

CWR *magazine*

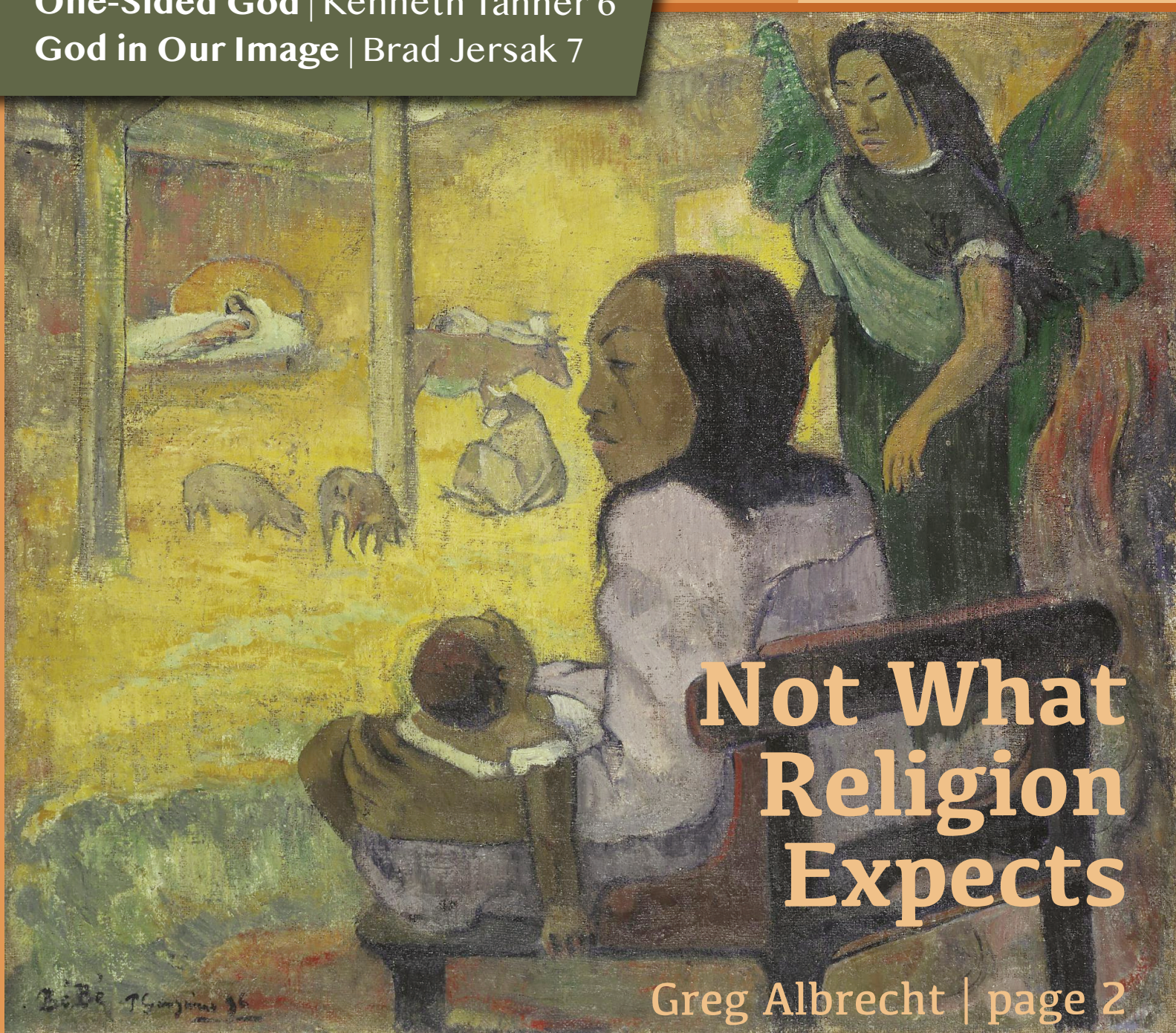
December 2023 **CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION**
Volume 14, Number 6



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Not What Religion Expects

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Feature art by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

Not What Religion Expects

Greg Albrecht

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. —Isaiah 53:3

Jesus was not just ignored nor was he merely disliked. He wasn't simply a minor irritant—he was *despised* and *rejected*. Strong language—powerful emotions!

When someone is *despised* they are regarded with contempt and scorn, they are hated and loathed, and regarded as unworthy of interest or concern.

When someone is *rejected*, others refuse to accept or recognize them. A person who is *rejected* is effectively discarded as useless.

Who, specifically, *despised* and *rejected* Jesus?

Did his fellow carpenters go ballistic when they heard him preach?

Did the fisherman all threaten to stop fishing and picket against Jesus?

What about the prostitutes—were they so alarmed by his teaching that they paid someone to kill him?

What about soldiers, lepers, farmers, shopkeepers and merchants—what about elderly people—did they despise him?

No, the Bible does not single out any of those groups within society as despising and hating Jesus.

Who then? Who absolutely detested Jesus so much that they eventually had him killed?

The religious hierarchy and authorities hated and despised Jesus! The proud and arrogant religious leaders—so impressed by their obedience and righteousness, so devout in their holy days and ritual observances—were scandalized by Jesus.

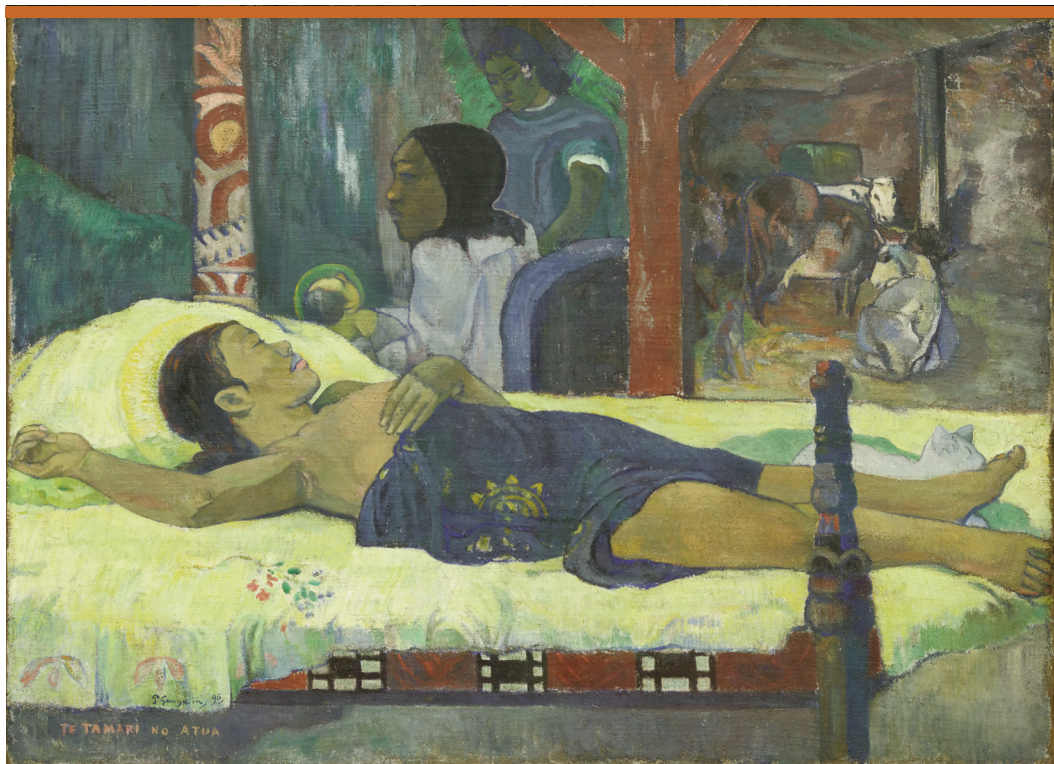
He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. —John 1:10-11

ILLEGITIMATE SON & DRUNKEN HERETIC

In John 8:41, the religious leaders called him a bastard—with reference to the fact that Mary was not married when she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

One of the claims to fame of the religious establishment of Jesus' day was their origins. They took great pride in who they thought they were, racially and religiously. They believed their own press releases. They believed that their own birth was spiritually pure. Then along came this "illegitimate" Jesus who questioned their religion, their traditions and their ways of doing things.

Jesus told the religious authorities they claimed Abraham, the patriarch of faith, as their spiritual



father, but they were looking for a way to kill Jesus, something Abraham would not do. They responded by calling attention to Jesus' questionable birth, calling him a bastard.

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." — John 8:41

On another occasion the religious authorities called Jesus a hopeless drunkard, for if they could convince others that he was perpetually intoxicated, he would be unable to be a legitimate religious teacher (Matthew 11:19).

When Jesus profaned their holy sabbath and equated himself with God the Father by calling himself the Son of God, they determined Jesus must be put to death (John 5:18).

Big business religion in Jesus' day seems to have exhausted every hateful emotion and run out of every vicious, repulsive accusation it could direct at him.

BEATEN BEYOND RECOGNITION

When their religion was blasphemed, the leaders of that religious establishment tortured and beat Jesus to such an extreme that his disfigurement was shocking.

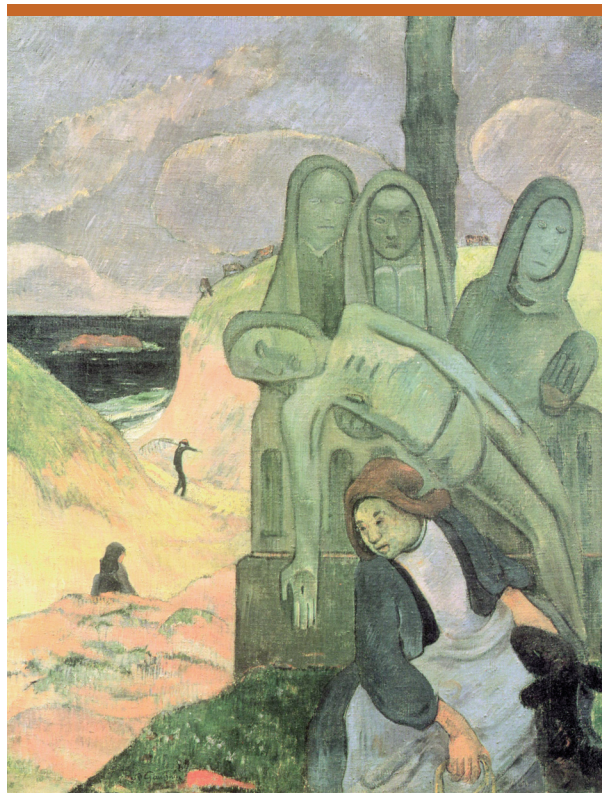
... his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness.

—Isaiah 52:14

His crucifixion followed a brutal beating and torture—all

caused by the religious rejection of God in the flesh. As it turned out, he was crucified for, among others, those who despised and rejected him. That's an incredible commentary on the love of God!

When Jesus said, from his cross, *"Father, forgive them, for they have no idea about what they are really doing"* (Luke 23:34), it's fair to conclude that he was not only talking to those present at his crucifixion.



He was forgiving people down through time who would despise and reject him. He was forgiving people who, even though they would think that they were doing all of the right religious things, actually despised and rejected his grace.

Jesus of course has not changed. The gospel of our risen Lord is the same, 2000 years later. He has not adapted or modified the love, mercy and grace of God.

But the question we must ask

is this: *Has big business religion changed over the past 2000 years? Is institutionalized Christendom in complete harmony with Jesus today? Does anyone today, while claiming to love and obey God, actually despise and reject Jesus?*

WHY? WHY? WHY?

When God came to us, in the person of Jesus, he came to be one of us—in humility.

That truth alone—that God humbled himself—seems to be blasphemous to many within religion. Why would God become humble? By and large, religion rejects humility in its god(s).

When the Lamb was slain from the creation of the world (Revelation 13:8), God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—determined that God the Son would enter into the womb of Mary, a teenage girl who was betrothed, but not yet married. Mary was told that God the Holy Spirit would impregnate her (*overshadow*—Luke 1:35) her. She was married to Joseph when Jesus was born, but she was pregnant with Jesus when she and Joseph married.

The nature of his birth caused tongues to wag. Why did God do it that way? Why didn't the Holy Spirit just wait to impregnate Mary after she and Joseph were married? Of course, God orchestrated things the way he did so that the birth of Jesus was absolutely miraculous—as we call it, the virgin birth.

Jesus, the God-man, chose to be born into a poor, humble family, beginning his human life

not like Adam and Eve, who were created as full-grown adults—but rather, Jesus started his human life in the weakness and dependence of infancy. Why?

He was born in a manger, not in a palace. In a barnyard, not in a sanitized, hygienic hospital birthing room.

Why did he begin his earthly life as an infant? Why waste all that time? Why not come to us as an adult—and then he would have been able to minister for 30 years, instead of just 3½? With more time he could have accomplished so much more, healed more people, preached more sermons, and maybe, just maybe, been far more effective than he was.

Of course, that's a stupid, human thing to say about how God chose to come into this world—that's our humanity speaking—that's our imperfection—that's all we know, which of course, apart from God, isn't much.

The fact is that Jesus lived in this world in poverty and in need for 30 years—he spent 30 years as an unknown, insignificant nobody.

IF HE WOULD HAVE COME AS...

Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, was born into a spiritual wilderness. Religious legalism had sucked all of the spiritual vitality out of that time, that place and that culture. People were,

spiritually speaking, zombies—by and large they had no relationship with God—institutionalized religion has seen to that.

If Jesus had come as a health and wealth preacher, then people would have followed him, hoping to improve their physical status in life. He wouldn't have been despised and rejected—he would



have been celebrated.

*If Jesus had come predicting the End Times, holding huge prophecy crusades, writing a string of *Left Behind* novels, he would have sold-out stadiums and amphitheaters. He wouldn't have been despised and rejected—he would have been a best-selling author, honored and respected.*

If Jesus had come with a healing crusade, then he would have attracted far more of those

desperately in need of physical healing. He wouldn't have been despised and rejected—he would have been worshipped and revered as a healer.

If Jesus had come as royalty, then people would have followed Jesus because of his power, his military and his political influence. He wouldn't have been despised and rejected—he would have been treated like the king he actually was and is.

If Jesus had come with a striking, jaw dropping, head turning physical appearance, he would have been followed just because of his appearance. He wouldn't have been despised and rejected—he would have been treated like a human god of Hollywood—like the Creator God he actually was and is.

If Jesus had come possessing incredible physical riches, he would have been followed because people would have wanted to get some of his wealth. He wouldn't have been despised and rejected if he made people wealthy, but

Jesus chose to make us rich another way, and for that, he was despised and rejected.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

—2 Corinthians 8:9.

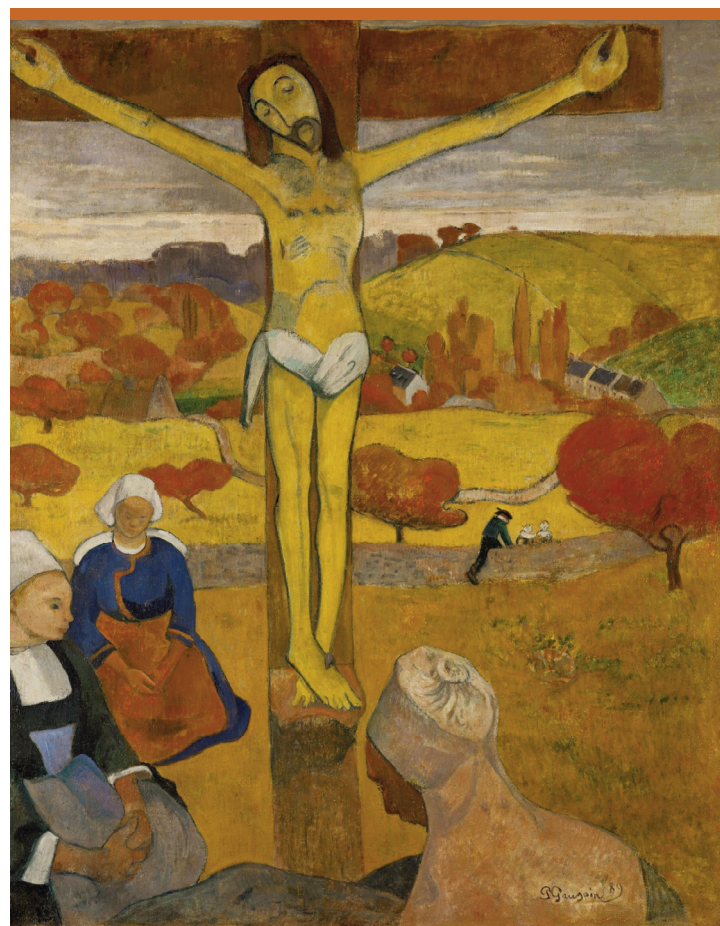
HE CAME ANYWAY

God knew exactly how he would be treated—he knew that he

would be despised and rejected—but he came anyway.

He came into our world and into our lives fully aware of the hatred, rejection, and ultimately torture and crucifixion to which he would be subjected.

God knew that human religion is unforgiving and that life on earth would be hard for a child born into a heavily religious society—a child whose illegitimacy would offend religious values.



This is the greatest love story of all time. There is no greater love, no greater romance, no greater sacrifice.

He came anyway. He came so that we might be given a new birth, a new life—he willingly accepted being despised and rejected so that we might be rescued from the slavery of religious oppression.

He brought the kingdom of heaven to a place of scorn and corruption so that we might rise out of the swamp of religious captivity, rising with him from death to eternal life in his kingdom. He came so that we could be spiritually transformed and reborn.

Grace is amazing, is it not? God comes to you and me with his unconditional, no-matter-what love. He comes to you and me with his in-spite-of love, with his amazing grace for a wretch like you and me. We were once lost and blind, but we are now found and we now see. □

Greg Albrecht is founder & president of Plain Truth Ministries.

Paul Gauguin
(1848-1903)
was a French painter, sculptor and print-maker, born in Paris and died in French Polynesia. His 'symbolist' style aimed to convey 'primitive' states



'Portrait of the artist with the Green Christ'

of spiritual and emotional expression.

Gauguin is known to have lived and collaborated with Vincent van Gogh for a time, and also his self-imposed exile to Tahiti. We can see how the culture and people of the French colony inspired his interpretation of the sacred art featured here:

Cover art: 'Bé bé' or 'the Nativity' (1896)

Page 2: Tahitian: 'Te tamari no atua' (Polynesian for 'the Son of God') also titled 'The Birth' (1896).

Page 3: 'The Green Christ' (1889 in Pont-Aven, Brittany).

Page 4: Tahitian: 'Ia Orana Maria' or 'Hail Mary' (1891).

Page 5: 'Le Christ jaune,' French for "the Yellow Christ (1891, Pont-Aven).

True to the title of our cover article, Gauguin's depictions of both the nativity of Christ and his crucifixion are "not what religion expects."

The artist has, for example, recreated the annunciation of the angel Gabriel ("Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" — Luke 1:28) in the context of rural French Polynesia. We see Mary and the Christ-child being visited by two indigenous women (page 4). Not what religion expects!

And is that Joseph finally getting his turn to nap after the miracle birth on page 2? Not what religion expects. Why? Maybe it's too true to life!

One-Sided God

Kenneth Tanner

When I preach or write about the love of our Father, there's always someone who says, "Don't forget to preach the other side of the story."

What other side?

That it's not true that God loves us before we, full of ourselves, show any sign of loving God?

That God has something bad or imperfect in store for us? Perhaps a snake or a stone instead of bread and fish?

That there are dark shadows lurking in God that might drown out his bright light at any moment?

That God gives only to take back the gift?

That God cannot be trusted?

That God hates humanity?

You see, there is no other "side" to God.

Our God is not—like the lesser gods, like many human fathers—many-sided, contradictory, or inconsistent.

There is no shifting shadow in God but only goodness and light and life and forgiveness and—praise God—gift.

Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.

God IS love.

Love is not an attribute or part or side or angle of God but the *NAME* of God.

take away our sins (James 1:17; 1 John 4:9-10).

God is human in Jesus Christ and never stops being human. The scars he bears in heaven are in the body Mary gave him.

God not only makes the human race in love but God is in Jesus Christ a member of the human race.

God cannot become what does not inherently participate in his goodness.

He hates nothing that he makes and would have to hate himself if he hated us for he is one of us.

We are the ones who as we live in this world bring about our destruction, wreak havoc in other lives, and sow discord into nature, when we refuse the gift and the Son and the sacrifice and the

light and the love.

So choose the Love that has already chosen you and made your nature his own. □

Kenneth Tanner pastors the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Rochester Hills, Michigan.



God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.

This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to

God in Our Image

Brad Jersak

DEFINITION

Anthropomorphism: Attributing human traits or behavior to God. From *anthropos* (human) and *morphé* (form)

QUESTION

I'm reading your chapter in *A More Christlike Word* on Cassian and Ambrose. I find it helpful to see the church fathers speak about the limits of using "*anthropomorphisms*" when speaking of God.

The question that keeps rattling around as I read is that this is great to know when we apply negative attributes to God, but what about the positive? Compassion, kindness, love, delight; even grief?

I see that you note that God's love is immutable so that it doesn't waver like human passions. But how is it still not an *anthropomorphism* of sorts, if other human emotions like wrath and anger are?

RESPONSE

Great question. I think that these, too, are human projections, in the sense that we can only use human words that describe human experiences that are analogous to human actions and emotions. We recognize that this comes with severe limitations in terms of apprehending the God of the universe who is *beyond words* (ineffable) and even *beyond being*. That is, God is not just a Being among other beings. Rather, everything has its being in God (Acts 17:28).

However, *anthropomorphisms*, as shadowy analogies, are not empty or meaningless. Words like love are even difficult to nail down from human to human, BUT we rely on a few truths that allow us a meaningful approximation:

1. *Words do mean something and God isn't afraid to*

use them. So when God reveals himself as love or compassion or mercy, that's not merely a human projection. It's a self-revelation of God who wants to say something about himself using our words.

2. *To be created in the image and likeness of God in us means something*. God images something of God in us. So, again, we are analogous images of God so that at the very least, God cannot be LESS than what we are (e.g., relational) and we know that he is certainly MORE than we are (e.g., ultra-relational). As shadows of reality, human nature at its best 'gestures' toward our blueprint.

3. *That Jesus is the image of God means we have a revelation of who God is in the flesh, so **Incarnation trumps anthropomorphism***. In John 3:16, we read, "*For God so [in this way] loved the world,*" and Paul will proclaim, "*Jesus is the image of the invisible God,*" and "*Jesus is the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form.*" Jesus claimed, "*To see me is to see the Father*" and the author of Hebrews insists, "*He is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of his likeness.*"

So Jesus is the Word of God, as in *Jesus is what God has to say about himself*. Thus, ***Jesus is our quality control for all anthropomorphisms***.

"The passion of anger and wrath cannot be literally attributed to the unchangeable nature of God without fearful blasphemy."

—John Cassian (360-435)

Anthropomorphisms are never the problem. God freely uses them in his self-revelation. The early Christian teachers' concern is that when we slip into reading them literally, we paint a picture of God that is not only contrary to God's nature but even to the Incarnation Image through Whom God definitively revealed himself. □

Bradley Jersak serves as editor and art director with CWRm and is Principal of St. Stephen's University, NB.

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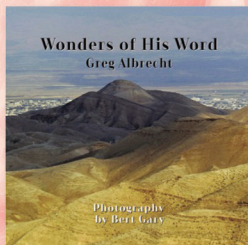
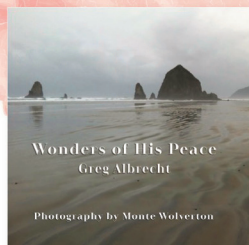
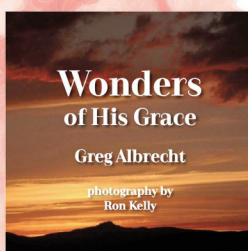
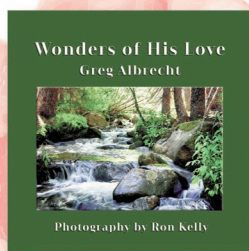
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with Greg Albrecht

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