

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

God the What? What Our Metaphors for God Reveal about Our Beliefs in God

Carolyn Jane Bohler

Introduction

What metaphors for God were you taught as a child? What was your image of God then?

How have your images and metaphors for God changed over time?

Think of three metaphors you use for God today and write them down. Your metaphors might be from your place of worship, your reading, or what you picture when you are crying or smiling in bed at night.

Consider what each of these metaphors suggests about what you believe about God, and what each infers about what you hope to experience from or with God.

Complete the God Belief Checklist on page 133. In small groups of three to five people, share what core belief items you have checked.

Chapter 1: God the *What*?

What metaphors for God (either in scripture or that you've heard other people use) intrigue you? What metaphors trouble you?

Select a God metaphor that you are familiar with and explore both sides of it: How do you think God *is* like that? How do you think God is *not* like that?

Have you had an experience when a God metaphor that used to "work" for you no longer fits? What changed in your life at that time? How did that affect your metaphor(s) for God?

Do any of the six new metaphors suggested in this chapter resonate with you? In what ways?

- God the Bright Night Light: a God who provides comfort in the dark
- God the Compass, Sail, and Wind: a God who helps us navigate
- God the Divine Blacksmith: a God who knows what fits
- God the Divine Physical Therapist: a God who helps us maximize our potential
- God the Nursing Mother: a God who cares for me as I care
- God the Uncountable Infinity: a God who meets my need to be logical

Think of a God metaphor that is common in your place of worship. Consider the qualities of God that this metaphor points to. See if you can come up with a different metaphor that captures some of the same qualities.

Take some time to write your own version of Psalm 2. What metaphor would express, in an ultra-relevant manner, your faith in a comforting and caring God, as Shepherd did for the original psalmist?

Chapter 2: God Can Do *What?* God's Power

What is your first response to natural disasters? Where do you see God fitting into the picture?

What kinds of encouragement have you heard from people when you have suffered an illness, catastrophe, or loss? How did their words help (or not help)? How did they fit with your beliefs about God?

Consider someone who has power in your life. How do they affect you? How do they get you to do something? To *not* do something?

Consider someone who has creative and good power in your life but who does not use any kind of coercive force. How would you describe that power?

Think about your favorite hymn, praise song, or worship chant. Consider the words you sing and what they infer about God's power. How similar or dissimilar is this description to the God you believe in?

Which of the metaphor(s) described in this chapter come closest to your belief about God's power? Are there any metaphors that you'd like to explore further?

- God the Almighty: total power
- God the Post-heroic CEO, God the Tough Love Parent: restrained power
- God with Us (Helicopter God): the power of presence
- God *Is* (Spirit, Breath, Ground of Being): the power of pure being
- Ambiguous God (God the Caregiver over Thirty-Five Accepting Her/His Own Ambiguity): the power of good intentions
- God as Dynamic Love: the power of love
- God as Persistent Life: the power of transformation
- God the Jazz Band Leader: the power of shared power

Think of a time in your life when things seemed to be a mess or in chaos. As you look back on that experience, how do you understand God working? What metaphor(s) could you use to describe God's presence or action in this experience?

Chapter 3: God Wants *What?* God's Will

How much, or how little, are you a "what *is* is meant to be" person? Do you believe that everything that *is* is God's will?

Do you think God wants something from humans? If so, how do you think we find clues to understand what God wants?

Think of some noes in your life that were important. Describe some of the results of your noes.

Think of a time in your life when you improvised. What surprises or good things came of creating in the moment?

Do you imagine God more as a Planner or an Improviser? What metaphor(s) might describe your image of God when it comes to this issue of control?

Think of a current situation in your life where you (or a family member or close friend) are trying to make an important decision. Make a list of “clues” that seem to suggest one or two possible directions. Would you attribute any of these clues to God? Where and how might you look for other clues? What metaphor would you use to describe God’s guidance in this situation?

Chapter 4: God Interacts *How?* Our Relationship with God

Name two people you admire and identify some of their qualities that you would like to have or to develop within yourself.

Think of two people with whom you like to spend time. What is the “give and take” like in each relationship? How is this important to the quality of your relationship?

How do you see yourself as being “like” God in some ways? as being “with” God?

How do you think your beliefs about God affect your actions? How do your beliefs affect how you view other people?

Of the five coach metaphors presented in this section, which one(s) most closely match your beliefs about God? How do you see that metaphoric concept of God at work in your life?

- God the Distant Decider Coach
- God the Attentive Affirmer Coach
- God the Good-Guy Coach
- God the Receptive Resourcers as Co-coaches
- God the Team Transformer Coach

Imagine what it would have been like for you if you had been shown a creative and diverse array of images for God beginning when you were very young. Consider how that would have helped you sense that you (and all others) are in some ways made in the image of God, *and* that you could come to trust that you (and all others) are also *with* God. If you were asked to teach a group of children something about God, what metaphor(s) might you use?

Epilogue: Personal Metaphor Wondering

Complete God Metaphor Checklist 1 on page 136. In small groups of three to five people, share whether anything has shifted since you filled out the God Belief Checklist at the start of the group meetings.

Name two to six metaphors for God that feel vital and authentic for you today.

What metaphors might help you relate to God (as you believe in God)?

What metaphors might help you expand your experience of God?

Experiment with writing a prayer using a God metaphor that you like, or take a familiar prayer and change the God metaphor. Invite each person to read one of his or her prayers as a way to close the last meeting of the group.

Invitations for Future Exploration

Keep a notebook where you can jot down possible metaphors for God as they occur to you.

Start a prayer with a metaphor at random and see how that prayer proceeds. (You might find it helpful to use the Metaphor Index on page 160 for possibilities.)

Use the Scripture Index on page 159 to look up various biblical metaphors for God. Note your response (both intellectually and emotionally) to each.

Complete God Metaphor Checklist 2 on page 140 after some time has passed (perhaps a year). Compare it to your earlier checklists to see whether anything has changed for you.

LEADER'S GUIDE

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This book lends itself well to six discussion meetings or classes. Below are suggestions for meeting format, ideas on how to start the group and how to use the discussion questions (which include a written activity for each meeting) and a “homework assignment” for the next meeting.

I highly encourage you to open each discussion with a prayer that employs a different metaphor for God. This will be a terrific opportunity to explore a wide variety of God metaphors.

Meeting 1: Opening Discussion on God Metaphors

Summarize the ideas from the introduction for the group. Use the introduction discussion questions for group participation and discussion. As a way of modeling for the group, you might briefly describe the metaphors for God you were taught as a child and how you imagined God then.

Activity: Complete the God Belief Checklist. (Go over the directions in the epilogue on how to use the first checklist.)

Assignment: Read the introduction and chapter 1, *God the What?* for the next gathering.

Meeting 2: Discussion on Chapter 1—God the *What?*

Use the discussion questions for chapter 1 for group participation and discussion. As a way of modeling for the group, you might briefly describe a metaphor for God that used to work for you but no longer seems to fit.

Activity: Write a personal version of Psalm 23, using a metaphor other than Shepherd for God.

Assignment: Read chapter 2, *God Can Do What?* for the next gathering.

Meeting 3: Discussion on Chapter 2—God Can Do *What?*

Use the discussion questions for chapter 2 for group participation and discussion. As a way to launch the discussion about God’s power, you might talk about a natural disaster that has occurred in your area or a catastrophe that has caught world attention and then segue into the first discussion question: Where do you see God fitting in the picture?

Activity: Describe a chaotic time in your life and make a list of some metaphors for God that might describe God’s involvement.

Assignment: Read chapter 3, *God Wants What?* for the next gathering.

Meeting 4: Discussion on Chapter 3—God Wants *What?*

Use the discussion questions for chapter 3 for group participation and discussion. As a way to begin the discussion about God’s will, you might want to ask the group to do some

brainstorming about the pros and cons of believing that *everything* that happens is God's will. (If possible, have someone write down the group's ideas on a board or flipchart.)

Activity: Make a list of "clues" about an important decision, identifying a possible metaphor for God's guidance in this situation.

Assignment: Read chapter 4, God Interacts *How?* and the conclusion, Metaphors Matter, for the next gathering.

Meeting 5: Discussion on Chapter 4—God Interacts *How?* and Conclusion

Use the discussion questions from chapter 4 for group participation and discussion. You might start by asking each person to someone they admire and describe how they identify with them. Then have each person describe someone they like to spend time with and what the "give and take" in that relationship looks like.

Activity: Write a short vignette using a unique metaphor for God that would describe how God might interact.

Assignment: Write a prayer using this metaphor for God.

Meeting 6: Discussion on the Epilogue: Personal Metaphor Wondering

Go over the directions for completing the God Metaphor Checklist. After completing the activity, use the discussion question with the group.

Activity: Complete God Metaphor Checklist 1.

Assignment: Consider the Invitations for Future Exploration on page 149. Ask the group if they'd like to revisit the God Metaphor Checklist at a later date to see if anything has changed.