

INTRODUCTION

An Image of God That Isn't True

God is not nice.”
The students in my theology class at Marquette University stirred and shuffled their books. Heads came up. A young woman on my right scrunched her face. A young man on my left frowned. More than a few looked confused. I tried not to smile. It is a moment that every teacher lives for: interaction. Students started to raise their hands, ask questions, and engage with the lecture.

But why? Why did my pronouncement awaken my students from their academic slumber? The answer is very simple: they’ve probably never heard someone say, “God is not nice.” It challenges the dual narrative fed to them by our culture through a twenty-four-hour-a-day bombardment on TV, social media, and, sadly, even at church, telling them that if God exists then God is nice and will do whatever we ask. We can make “deals” with God, or bargain for what we want, as if he is a firm but kindly merchant at a farmer’s market.

Or the culture contends that God is some kind of divine therapist, and this belief infects even those who attended Catholic schools, as did many of my university students. For them, God is like a psychiatrist who treats each of his patients the same way, a friend whom we can call in times of need. But when things are going great, we don't bother him much. Thus, God doesn't play a role in our lives, and grace has no chance to transform us. Why change your life for such a God? He makes no demands.

At first I thought that the religious education these students had received in school and at home contributed to the problem, and it no doubt had. But when I listened to my own kids, as well as the children of others whom I know have been taught since birth about God's character, I realized that they all use the same language. It made me realize just how powerfully the culture shapes the common narrative about God.

If I am to be completely honest, I am not entirely immune to it either. I have often found myself a little too comfortable when it comes to my own relationship with God, making it routine and conventional.

The word *conventional* means ordinary and not very exciting. At best, it is mildly pleasing, forgotten when the next pleasant thing comes along. And in our culture, there are many things to do that delight and surprise. Is it any wonder, then, that students and young adults leave the Church behind? We have made attending church and believing in God something that nice and polite people do, mostly on Sundays. But this is idolatry of the worst kind and a deadly threat to not only our faith but also the faith of our children. Surveys tell us that an overwhelming number of people believe in God or some kind of spirituality. Yet those same people never attend church or ask questions about how knowing God might transform their everyday lives. Instead of seeing God and God's people as a countercultural

movement that defies current trends, most people get the impression that God is boring. And so are his people.

This is why we all need the vaccine of knowing the true transforming and mysterious character of God: the God who shows up in burning bushes, speaks through donkeys, drives demons into pigs, throws Saul to the ground, and appears to St. Francis. It is only this God who has the power to challenge us, change us, and make our lives dangerous. He sweeps us into a great adventure that will make us into different people.

At the heart of Marquette University sits St. Joan of Arc Chapel, a fifteenth-century stone structure transplanted from France. Inside is a stone kissed by the saint herself before she went into battle. As a young teenager, Joan met God in a fiery and profound way that changed her life. She came into contact with the wild God and it transformed her into a saint.

Usually I walk by the chapel and pray, “Holy Spirit, help me to guide my students.” One day, as I pondered the life of the great saint, I realized I had been conventional about my faith, especially with my students. I had held back my passion for God in the classroom, and I hadn’t given my students fuel for their own walk with Christ by inviting them into the mystery of faith. My own faith was drowning in the conventional, the boring, and the unadventurous.

The revelation washed over me, and I felt the burning fire the saints often tell us about: God’s love and insight that devours but doesn’t destroy. The revelation about the nature of my own faith buckled my knees. I could almost imagine Jesus standing in front of me, as the Challenger, the Listener, and the Healer. I wanted to renew my own efforts to go beyond the safe house I had constructed for Christ and push into trying to find him in all things, as St. Ignatius of Loyola said.

But how to show this to my students? The answer came as I sat in my lush garden and graded their papers. I had asked them to write

about the Israelites and their journey out of Egypt—an amazing adventure story of wandering into the desert, drowning armies, and depending solely on God for their daily lives. Yet I often read things such as, “God helped the Israelites because they prayed to him.”

This is a true statement. But it doesn't capture the complete picture. I realized that I needed to help my students connect the dots and reject the conventional vending-machine God—that is, the idea that if we put in our coins (or prayers), we will get our goodies dispensed. So in my next class discussion, we talked about the history of redemption in the Old Testament. Abraham was called out of Ur into the unknown. He left everything to follow God merely on the promise that something would be there in an alien land. We talked about Moses and the burning bush, removing his sandals because he stood on holy ground, and about Elijah being fed by ravens and talked to by God in a still, small voice after a great wind and storm. Story after story in the Bible emphasizes the beautiful and strange mystery of God.

And then I said, with more passion than they had probably ever seen from me, “This is a God who invites you on a great adventure that will change your life and who dares you to attempt great things. In the words of Mr. Beaver from *The Chronicles of Narnia* about Aslan, ‘He’s not safe, but good.’”

Really, safety in our lives is an illusion. People and events are always changing us, either for good or bad. A great example of this is marriage. When I met my wife at the University of Notre Dame during a class on the Holy Trinity, I knew she would change my life. And she still does on a daily basis. She challenges me to be a better husband and father. It is not a safe situation. I can't rest in my comfort and live in the world of my own head. Rather, the great adventure I began with my wife changed us both.

I told my students that if a *human being* can change us that much and can call us to an amazing journey, imagine what God can

do. He takes us on adventures we could never plan and to places we would never expect. God wants us to be transformed, to be uncomfortable in our lives and to stretch toward heaven, a beautiful grace he gives to us.

This grace doesn't make us nice—if it did, it would be just a superficial thing. Instead, it transforms us as wine changes into the Blood of Christ at the Eucharist. It flows from God's very character, and it therefore interrupts all our best-laid plans. We think we know what's best, but God disagrees because he loves us.

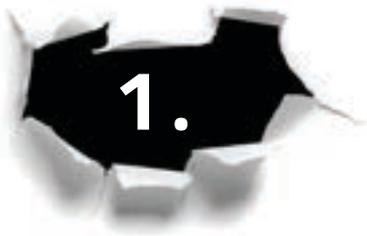
St. John of the Cross once wrote, "If you think you can find God in the comfort of your bedroom, you will never find him." The journey to knowing God brings us to places we have not been, helps us notice unseen things, and opens our eyes to surprises and delights we didn't know existed. Only the adventurer is able to see what nobody else sees—and it is this insight that we have lost when we think about God in conventional ways. And then we wonder why life doesn't make sense—why we are so unhappy and why our existence bores us to death. Deep down, we want that challenge, that journey, that adventure.

This book lays out a road map to help us leave the comfort of our bedrooms and meet the wild God who wants our lives. When I first began thinking about this theme, I remembered an episode from my high school days. I sometimes served Mass for an old, retired priest, whom I enjoyed talking with afterward; he had gravitas but also embodied a fierce joy. In one of these conversations, Fr. Karl confided in me that the night before his ordination in 1936 in Hitler's Germany, he knelt in front of the tabernacle and asked God, "Lord, take all that I am, but please don't give me a boring life." His wish was granted. A few years later, he was called to be a military chaplain, serving dying soldiers in Russia. After the war, he almost died in a Soviet gulag, and once he returned to Germany he served in a big parish.

Fr. Karl smiled and said, “And I haven’t been bored a single second.” He carried no bitterness about the lost years of the war, the pain of prison, starvation, or health problems that deprived him of a career in the Church—just the sincere joy of being a worker in the vineyard of God.

Today, when I stand in front of my theology students, I remember him and his story: with God there is life, a life of adventure. The God whom Catholics believe in is not a nice, conventional being but a radical, all-consuming, at times terrifying mystery.

This book is an invitation to know this God. By discovering who God is, we will find that he invites us to an exciting life but also that he is interested in our eternal well-being. I will try to identify some roadblocks and idols that hinder us from embarking on an adventure with him and suggest how to overcome them. I want to show you how walking with God means adventure in our lives and faith. And, in the end, I hope you realize that God loves you too much to be nice.



1.

THE GOD OF CREATION

I left my small town for the big city of Munich to study philosophy and theology. Like many college students, I went searching for my identity, trying to understand how God wanted me to live my life. Thankfully, many of my professors were Jesuits and knew how to guide me. One of my philosophy professors suggested I read Erich Fromm, a Jewish atheist psychoanalyst, and his book *To Have or to Be?* Fromm's work shook me to the core and woke me up to my selfishness when it comes to ideas about God.

Fromm believed there are two modes of existence for all human beings: “having” and “being.” Those who focus on “having” want things and see the world as a backdrop for acquiring and consuming them. Those who focus on “being” seek to develop the profound mental and spiritual nature of their inner existence and then strive to find interconnectedness with the world.

Fromm argued that it is the mode of being that makes us give up the selfishness of having and helps us become active as true selves, not as acting machines.¹ I discovered that I was tempted too much by the conventional mode of life, namely of acquiring and having things, which explained why I sometimes viewed God primarily as

someone who was there to support my needs. Fromm's book woke me from my selfish slumber and set me on a path to discover the real, personal God of adventure, who was, at times, not very nice.

The Realism of Creation

Fromm encouraged me to discover being; as abstract as it sounds, it was very practical advice, namely, to be mindful of my own existence and my being in the world. This, however, invited me to a deeper understanding of all that is, of all of creation.

The journey to meeting God begins with creation, of which human beings are a part. Even secular environmentalists share with believers the value of nature and the connectedness of humans to it. Yet the Christian faith goes far beyond that. In fact, it is much more radical: we are part of the cosmos and experience our connections within it. We coexist in a hierarchy of being, where the lower is directed to the higher, the material to the spiritual. In the human person, matter achieves a new level because it is connected to a mind and soul. Therefore, we are not permitted to treat the rest of creation badly or abuse it, because we are part of it.

Our body is for us as persons different from what a body is for an animal. Every animal encounters the world as something that satisfies one of its needs: a cat sees the owner who gives food or comfort; a rabbit perceives the plants it wants to eat or a mating partner. As a human being, however, I am able to have a somewhat *fair and unbiased* relationship to this world (absolute objectivity is reserved for God and the angels);² I can try to bracket my own desires, expectations, and needs and observe reality for its own sake. I can see the tree for its own sake, not as it serves the beauty of my garden. Or I can reflect on the nature of sexuality rather than see only how it serves my selfish needs. This sort of thinking gives me glimpses into the nature or essence of things themselves and leads me to discover their natural order.

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the core of true knowledge is “participation,” which happens through reception. If we learn to see nature as it is and don’t project our expectations and desires on it, we will be surprised and impressed by reality. Nevertheless, very often society hinders us in our ability to see what is going on in the wider world around us.

Many people in our society build conventions that block us from seeing reality. They challenge the notion that things have a “nature.” But they forget two points. First, no philosopher ever said that by grasping the nature of a thing we have understood it completely—far from it; so there is no danger that we exaggerate what belongs to the nature of a thing. Second, if we can’t grasp *some* essence of a thing, it is very hard to communicate at all. Our words would become meaningless because we couldn’t form concepts such as “weather,” “animal,” or “food.” Concepts, however, are only shadows of things, and as Aquinas says, the more we understand something, the more it escapes our conceptual language.³ The biggest problem is that if we give up the notion of the “nature” of things, we also give up the idea that things have a certain inherent order that we have to respect. It is the forgetting of the natural order of things that enables us to exploit them merely as a resource to be used, whether they are a person, place, or thing.

Very often, we block our view of reality and of the order of things by our bad choices and bad habits: if I am constantly drinking too much, I have attached a wrong value to alcohol, which distorts my view of the world; if I am indulging in pornography, I have a distorted view of human sexuality and the human person; and so on. We have to get rid of the filters that do not allow us to access reality with its hierarchy of goals, its teleology. We have to stop imposing our selfish needs on the world. This is especially the case if we follow the consumer mode of “having,” because then we treat others as things, and they become means for our ends.

Human behavior is thus quite different from that of animals, which have a very limited knowledge of things and do not observe the world as world; for them, it is always a world embedded in the context of survival. Humans, however, can choose their stance toward the world. In fact, we are forced to form a relationship with the world because we are not bound by animal instincts. We are forced to be free, and it is in this aspect that we can detect a likeness to God. Thus, we do not see the world entirely as animals do, but we also do not see the world as angels do. Human reason finds order in creation and contemplates the things and beings around us. In this act of becoming watchful stewards of all that is, we are seeing the world a little bit as God does.⁴

Unfortunately, however, we constantly abuse this freedom against divine order. It hit me how much this rebellion against order permeates our life when I was standing in a freezer aisle in the local grocery store, staring at the frozen meat in front of me. How do we treat these animals? Are we seeing them as part of the order, how God wanted them to be treated, how nature “wanted” them to be treated? Our faith has a name for the inclination to disregard God’s order, and that is “original sin.” In this mode, we tend to see the whole of creation as a means to an end. We utilize the world around us and stop contemplating the order that surrounds and embraces us. Certainly, we do not fail all the time, but we do fail constantly. The philosopher Hans-Eduard Hengstenberg has therefore spoken of *the* major decision in each person’s life: we either approach concrete beings according to their inherent order or we surrender them to “our egotistical exploitation.”⁵ If we decide to see things and persons within the horizon of their natural goals and order, we tend to get to know them more intimately, we learn to love them, and we mature in our will. If, however, we turn away from this order, we see everything only from our own perspective. The first stance is a natural piety toward the entire world, which we can call Christian realism. The second option is what most of the secular world is doing. Of course,

we will continue to fail, due to our fallen nature, but the more firmly we decide to approach beings according to their inherent order, the more we will cling to grace and sacramental forgiveness and can hope to make some progress, because we will see the world with “God’s eyes” and not through the lenses of selfishness.

Sentimentalism and Its Cure

Realism means being in touch with the real world, with real things. Often I have the impression that we are running away from reality and focusing on feelings as if emotions were the only real thing. Through my experience with religious education textbooks and catechesis classes in both Germany and the United States, I have come to see that much of our parish life is centered on sentimentalism, or the chasing of feelings. Children are invited to “feel” and “experience” this or that, but they are rarely given any content for their faith. It does not surprise me that they leave the Church if they can find better feelings elsewhere.

Feelings have their place in faith, but there has to be some substance underneath; otherwise faith has no roots. The churches wanted to be relevant and believed that the only way of achieving that was creating an emotional connection that many thought was lacking in the Church before the 1960s. This experiment has failed in many ways. Sentimentalist theology that preaches religious feeling paved the way for a substanceless religion; Kenda Creasy Dean’s book *Almost Christian* proves this painfully.⁶ Her statistics show that religious education classes and parental guidance have failed our youth. Three-quarters of religious teenagers today know very little about the *content* of their faith and instead have a benign “whatever” attitude toward religion. They see religion not as connected to the mystery of the world, and thus to realism, but only through their own sense of self: I choose certain beliefs and arrange the beliefs according to my needs or liking. Their God then becomes much like a bad therapist

who helps them get over a breakup or offers some emotional help in times of stress. Faith, world, and God are no more than therapeutic means.

It is hard to overlook the egocentrism in this. Do we really need more of this nice, therapeutic God? Can't we acknowledge that the experiment has failed and refocus on the realism of the faith that keeps eroding? When Jesus reminds and admonishes us to become childlike (Mt 18:2–4), he expresses the timeless truth that children are born realists. Only grown-ups will mistake their games with imaginary friends or heroes as misguided reality; every child knows very well what is real and what is not, and if you doubt that, you should spend more time with kids. Imagination is not misguided reality but the ability to see the innumerable possibilities of reality. People who have no imagination have a very limited view of the world and are usually not very creative. While realism is not the same as imagination, imagination without realism is impossible; it is merely delusional.⁷

A child approaches reality as a mystery. She asks why is this rather than that or what makes a chair a chair. She turns a bed into a pirate ship and thus touches upon the mystery of being. The child knows she is part of a great story in which sometimes bedspreads can be ships and chairs can be towers. Little brothers turn into angry pirates. The child knows intuitively that she is connected to a world of beings and meanings. Children contemplate the world—they intuitively approach it with trust. As we grow up, we lose this realism. Our experience is “settled,” and we stop gazing in awe at the world; we have become accustomed to it.

As a result, we conceive ideas about the world, trying to make it more manageable because we think childlike wonder is something bad or at least something that distracts us from being productive. Yet as Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) taught us, such “adult” thinking makes us lose empathy! It is therefore adults who are usually less realistic because they have built lenses to filter reality

according to their prejudices, preconceptions, and needs. That is why my five children keep me on my toes and are a constant source of inspiration.

Many teenagers and adults think they are no longer a part of the great story of being but stand somewhat outside of it as aloof judges. For them, the world becomes a problem, and *being* is no longer a mystery that contains wonder, excitement, and the road to love. But we cannot separate ourselves from being, since we are always part of it. We can never fully understand what it is; therefore, it will remain in its deepest core an impenetrable mystery. At the bottom of this mystery is, Christians believe, a person, God, who is being itself, or as St. Thomas Aquinas said, the “act of pure existence,” on whom all that is depends.⁸

Even in the most fantastic games and imaginary worlds that children create, there is an order and there are rules. In fact, children come up with quite sophisticated, often complicated rules. I remember a board game we never played because we had lost the instructions; yet one day, when I came home from work, I saw four of my kids playing it. They had made up their own rules, and they were quite precise. This is so because children have an innate sense of order. An unclean room where toys lie around is not orderly, some readers might interject—yes, that’s true. But when I ask my kids, “Is there order in this chaos? Is it beautiful?” they will grudgingly agree that there is indeed no order and therefore no beauty in the messiness.

Yet for them, the order of things in themselves is more important than the order of the room—they know what is more valuable and joyful and what rules to follow. A child knows intuitively, for example, that an apple tree brings forth apples and that fish eggs produce fish and not frogs. They have an innate understanding of what motherhood and fatherhood are and that life is a gift and not a burden. They know that love is a higher value than money or toys and that death is a great tragedy. As children stumble through the