FEATURES

"HALLOWED BE THY NAME": IMAGES OF GOD AND THEIR PLACE IN THE FUTURE OF MISSIOLOGY

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Introduction

The way we understand mission and its tasks is closely related to our images of God. Given a time-honoured approach to mission, the exclusivist understanding of evangelism implies highly problematic images where the most destructive among them portray God as a merciless judge condemning the majority of humankind to eternal torture or annihilation.

Negative, destructive and “demonic” images, as Karl Frielingsdorf calls them, not only cause psychological suffering, they frequently alienate people from God and religion altogether. These images have driven humanity into the deepest abyss of our existence, namely the assumption that violence and war are God’s will.² It can be hoped that embracing less aggressive images of God could not only improve our relationship to non-Christian religions, it could have a positive impact on the way we treat each other in general.

As evangelical and charismatic groups continue their missionary activities based on an exclusivist understanding of salvation (compared to the inclusivist or pluralist understanding)

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and the problematic image of God that goes with it, the state of the world makes it more and more pressing to find alternative, healing, freeing and truly empowering images of God.

The paper reflects on destructive images of God, including their development, background and biblical reference, and then goes on to explore the positive images that could transform our lives and our missionary activities.

**What are images of God?**

There are two different types of images: one is the "visual" or conceptual image found in the biblical and theological books (impersonal, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic like eagle, lion, etc.); the other, which is even more important in a person's life, is an unconscious, psychological image imperceptibly affecting our actions and our decisions. In the following chapters we will focus on these unconscious, "psychological" images.

Images of God are far more than just ideas about God but constitute a complex system of mental concepts and ways of thinking about ourselves, others, the world and the divine. The way a person experiences or imagines God points to how they experience and understand themselves, their life, other people and the cosmos. Vice versa, speaking about people is speaking about God. For example, speaking about others as being lost and condemned to eternal torment or annihilation in hell at the same time means to speak about one's image of God. How people think, feel and behave is influenced by their image of God. This applies, of course, also to their missiology and praxis of mission.

To clarify what is meant by images of God, we have to take a quick look at the terminology involved, particularly the

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psychological terms used by the branch of the so-called Object Relations theory dealing with God-representations.

Psychological Terminology: God-representations

Various terms and notions are used in psychological literature to name one's understanding or image of the divine, and there is also a certain confusion of terms between imago, image, prototype, concept, and representation.\(^5\)

The psychological term God-representation has been developed within the branch of the object relations theory\(^6\) which studies the association of object relations and images of God.\(^7\)

According to the pioneer in object relations theory, Donald W. Winnicott, in order to become able to deal with outer objects (persons), in the course of the development of a human person, first a "transitional object" such as a teddy bear or cuddly blanket is used which is neither completely internal nor external but occupies


\(^{6}\) "Object relations theory is an offshoot of psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes interpersonal relations, primarily in the family and especially between mother and child. ‘Object’ actually means person ..., and especially the significant person that is the object or target of another's feelings or intentions. ‘Relations’ refers to interpersonal relations and suggests the residues of past relationships that affect a person in the present. Object relations theorists are interested in inner images of the self and other and how they manifest themselves in interpersonal situations", available at: http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/objectrelations.html, accessed 02.11.2009

\(^{7}\) Some names to be mentioned here are Donald W. Winnicott, Ana-Maria Rizzuto, Paul W. Pruys, Antoine Vergote and William R.D. Fairbairn. Andrew R. Fuller, *Psychology and Religion: Eight Points of View* (Maryland and London: Littlefield Adams Quality Paperback, 1994), 271. (For overview of the development see also pages 271-284).
a place midway between inner and outer experience. Later on, a psychic organisation called *object representation* is developed. An *object representation* is “an unconscious psychic organisation which is the source of the conscious symbols, images, fantasies, thoughts, feelings or actions”.

*God representations* are a sub-type of object representations. The big difference between God representations and other object representations is that God is “the only relevant object which has not undergone and cannot undergo reality testing”. Conservative evangelicals might argue that this is not so, because, according to their viewpoint, God is clearly revealed in the Bible. But this argument holds only in the case where one believes that the Scripture is verbally, word-by-word, inspired and absolutely inerrant; therefore a direct and errorless evidence of how God is, contradiction-free, one unity and in perfect harmony. This statement has far-reaching consequences for the image of God. If we see all texts of the Old and the New Testament as one unity,

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with no inconsistencies or contradictions of any kind, it then has to be concluded that the God of the Bible is a God both of wrath and of love. If one holds fast to the literal understanding of the Scripture another problem arises: the vindictive, violent and abusive images found in the texts logically have to be taken as truth about God as well.

Karl Frielingsdorf uses a different terminology. He defines the basic unconscious attitude to life and oneself as a person’s *key-position* that reveals itself especially in situations of crisis and conflict. It is connected and interdependent with one’s behaviour and methods of coping. The *key-position* is found during the course of the therapy with the help of various methods. The key-position is also a reliable pointer to the unconscious *image of God*. Image of God in this sense is similar in its nature to the self and life-image that is entailed in the key-position. Both articulate a fundamental feeling and attitude that influences one’s life behaviour and consequently also one’s psychical health. Frielingsdorf’s theory is developed in the course of his work with people suffering from harmful images of God.

**Importance of the images**

Because images or representations of God are very powerful, and because negative ("demonic") images affect all levels of human existence including the psychological, social and political sphere of

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16 including the writing of life script, therapeutical painting, dream work and bodily expression of the patient’s key-position
17 Frielingsdorf, *Dämonische Gottesbilder*, 76-77 and 15.
life, these images are in need of the “discernment of the spirits”\(^\text{18}\) and require studying. Images of God matter because they may inspire love and relatedness but they may also destroy or cripple a life of faith\(^\text{19}\). It is of crucial importance for the preservation of peace and for a wholesome theology and missiology that “Healthy images of God must awaken our capacity to wonder and stimulate our ability to see beauty and goodness in ourselves as well as in others.”\(^\text{20}\)

Martin Buber came to the conclusion that purging our faith of all imagery portraying the divine as either vindictive or abusive is one of the great spiritual challenges of our time and that it is most regrettable that people often confuse the words of God with the words of man, the true God with human images of God.\(^\text{21}\)

One should also keep in mind that images of God (including those found in the biblical and theological texts), on the one hand, are psychological realities and far removed from their transcendent object.\(^\text{22}\) This fact is unfortunately all too easy to forget. To use Carl Gustav Jung’s words, the term ‘images of God’ expresses the psychic reality of a certain individual rather than the metaphysical reality of God.\(^\text{23}\) On the other hand, as Karl Frielingsdorf puts it, the “image of God means the mental medium in which and through which the living encounter of the religious human with his/her God takes place”.\(^\text{24}\) This medium can be little transparent and cluttered

\(^{18}\) Frielingsdorf, *Dämonische Gottesbilder*, 165-166.


\(^{20}\) Samuel, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, 67.


\(^{23}\) Frielingsdorf, *Dämonische Gottesbilder*, 22-23.

\(^{24}\) Ibid. 20.
with negative messages from what the concrete person has learned and experienced (as it is in the case of the negative images.)

Representations or images of God not only control our thinking they also shape our actions. If we apply this to the image of God represented in atonement theory, in exclusivism and in the ideas of judgement day and hell, we can detect God consciously or unconsciously imagined as a merciless judge who sends "wrong believers" to eternal torment or annihilation in hell. The metaphor of coming judgement and condemnation (with the only logical answer to those who believe it being urgent evangelism and mission) then becomes the background pattern that determines one's thoughts, emotions and actions even if their "official" doctrines proclaim a loving and merciful God.

The Problem of the Exclusivist Interpretation of Mission

Christian mission in the past has often been guided by a one-sided and, from the outset, rejecting position. According to David Pailin, Christian attitude to the believers of other religions (as "pagan and savage tribes") frequently and for a long time "reflected a strong, confident, aggressive and often ill-informed type of Christianity." This combined with the conviction that they were lost, condemned to punishment in hell, and that only Christianity held the way to salvation, defined the aim of mission to bring this salvation by converting them to the Christian faith. The exclusivist mission understanding carries problematic images of God, especially as one who condemns the majority of humankind to eternal torture. These images have been revealed in

25 Jung, Antwort auf Hijob, 391 as quoted in Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 22-23.
countless psychological studies and therapy to be harmful to the psyche of many people. As M. Erickson puts it:

The problem takes a slightly different form when we consider the future state of the un-evangelised. The traditional doctrine has been that such persons spend eternity in an endless punishment in hell. How can this be reconciled with God's love? Did not Jesus teach that we are to forgive those who wrong us, to love not only our friends, but also our enemies? How then are we to understand a God who apparently does not love his enemies, who takes vengeance on them, and eternally so, who is never satisfied with the punishment of these people?28

Many psychologists, therapists and theologians have criticised the idea of Judgement Day and eternal damnation to hell as highly problematic and destructive. Carl Gustav Jung described this apocalyptic vision as "a true orgy of hate, wrath, vengeance and blind destructive rage."29 Karl Frielingsdorf points out that these pictures, ideas and visions not only cause fear in connection with death, but also embody vindictive images of God.30 These images, as Hanna Wolff contends, also pervert Jesus, the very "Prince of Peace", into an agent of an essentially violent God.31 This is why Heiko Rohrbach sees only two options that are mutually exclusive: either to believe in a loving and forgiving God as experienced in Jesus or to believe in hell.32 There is no way of reconciling these two visions of God. The horrific nightmares painted in the Book of Revelation as well as in some other passages (for example Romans 1:18) show the punishing Judge-God going berserk to the effect

29 Helmut Jaschke, Dunkle Gottesbilder: Therapeutische Wege der Heilung (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1992), 51; also "eine wahre Orgie von Haß, Zorn, Rache und blinder Zerstörungswut"; Wolff, Neuer Wein- Alte Schläuche, 60.
30 Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 107.
31 Wolff, Neuer Wein- Alte Schläuche, 178.
that the good news that Jesus brought is "pulped in a really terrible way." Should these images be the ones to motivate our mission?

Also the form of soteriology where Jesus' death on the cross is interpreted as atoning, substitutionary sacrifice that saves from the wrath of God and eternal torment (or annihilation) in hell, results in a very negative view of the condition of non-Christians and consequently in the urgent need to evangelise and convert them to Christianity. The gravest problem of this position again is the violent image of God it carries. The mission connected with this soteriology means to inform the Non-Christians about the future judgement, condemnation and punishment in order to make them understand the necessity of salvation through accepting Christ's atoning sacrifice for themselves.

Resulting Neurosis

Following Carl Gustav Jung, Jörg Müller is convinced that every neurosis can eventually be traced back to deleterious images of God, although this does not mean everybody suffering from such images is automatically neurotic. Müller's claim appears to be surprising and even irritating, but long-term clinical studies provide ample evidence in support of this claim. He combines this with the theological idea that God suffers from these images too, because they torment people or motivate them to reject or misinterpret God.

Zellner adds that in the wider range there is a crisis of images and stories, a crisis of content and not merely—as is often thought—of interpretation. He corroborates Müller's view that the God-condition of a soul and the general condition of a person's

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33 Wolff, Neuer Wein- Alte Schläuche, 60; Jaschke, Dunkle Gottesbilder, 51.
35 Müller, Gott ist anders, 7.
psyche are closely linked. Small wonder that an increasing number of people find it difficult to relate to the old “traditional” vindictive image of God!

Karl Frielingsdorf’s studies demonstrate that there are many people suffering from a “God-complex” (Hans Eberhard Richter) or from “God-poisoning”, an expression coined by the Swiss psychoanalyst Tillman Moser. The negative and destructive images of God found in peoples’ unconscious often stand in direct contradiction to their consciously professed positive images. Most of the clients would refer to themselves as believing Christians who expect salvation and deliverance from God and believe in “the loving and merciful God of the Good News”. Outwardly they profess God as a loving father and good shepherd, but in crisis situations they are shaken by fear of a punishing or unpredictable one. One is reminded of Nietzsche’s dictum “‘unredeemed-ness’ of the supposedly redeemed” (“Unerlöstheit" der doch angeblich Erlösten”) meaning that they are in reality afraid of the God who they claim is love.

Karl Frielingsdorf not only addresses the connection between negative or what he calls “demonic” images of God and the psychological damage that such a wrathful God can do to the human psyche. He identifies too how century-old theological doctrines such as the prevailing atonement theory in Christian soteriology (today mostly evangelical) and its logic of justice by punishment ("Strafgerechtigkeit") are conducive to the rise of

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37 Samuel, The Lord is My Shepherd, 64-65.
38 R. Riess, Sehnsucht nach Leben (Göttingen, 1987), 236 as referred to in Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 22.
39 Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 7.
40 The latter being especially present in the case of people believing in the Double Predestination or the ones suffering from the psychological image of God. See Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 7.
41 Friedrich E. von Gagern, Der andere Gott (München: Kösel-Verlag GmbH, 1990), 15.
negative images of God. This understanding of salvation or redemption can be summarised as the need to restore law and order after it has been destroyed by human disobedience (sin) by the means of an “adequate” punishment. In the end, it is the God-man Jesus Christ who has to take upon himself the punishment deserved by humankind.\(^42\) According to this logic reconciliation takes place by way of punishment. The punishment functions as the means by which to restore the unbalanced or disrupted order where everybody receives what they deserve.\(^43\) Friedrich von Gagern pointed out that the “traditional” concept of sin as disobedience automatically implies a judging God.\(^44\) This was the “wrath of God”\(^45\) Martin Luther feared so much that it moved him to search for a theological solution that would once and for all answer the tormenting question how to escape the threatening judgement and find a merciful God.\(^46\) Unfortunately, the solution Luther suggested maintained that God justifies sinners through the death of Jesus Christ and failed to abolish the fear-generating features attributed to God, namely, that without Christ all we see is a merciless judge demanding sacrifice and punishment.\(^47\)

Karl Frielingsdorf welcomes what he observes as a current moving away in theology from the old soteriological paradigm towards a divine justice that works in form of love and creative righteousness rather than punishment.\(^48\) The new paradigm


\(^{43}\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^{44}\) von Gagern, \textit{Der andere Gott}, 72.


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ascribes an entirely new meaning to the death of Jesus Christ. Christ so loved God that he was not only able to refrain from hatred and retaliation when he was dragged to his death, he lived God’s love so fully that he loved those who killed him till the end, thus calling humankind out and away from the vicious circle of crime and revenge into participation in God’s kingdom where love reigns. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ discloses what human hatred and God’s love are capable to do. In other words, the life and fate of Jesus becomes judgement of our sins in the sense of revealing human punishment-justice and violence for what it is. At the same time it is a revelation of the completely different justice of God that reaches out towards human beings and their life with each other. This justice is no longer based on the “Do ut des” (quid pro quo or tit for tat) principle, but rather on the creative love of God meeting each individual with understanding. Instead of the Judgement Day being a day of last punishment or reward (once and forever, with no chance to change or repent), it becomes a time of purification and transformation of human beings. This is done by the virtue of God revealing to human beings God’s innermost nature which is pure goodness and love. Instead of punishment—be it eternal torment in hell or annihilation—humankind could (if they would wish so) be transformed by unlimited and unreserved communion within the divine love. Frielingsdorf leaves open the possibility that the life of some individuals could be so hardened by their own self-centredness as not to allow the creative love of God to resurrect it to become a new life in love.49

One example from psychology: The Punitive Judge

Karl Frielingsdorf has dedicated most of his life’s work to addressing the widespread image of God the punitive judge and its

Vorgrimler, Der Tod im Leben und Denken der Christen (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 88f.
numerous derivations. He contends that this image is the one most frequently found among patients (94%) both in its basic form and in its diverse variations. It was Friedrich von Gagern who expressed his wonder about the strange reality that for many people it seems to be easier to believe in God’s punishment than in God’s unconditional loving kindness. That the punitive judge prevails unbeknownst in many cultures and societies is borne out by commonplace phrases like for example: “Let God not hear this!” “God will punish him for this”, “Why did God do this to me?” (when something severe—like death of a child—happens) or “Be silent, God is angry!” (when hearing thunder.) It is rather unfortunate that sayings like these feature prominently in day-to-day conversation between parents and children. They attest to the deep roots that this image has in peoples’ minds, particularly when we consider that many among those who utter these phrases would not refer to themselves as “believers” or “Christians”.

When the punishing judge decides to show mercy he postpones or holds back his punishment for a while. This understanding of God’s grace is clearly expressed by a Latvian conservative evangelical in the following quote, “I understood God’s love: that He has not yet destroyed the Earth with fire or water and gives people time of grace every day to repent for their

50 Karl Frielingsdorf, Der wahre Gott ist anders: Von krankmachenden zu heilenden Gottesbildern (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1997), 63-66, also Zellner, Gottestherapie, 24-25.
51 Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 112-113.
52 The negative and destructive images listed and examined by Frielingsdorf are: the “Punitive Judge-God”, the “Death-God”, the “Bookkeeper-God” and the “Hard-to-Please God” (Frielingsdorf, Der wahre Gott ist anders, 10 cf. F.W. Niehl, Hg Die vielen Gesichter Gottes) and The “God of the Gaps”, the “Capricious Player-God” (“willkürlicher Spielergott”), the “Tyrannical Despot” (Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 48 and 107) They form variations of the punitive Judge-God image as they are all in one way or another related to the God who punishers humans for their sins
53 von Gagern, Der andere Gott.
The punitive, judging image of God logically implies that people have to be “thankful” for not yet being rejected or condemned. This has nothing to do with free and genuine love. In other words, it is “love” in fear of hell.

The image of the punitive Judge-God as well as its other forms mostly remains in the sphere of the unconscious and works its influence from there. It is frequently hidden by the façade of a superficial positive image and in case of many of Frielingsdorf’s patients only appears occasionally in psychosomatic symptoms, depressions, fears and feelings of guilt. These negative, destructive images may appear consciously only in situations of severe crisis and conflict when the person falls back into his or her key-position and thus under the influence of corresponding God-images.55

Hanna Wolff is convinced that the ultimate source of the judging God is to be sought in parts of the Old Testament where God resembles a despot ruling over the nations with violent omnipotence. With this image judgement and punishment comes into Christianity as a fundamental motive (as seen in atonement theory and the notion of hell and perdition.) It will also automatically carry violence.56 In her book *New Wine in Old Skins* Wolff takes up Moser’s point that fear and love are incompatible and criticises the century-old theological practice to try and synthesise at all costs diverging elements such as wrath and love, justice and love, omnipotence and righteousness, fear and love, creation and salvation or law and mercy.57 She warns about the suffering such synthesising has caused especially before any scientific and psychological aid had been put in place. Wolff asserts that these images are not only problematic because they preserve archaic views and obsolete levels of consciousness, but

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because they force the new image of God revealed by and in Jesus Christ into the Procrustes bed of old categories and ways of thought: the new wine is rigorously or consistently poured into old wineskins. She concludes that if Jesus brought nothing new to our understanding of God, he could have saved the efforts.\(^5\)

The harmful God-representations and images detected by therapists in their work with patients are neither purely individual nor are they new, because similar images of God can be found in the Bible. This brings us to the question where these notions have their roots. Studying the origins of biblical metaphors will inevitably lead to results that challenge the theory of verbal inspiration, for not only can biblical metaphors of God be traced back to much earlier stages in the history of religion, some biblical images are also highly problematic, to say the least. We cannot avoid asking the question whether all images of God mentioned in Scripture can be considered healthy and fit for use today, as we would have to do if we wanted to read the Bible as verbally inspired timeless expression of truth and according to its natural or literal meaning. Wolfgang Böhme remarks that taking Old Testament language portraying God as brutal, vengeful and unforgiving places the reader under the obligation to love God not because God is infinitely worthy of love, but in spite of the fact that such a God would rightfully deserve human loathing and protest.

**One example from the Bible: The sexual Abuser**

Occasionally, God is described as directly involved in acts of sexual violence, so for example in those chapters of the Old Testament talking about the relationship between JHWH and certain cities. The cities appear in personified form as wives, daughters or other female figures. In Ezekiel 16:35-42 JHWH strips

\(^5\) *ibid.* 163-164.
and mutilates Jerusalem “before the eyes of her lovers”. The city who once was a foundling is thrown back into its primeval nakedness, and the city-woman is killed and her body cut up with swords. The brutality of the violence depicted in this story is still shocking for us today. But as Elke Seifert points out, the logic behind it is no less dreadful. Judgement and punishment are brought upon the woman-city because JHWH has kept her alive as a child. Now that she has grown up it is her duty to live only for him. This means that she is entirely at his disposal, which explicitly includes that she has to be available to him for sexual favours.

Another example can be found in the same book of Ezekiel. Chapter 23 talks about two sisters: Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem). They are presented as child-prostitutes who lust after their lovers, meaning they enjoy sexual relationships in early childhood (Ezekiel 23:3,5,12). This in itself is a dangerous misrepresentation. The text describes as sexual pleasure what is in fact childhood sexual abuse. Contemporary abusers use very similar language to justify their criminal activities. As a rule, abusers blame their victims and portray them as “little whores and seducers”. The story goes on to describe how the two sisters are

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63 See Ulrike Brockhaus and Maren Kohlshorn, Sexuelle Gewalt gegen Mädchen und Jungen: Mythen, Fakten, Theorien (Frankfurt, 1993), 157; see also Ursula
punished in a brutal and humiliating fashion to force them into complete submission so that the surviving woman “could not lift her eyes”. The responsibility for sexual contact is entirely assigned to the woman and she alone carries the consequences.

The above mentioned books of the Old Testament imply that a metaphorical female figure, be this a daughter or a wife, can be pushed about, rejected and abandoned at will (Hosea 1:6) used for sexual pleasure and producing offspring, because he has taken her in when she was born (Ezekiel 16:3). She can even be given away to be raped (Gen 19:8). A drastic form of violence is demonstrated when the woman is punished and humiliated (see Jeremiah 4:30-31; 6:2, 13:20-27.)

As can be seen from the examples above, the image of JHWH as abuser and sexually violent is not a singular, but a rather widespread image in the Old Testament. In these texts it is JHWH who actively and deliberately afflicts pain, sorrow and suffering: JHWH’s prophet uncovers the nakedness of his wife in front of other men (Hos 2:2), JHWH does the same to the city-women both in Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Ez 16:37; Jer 13:22,26), JHWH “treats her shame with violence”, JHWH treads “the virgin, the daughter of Judah, in a winepress” so that his garments are sprinkled with blood (Isaiah 63:2f.)

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64 Ezekiel 23:27
65 Ezekiel 23:28 King James Version
68 Ibid. 309.
69 "behandelt ihre Scham gewaltsam" (Jer 13:22) Seifert, Tochter und Vater im Alten Testament, 305.
70 Lamentations 1:15; see Artur Weiser, “Klagelieder”, “Das Hohe Lied, Klagelieder, das Buch Ester”, ATD 16/2 (Göttingen, 1958), 56, compare Isaiah 63,1ff (63:3b I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment); Seifert, Tochter und Vater im Alten Testament, 285.
Levels of Spiritual Development

Carl Gustav Jung once complained that in Christianity there is still a considerable lack of attention paid to the unconscious images that guide our actions. Humankind is ‘historically layered’. The psychological make-up between people or even within the mind and psyche of one person might differ by centuries and even millennia: some have the mentality of the Stone Age, others still feel at home in the views of the Middle Ages, many have never left the age of Enlightenment, and others still dream about the wonders of twentieth-century technology. The views and opinions, suggestions and plans are correspondingly diverse and controversial. This includes, of course, the images of God so that archaic, medieval, eighteenth-century and post-modern worldviews all exist side by side today. One can discover in oneself ideas and images that belong to very different levels of development and it can be a matter of choice to decide which one to take.

Striving For New Images of God in Theology and Missiology

Today Christianity is reeling in an age of crisis issuing forth in low church attendance and the scandals surrounding clerical sexual abuse in Europe, and the exponential growth of Pentecostalism and fundamentalism in the rest of the world. In this situation a new reformation is needed. We need new images, new language, new love instead of a supreme patriarchal ruler, king, judge demanding punishment and satisfaction or exclusivistic God who condemns the majority of humanity to hell. They should be tested by the results which the images produce ("the fruit it bears")—so to figure out if they are positive and healthy or rather unhealthy and harmful.

71 Frielingsdorf, Dämonische Gottesbilder, 165.
72 Wolff, Neuer Wein- Alte Schläuche, 169.
73 Ibid.
There is no alternative than to struggle for a Jesus-like image of God, a loving God.\textsuperscript{74} New ways of thinking and questioning images of God may become a source of healing.\textsuperscript{75} We are too much afraid of mistakes in our attempt to find new answers to old questions; instead we have reason galore to believe that the biggest sin is holding fast to a violent, punitive Judge-God.\textsuperscript{76}

Hildegard Wustmans calls for new images that are not static definitions but rather expressions of a dynamic relationship like friendship.\textsuperscript{77} God is the liberating companion of the creation\textsuperscript{78} and not its punitive judge. This corresponds with the image derived from Karl Fielingsdorf’s therapy. In the healing process most of the patients experience God simultaneously as coming down to everyone and meeting them exactly where they are, exactly in their situation and “key-position”, and being much greater than the images they suffered from. This God has been holding and supporting them through the past experiences, through the therapy and is leading them beyond.\textsuperscript{79}

The friendship metaphor is especially adequate for interreligious sphere, because within this paradigm “the diversity, cultural, interracial, and ecumenical, is consciously prised as a condition for connectedness, for women have the insight born in pain that a monolithic position inevitably works to the disadvantage of somebody, usually the most powerless.”\textsuperscript{80} This form of relationship is based on freedom and is not determined by purpose

\textsuperscript{74} Frielingsdorf, \textit{Der wahre Gott ist anders}, 109.
\textsuperscript{75} Jaschke, \textit{Dunkle Gottesbilder}, 64, 84.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.} 12.
\textsuperscript{77} Hildegard Wustmans, \textit{Wenn Gott zur Freundin wird... Freundinnenschaft- der Weg zum neuen Himmel und neuer Erde}, Würzburger Studien zur Fundamentaltheologie Vol 14, Ed Elmar Klinger (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 1993), 53.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid.} 55-57f, 67-69.
\textsuperscript{79} Frielingsdorf, \textit{Dämonische Gottesbilder}, 101.
or benefit as most other relationships like family bonds, work relations, etc. are. In friendship people are opening up to each other entering the adventure of mutual exchange, discovery and widening of horizons. It is a free relationship, because friends choose to be together, they are not forced to do so. There is no hierarchy, no “inferior” and “superior”, in friendship contrary to the relationships inspired by the old, patriarchal image of God that is defined by hierarchical relations between people.

The further development of theology should, according to von Gagern, lead to partnership paradigm. Here the contrast between the old image of God and the new friendship image becomes apparent. The old image implied a powerful (potentially or actually violent) protector who is expected to solve the problems for both individuals and for societies or the world. The friendship paradigm however is a project of and for the future on our planet which is getting smaller and closer, where human beings and nature can only survive if they become friends. The contrast is between dependant ‘command-following’ relationship with God and one where cooperation, human responsibility and participation are expected. This also was the type of relationship expressed in Jesus’ life. He talked about being friends and not slaves. This message is therefore authentically biblical.

Religious Pluralism in a Changing World

The growing necessity to cope with a religiously plural world “which of course, is the only world there is” has been described

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82 von Gagern, *Der andere Gott*, 18, 141.
84 Wustmans, *Wenn Gott zur Freundin wird*, 75.
85 Wilfred C. Smith, “The Christian in a Religiously Plural World”, John Hick and Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and other Religions* (Glasgow: Collins,
by Wilfred Cantwell Smith as a current that is about to become a flood. At the same time the need to cooperate in the fight for justice and peace is also growing. As Bhikhu Parekh formulates it: “almost all societies today are multicultural and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future” Apart from that, more and more people are interested in other faiths, and this not only out of curiosity, but as part of their own spiritual search. A well-known example is the regular exchange between Western Benedictine and Japanese Zen monasteries, where monks hailing from seemingly unrelated traditions learn from each other’s meditative practice and spiritual experience.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has been aware of religious plurality for a long period of time. A lot of effort went into dealing with the question what the appropriate Christian attitude towards other religions should look like. The ecumenical movement also responded to the call for a ‘new’ or ‘wider’ ecumenism. If all this was not difficult enough, then the real challenge posed by religious pluralism was the issues pertaining to the traditional understanding of mission and evangelism. The ongoing debate about this particular point gave rise to consent and substantial disagreement alike, even within the WCC itself.


86 Ariarajah, Hindus and Christians, 7.


89 Ariarajah, Hindus and Christians, 4.

90 Ibid. 6.

91 Jan van Lin’s study Shaking the Fundamentals: Religious Plurality and Ecumenical Movement illustrates the wide variety of positions, standpoints and opinions taken by different groups (such as Continental, Anglo-Saxon and Asian Christians, especially from India and China) and individuals. Jan van Lin,
If plurality is to be lived, certain issues are most likely to arise such as: "is the Hindu really damned because he or she is not a Christian?" 92 This question becomes all the more pressing when the Hindu is our neighbour, colleague, friend or our classmate and not just somebody featuring in the television news.

In the past, Christianity has had a habit of feeling superior to other faiths. This attitude is at least partly the result of a certain understanding of the Lord’s commandment to baptise all nations. Not until very recently, only a small group of people had more than a faint knowledge about other world religions apart from the three Abrahamic traditions (and frequently even of them.) The whole situation has changed profoundly, as the knowledge of other religions “increased in proportion to the development of scholarly sciences such as anthropology, sociology of religion, history of religions and oriental studies.” 93 Together with globalisation, media communication and massive migration, it transformed the face of the earth. J. Erickson sums it up in a few sentences:

Christians have traditionally tended to be condescending towards other religions. They were either regarded as idolatry, or at least as clouded or mistaken constructions of the revelation given to all persons. We must now, however, as a result of a closer contact, ask ourselves about the status of these persons and their religions. What should be our attitude toward them? Should they be evangelised, or regarded as fellow travellers, who although they express themselves differently, are really bound for the same place we are?94

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92 D’Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism, 3.
93 D’Costa, Theology and Religious Pluralism, 2.
94 Erickson, How Shall They Be Saved, 22.
Conclusion: New Approaches to Mission

The greater awareness and appreciation of religious plurality prompts many churches to move towards a more adequate theology of religions and understanding of mission. There is a widely felt need for such a theology, for without it Christians remain ill-equipped to understand the profound religious experiences which they witness in the lives of people of other faiths or to articulate their own experience in a way that will be understood by people of other faiths.95

In today's multicultural, multi-religious, globalised and religiously polarised world, mission no longer can be seen in terms of church expansion, salvation of lost souls condemned to hell; or as supporting the outreach of colonial powers.96 Instead the inter-religious dialogue and collaboration for peace, justice and the preservation of the creation is now recognised as some of the most pressing needs of our time. In addition to the theological issues arising from the "shrinking of the world and the ever more porous boundaries between communities, religion has become an increasingly significant component in inter-communal relations. Faith can make things better, or it can make them a great deal worse."97 As Hildegard Wustmans puts it "if we do not learn to live with each other, we will die together." In this situation, God calls for our participation, solidarity and friendship.98 This implies very different images of God to those found in exclusivism, atonement theory and the notion of the punishment in hell.

98 Wustmans, Wenn Gott zur Freundin wird, 76-77.
Mission and evangelisation, even to a Protestant mind-set, does not necessarily mean converting others to one’s own form of religion, but it can be understood and lived as friendship, partnership and cooperation with God and with others. When we engage in missionary work we have to be careful as “first we need to rescue the words ‘mission’ and ‘evangelism’ from the clouds that hang over them [as a result of] long association of mission with imperialism and colonialism. In the West, Christians are only just now beginning to rid themselves of the sense that civilisation is in their hands and that they alone can bring light to benighted souls.”

Alternative ways of understanding and doing mission have to be developed: seeing the members of other religions as co-pilgrims with whom we cooperate, as suggested by the WCC. In this case, mission would mean to live and bring forth the good news of the loving God, in place of a cruel Judge threatening humankind with hell, and to work for the “already and not yet” of the Kingdom of God. True dialogue, according to the WCC, must lead to mutual empowerment so that Christians and their non-Christian partners can cooperate in the struggle for peace, justice and the equality.

God’s wisdom and justice extends “to the ends of the earth as he guides the nations through their traditions of wisdom and understanding” and God’s glory shines through the whole of creation. Therefore, “people have at all times and in all places responded to the presence and activity of God among them, and have given their witness to their encounters with the Living God. In this testimony they speak both of seeking and of having found salvation, or wholeness, or enlightenment, or divine guidance, or

100 Bevans and Schroeder, Constants in Context, 285.
101 Introduction to the Baar Statement.
102 Ibid.
rest, or liberation." Therefore according to Hick theology needs a Copernican revolution and must “shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre, to the thought that it is God who is at the centre and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him”.

Wanda Deifelt points out that “when language about God speaks of mercy, compassion, grace, and the divine embrace, we remember the divine solidarity of the creator with creation. We should suppose that this language would have an impact on the way we see ourselves and how we act in this world. We are travellers on the way and we will not survive if we do not take others into account, trusting them and celebrating ourselves as God’s concrete bodies. To be created in God’s image means we participate in this divine creativity, in which we can, with the help of God, contribute to the blooming of small signs of hope and life.”

Along this line of thought is Hildegard Wustmann as well in pointing out that the church as a community of friends can become a powerful counter-model to xenophobia as it is not necessarily the enemy but rather only the stranger which we fear and therefore are willing to kill and die for in this approach. This way Mission will also become much more exciting as it is answering to “God’s

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106 Wustmans, *Wenn Gott zur Freundin wird*, 81-82.
gracious invitation to humanity to share in the dynamic communion that is at the same time God's self-giving missionary life."\textsuperscript{107}

Learning from the vision and praxis of Jesus it brings new healing and new light to the globalised poverty, religious violence and helps to find a new appreciation of local cultures and traditions. Mission is then "about preaching, serving and witnessing to the work of God in our world; [...] as partners with God in the patient yet unwearied work of inviting and persuading women and men to enter into relationship with their world, with one another and with Godself."\textsuperscript{108}

It is simply inconceivable that a loving God consigned the majority of humankind to perdition because these people did not know Jesus, often because of no fault of their own. There should also be place for an aspect of mystical experience and of apophatic theology of not having words and images to describe the divine. As Jaroš says: "God is bigger than all human imagination. This should be considered in each image, each metaphor and speculation about God."\textsuperscript{109}

Lorenz Zellner reckons that there is probably no other single concept in human history that has been as much misunderstood and misused as that for which the word "God" stands. Therefore to love God must from here on also mean to "become more sensitive to what and how it is spoken about God."\textsuperscript{110} This is especially important when we are talking and doing mission.

\textsuperscript{107} Bevans and Schroeder, \textit{Constants in Context}, 285.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Zellner, \textit{Gottestherapie}, 15, 14.