

Rev. Michael Dowd,
Contributor

Big history/pro-future evangelist, religious naturalist, sacred realist, and bestselling author

God: Personification ≠ Person

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LONDON - AUGUST 21: Lorenzo Quinn's 'Hand of God' sculpture is positioned on Park Lane in Mayfair on August 21, 2011 in London, England. The 4 metre, 400kg aluminium work is also on display at The State Hermitage Museum, Russia. Hand of God forms part of Lorenzo Quinn's 2011 worldwide public art programme which includes The State Hermitage Museum, Russia; La Biennale di Scultura, Rome; and the 54th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale. (Photo by Chris Jackson/Getty Images for Halcyon Gallery)

God is a personification, not a person — an undeniable interpretation, not an otherworldly tyrant. If we fail to grasp this, we cannot possibly understand religion or religious differences.

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” — Philip K. Dick

Birth, life, death, the cycles and rhythms of Nature, the elemental forces of the Universe: these are inescapably real. Like it or not, we have always found ourselves in relationship with a Reality we could neither predict nor control. And given the nature of the human brain, there is one thing that people in every culture and throughout history have instinctively done: We’ve used metaphors and analogies to refer and relate to that which is unavoidably, undeniably real and/or mysterious. Indeed, it seems that we can’t *not* do this. Consciously or unconsciously, we regularly interpret our life and our world using relational metaphors.

As [Stewart Guthrie](#) shows in his acclaimed book, [“Faces in the Clouds”](#) (Oxford University Press), *all* images and concepts of God are meaning-rich interpretations and personifications. Images and concepts that evoke trust and the courage to forge ahead no matter what the obstacles are immensely useful. *Practical realism* in this way trumps *factual realism* if the mindset induced leads to greater evolutionary fitness.

Factual Truth vs. Practical Truth

In his 2003 book, [“Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society,”](#) [David Sloan Wilson](#) (Distinguished Professor of Biology and Anthropology at Binghamton University) draws a crucial distinction between

“practical realism” and “factual realism.” Practical realism, also known as practical truth, is that which reliably produces personal wholeness and social coherence by motivating people to think and behave in ways that benefit themselves and the larger community. Factual realism (factual truth) is that which is evidentially real. Wilson writes,

What do I mean by factual and practical realism? A belief is factually realistic when it accurately describes what's really out there (e.g., there are no people up there sitting on clouds). A belief is practically realistic when it causes the believer to behave adaptively in the real world.

An example of why practical realism historically has trumped factual realism is this: In group-to-group conflicts, any culture that offers the promise of an afterlife to those who heroically martyr themselves will likely triumph over an army of atheists who have the rational belief that death marks the absolute end of individual existence. Over the eons of human evolution, such selective processes would tend to favor the maintenance of beliefs in that which was felt experientially as real, whether or not those beliefs had any basis in measurable, factual reality.

David Sloan Wilson also writes,

“If there is a trade-off between the two forms of realism, such that our beliefs can become more adaptive only by becoming factually less true, then factual realism will be the loser every time. ... Factual realists detached from practical reality were not among our ancestors. It is the person who elevates factual truth above practical truth who must be accused of mental weakness from an evolutionary perspective.”

Religion Is About Right Relationship to Reality, Not the Supernatural

“The most profound insight in the history of humankind is that we should seek to live in accord with reality. Indeed, living in harmony with reality may be accepted as a formal definition of wisdom. If we live at odds with reality (foolishly), then we will be doomed, but if we live in proper relationship with reality (wisely), then we shall be saved. Humans everywhere, and at all times, have had at least a tacit understanding of this fundamental principle.” — Loyal Rue

All religions offer maps of what is real (how things are) and what is important (which things matter). So contends philosopher of religion [Loyal Rue](#) in his 2006 book, [“Religion Is Not About God”](#) (book review and YouTube intro [here](#)). Religions foster outlooks and practices that help adherents live in right relationship with each other, with society, and with Nature as a whole. Here again, so long as the stories and strictures do not contradict lived experience, the *usefulness* of the images and concepts are what matters most — not their truth value.

Thus Darwin didn't kill God. To the contrary, he and Alfred Russel Wallace offered the first glimpse of the real Creator behind and beyond our species' myriad mythic portrayals of how things came to be.

In addition to Stewart Guthrie, scholars as diverse as [Joseph Campbell](#), [Huston Smith](#), [Paul Tillich](#), [Rudolf Bultmann](#), [Robert Bellah](#), [Roy Rappaport](#), [Ann Taves](#), [Andrew Newberg](#), [Pascal Boyer](#), [Justin Barrett](#), [Daniel Dennett](#), and [Michael Shermer](#) remind us that we cannot understand religion and religious diversity if we ignore how the human mind instinctively relationalizes (personifies) reality when interpreting and making meaning of its experience. In the words of psychologist [James Hillman](#), “Personifying is the heart's mode of knowing.”

Evidence from a wide range of disciplines, from cognitive neuroscience and anthropology to cross-cultural studies of the world's myths and religions, all support the claim that “God” is (and always has been) an interpretation (a personification), not a person. Only in this way can one make sense of the thousands of competing stories as to what God (or the gods, or the Goddess) supposedly said or did. As I regularly remind audiences...

Poseidon was not the god of the oceans, as if a supernatural entity separate from water were looking down from on high or rising from the deep. Poseidon was the personification of the incomprehensibly powerful and capricious seas. Similarly, Sol was not the spirit of the Sun, as if there were a separation between the two. Sol was a mythic proper name for that seemingly eternal, life-giving source of heat and light. By saying “Sol,” “Helios,” or some other sacred name, our ancestors experienced that reality as a “Thou” to be related to — to be revered and sometimes feared.

Whenever any story or any scriptural passage claims that “God said this” or “God did that,” what follows is *always* an interpretation — specifically, an interpretation of what some person or group of people thought or felt or sensed or wished that Reality/Life/Nature/the Universe was “saying” or “doing,” and almost always as justification after the fact or to make a theological point. Such subjectively meaningful claims are never objective, measurable truth.

Indeed, had CNN or ABC News been there to record the moment of “divine revelation” there would have been nothing out of the ordinary or miraculous to report on the evening news — nothing other than what was coming out of someone’s mouth, or pen, or whatever folks wrote with back then. If we fail to grasp this, not only will we trivialize the very notion of the divine but, more tragically still, we will miss what Reality/God is “saying and doing” today. As I wrote in the [preface](#) of [“Thank God for Evolution”](#):

How was the world made? Why do earthquakes, tornados, and other bad things happen? Why must we die? And why do different peoples answer these questions in different ways? The big questions that children have always asked and will continue to ask cannot be answered by the powers of human perception alone. Ancient cultures gave so-called supernatural answers to these questions, but those answers were not truly supernatural — they were prenatal. Prior to advances in technology and scientific ways of testing truth claims, factual answers were simply unavailable. It was not just difficult to understand infection before microscopes brought bacteria into focus; it was impossible. Without an evolutionary worldview, it is similarly impossible to understand ourselves, our world, and what is required for humanity to survive.

Supernatural Is Unnatural Is Uninspiring

Everything shifts when we move from a worldview given by tradition and authority to one based on facts and empirical evidence. For example, evidence suggests that the only place that the so-called supernatural realm has ever existed has been in the minds and hearts (and speech) of human beings — and only quite recently. As Benson Saler revealed in his landmark 1977 American Anthropological Association’s *Ethos* paper, [“Supernatural As a Western Category,”](#) the very notion of supernatural, in opposition to the natural, is a Western invention.

The “supernatural realm” came into being as a thought form after we began to understand things in a natural, scientific way. Only when the concept of “the natural” emerged was it deemed necessary by some to speak of “the supernatural”: that which was imagined to be above or outside of nature. Prior to this, people all over the world used a blend of [day and night language](#) (reflecting their daytime and nighttime experiences) to speak about the nature of reality. But as we all know, when we fly in our dreams we’re not having a *supematural* or miraculous experience; we’re having an experience common to the dream-state.

As we have collectively learned ever more about the natural, the supernatural has become ever less. Supernatural and unnatural are, after all, synonyms. Anything supposedly supernatural is, by definition, unnatural. And most people find unnatural relatively uninspiring when they really stop and think about it.

It should not surprise us that young people are turning their backs on religion by the millions and that the [New Atheists](#) are riding bestseller lists when “the Gospel,” God’s supposed Good News for all of humanity, is reduced to this:

An unnatural king who occasionally engages in unnatural acts sends his unnatural son to Earth in an unnatural

way. He's born through an unnatural birth, lives an unnatural life, performs all sorts of unnatural deeds, and is killed, naturally. He then unnaturally rises from the dead in order to redeem humanity from an unnatural curse brought about by an unnaturally talking snake. After forty days of unnatural appearances to some of his followers he unnaturally zooms off to heaven to return to his unnatural father, sit on an unnatural throne, and unnaturally judge the living and the dead. And if you profess to believe in all this unnatural activity, you and your fellow believers get to go to an unnaturally boring place for an unnaturally long period of time while everyone else suffers an unnatural, torturous hell forever.

Why It Matters How We Think of God and Revelation

Why call what is fundamentally, inescapably real “God”?

As it turns out, how we name Ultimacy (and where we imagine It/Him/Her residing) makes a world of difference in our experience of life and one another and in how we relate to our world.

If we imagine God as an otherworldly person, for example, then we may be contributing — albeit unintentionally — to our species' demise. As renowned systems thinker [Gregory Bateson](#) warned:

If you put God outside and set him vis-a-vis his creation, and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you claim all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your people against the environment of other social units, other races, and the brutes and vegetables. If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic by-products of your own hate or simply of overpopulation and overgrazing.

[Thomas Berry](#), my mentor, expressed a similar prophetic sentiment when he said:

The world we live in is an honorable world. To refuse this deepest instinct of our being, to deny honor where honor is due, to withdraw reverence from divine manifestation, is to place ourselves on a head-on collision course with the ultimate forces of the Universe. This question of honor must be dealt with before any other question. We miss both the intrinsic nature and the magnitude of the issue if we place our response to the present crises of our planet on any other basis. It is not ultimately a political or economic or scientific or psychological issue. It is ultimately a question of honor. Only the sense of the violated honor of Earth and the need to restore this honor can evoke the understanding as well as the energy needed to carry out the renewal of the planet in any effective manner.

Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, wrote an important essay in 1931 titled, [“The Crisis of Faith.”](#) In it, he moves discussion of God beyond beliefs to universal experience. Moreover, he claims that such a seemingly modern and liberal view of God was actually the norm for peoples everywhere in pre-modern times. The essence of Bultmann's argument is that faith has virtually nothing to do with beliefs. Beliefs are actually the antithesis of faith.

Beliefs tend to be attachments of the mind to something being a certain way. In contrast, faith is synonymous with trust — trusting what is beyond one's comprehension or control. One great benefit of this shift from belief to trust is that the compulsion to argue about doctrinal issues and interpretations melts away.

I foresee that within a few generations the concept of a personal God imaged as an unnatural Supreme Being with both

the best and the worst of human traits — now the hallmark of fundamentalist religion — will be replaced by a reality-based view of God. A personified Ultimacy congruent with modern sensibilities simply cannot have the deranged personality and character flaws of a Bronze Age warlord. God is no longer acceptable as a kind of cosmic terrorist: “Believe as I tell you to believe or I will torture you forever.”

Thus from an *evidential* standpoint, we will finally come to celebrate that Ultimacy has no character traits or personality whatsoever, other than what we ourselves project. *God is a personification, not a person...* Hallelujah!

This fundamental shift in the “root metaphor” of the Abrahamic traditions will, I predict, be seen historically as a profound theological transformation. This shift, and what follows naturally from it, will also go a long way toward reconciling science and religion. It will do this not by accommodating science to religion, but by naturalizing, REALizing, religion. Such a shift compels a serious upgrade of our map of reality — opening a door to detecting “God’s ways” and “God’s guidance” no longer in ancient texts but via the collective and ongoing learnings of the self-correcting, global scientific tradition. Said another way, facts are God’s native tongue.

Make no mistake: There is one (and only one) God whose laws we *must* obey or whose “wrath” we *will* experience. Whether we refer to this inescapable Reality as “Abba,” “Allah,” “Lord,” “Nature” or in some other way, we must take seriously scientists’ prophetic warnings about climate change and the overall health of our world and life on Earth.

Like everything else under the sun, religions will either evolve or go extinct. “Getting right with God” means coming into right relationship with our planet and all its gloriously diverse species and cultures — honoring our inner and outer Nature, coming home to Reality. Imagining that it means anything less than this should be considered blasphemy.

“I believe in God, only I spell it N-A-T-U-R-E.” — Frank Lloyd Wright

Also see:

- [Ecology Is the New Theology](#)
- [New Atheists Promote Bible Study?](#)
- [New Theists: Knowers, Not Believers](#)
- [God Is Reality Personified, Not a Person](#)
- [Is Scientific Evidence Modern-Day Scripture](#)
- [Evolutionary Spirituality: Coming Home to Reality](#)
- [The Evidential Reformation: Humanity Comes of Age](#)
- [“What Reality In Human Experience Do We Point To With the Word, ‘God’?”](#)

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