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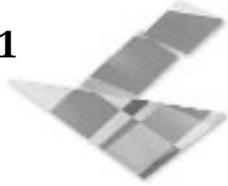
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## CHAPTER 1



# Encountering God Anew at the Crossings

“Write a biography of God-concepts in your life.” This was the first assignment I gave to a group of experienced pastors and priests who came for a one-week intensive seminar on the subject “Preaching in a Multicultural Community.” I explained the assignment this way: “In the act of preaching, we are working with people’s God-images and concepts—evoking them, reclaiming them, affirming them, challenging them, shaping them, reshaping them, and changing them. In order to do this task faithfully, we have to first recover how our own God-concepts have evolved and changed in our lives over the years. In other words, you are invited to explore how God interacted with you during different periods in your lives. In the revelation of God or the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit at significant moments in your lives, you may have been given opportunities to connect with God at a different point and therefore may have gained a view of a different dimension of God. In the process, we might discover what God-concept drives our teaching and preaching, and from where our passion for ministry came.”

In other words, this is an exercise for all Christians. It's something we need to do as the first step in our process of learning to communicate the gospel in a pluralistic world.

As a rule, I have never asked my students to do anything I have not done myself. The following was the result of my reflection on this assignment.

“If you look at anyone with lust, you have already committed adultery in your heart.” Father Jung paraphrased a saying attributed to Jesus from Matthew 5:28. I was a fifth-grade student in a Roman Catholic school in Hong Kong. Sitting in my weekly Bible class, I was terrified that I had broken one of the Ten Commandments, even though I had no idea what adultery was. However, I did have some inkling of what looking at someone with lust was about. Whatever Father Jung said, you believed. In the Chinese language, we called a Roman Catholic priest “Shun Fu,” which literally means “God Father.” With a title like that, he had to be the representative of God. Having seen pictures of God depicted as an old man with a long white beard, I was convinced that God was like a father or a grandfather. Besides, Jesus called God his father. What more proof did I need?

I was the youngest of six children. By the time I was born, my father might have lost interest in babies. I did not remember my father ever holding me or playing with me when I was little. My father was someone I talked to through my mother whenever I needed his signature for my report card or a permission form to go on a field trip. As the youngest, I also observed my father reprimanding all my older siblings when they did something wrong. He would go on for hours recounting everything that they had done wrong from the day that they were born. The “father” concept of God as taught in my Bible class fitted well with my experience of my father—distanced, authoritative, a permission-giver, a rule-setter. The scariest part of that is that if God were like my father, he would also possess a very long memory of everything that I had ever done wrong. As proofs to these ideas of God, we also studied the stories of Adam and Eve, the tower of Babel, the flood, and Lot’s wife. They all pointed to the punishing disciplinarian Father-God.

I am sure that Father Jung also taught us many stories of Jesus’ love and God’s grace. But living in a culture that emphasized the authority of the elders and the importance of the collective—the family and the community—I obviously paid more attention to the concepts of God that reinforced the dominant cultural values of the society in which I lived. I also remember spending a lot of time in Bible class on the Fifth Commandment: Honor your father and mother. In Chinese literature classes, we were also

taught the importance of filial piety. I remember vividly my teacher reciting a verse from Confucius that went something like this: “If the father wanted the son to die and the son did not die, that would be considered disrespectful.” In the Chinese cultural mind-set, Jesus was the ultimate example of a good son who obeyed his Father’s demand for him to die. Father Jung also pointed out the significance of Jesus’ mother at the foot of the cross. He died for his family and for the good of the larger community.

When I was fourteen, my family immigrated to the United States of America and settled in New York City. One of the first places we visited was the Episcopal Mission in Chinatown. The familiarity of church was a comfort that we needed desperately in the foreign environment. The mission was still in its infant stage of development, and we were invited to be part of the ministries right away. My oldest brother was on the Bishop’s Committee. All my siblings got summer jobs at the church. After the first year, for some political reason, the priest left, and so did the organist. The new priest arrived and immediately reaffirmed my family’s involvement with the ongoing ministry of the mission. At the age of fifteen, I was naïve enough to agree to be the organist, even though I had never played one before. My piano-playing skills did not prepare me for playing the organ, but I did okay and the church community was very forgiving. The positive side of this new role was that I had to be in church every Sunday.

Our new priest, Father To, preached two different sermons each Sunday—one in English for the young people, and one in Chinese. I found the Chinese sermon boring and irrelevant, but his English sermon was interesting and engaging, even though I was struggling to become proficient in the English language during that time. Father To was also enrolled in a master’s degree program in business administration, and what he was learning in business school worked its way into his English sermon and teaching. Through school and the media, mainly television, I was absorbing a set of cultural values and patterns that emphasized the personal and individual. Therefore, I was fascinated by Father To’s use of the language of commerce and individual gain or loss. When he preached a sermon about the “cost” of our salvation and that God had “paid” for my “individual” salvation by offering his

son, I was sold. This way of thinking about God and myself was exciting to me because it helped me survive in the new culture in which I found myself. God was a businessman trading his son's life for mine, and that made sense for the time being.

I went to college at Cornell University, away from my family and the urban environment of New York City. According to the new cultural values I was absorbing in the United States, I was supposed to find myself, do my own thing, and be independent by the time I turned eighteen. The first place on campus I visited was the Episcopal Campus Ministry. There I found the full version of individualistic Christianity. God was no longer an entity "out there" lording it over me. God was a loving parent—not just a father but also a mother—who paid attention to me as an important person, beloved and empowered. God incarnated through Christ. We are the body of Christ. God therefore incarnated in me. God was in me. I was in communion with God. In that communion, I was called to be creative, to work for justice, and to love everyone around me. I called my priest, Gurdon Brewster, by his first name—no more of the formality that came with a distanced, high-up-in-the-sky God. The campus ministry community also introduced me to God as feminine, which opened me up to a new horizon of relating to women in my life, especially my mother. God as a mother made so much more sense to me because my mother was the parent who was always there for me. She could almost always anticipate my needs before I had to ask for them.

I am sure that Gurdon and the church community leaders at Cornell taught on many occasions about the importance of community and the collective. Immersing myself in the exciting culture of individualism, I did not pay much attention to these ideas but focused and claimed those theological ideas that supported my individualistic yearnings.

A parallel development of this inward journey was an outward path to nature. Cornell University is built on top of a hill, surrounded by the beauty of nature in Ithaca, New York—waterfalls, magnificent gorges, big old trees of every kind, multicolored foliage in the fall, and blossoming trees in the spring. Every year, I was invited to go on retreats and commune with nature, where I was introduced to the idea that God was in nature.

God not only created me personally, God also made this wonderful and wondrous creation, full of lessons and mysteries. I was called to take care of this creation on behalf of God—its original creator. If I were to be in communion with God, I had to be in communion with nature as well. The lyrics of a song I wrote during that time depicted my idea of God well:

Praise the God of all Creation

Alleluia

Praise the same God in our hearts

Alleluia

These ideas of God, incarnate both in persons and in nature, were a perfect match of my experience of being in a highly individualistic, competitive environment as well as a place surrounded by the beauty of nature. I held tight to these ideas of God through college, my first full-time job as a computer systems designer, and my discernment process to eventually seek ordination in the Episcopal Church.

My experience in seminary continued to affirm my egocentric, individualistic approach to my faith. But deep down inside, I began to notice that something was missing. I saw the signs of this “missing something” everywhere I turned while living in the seminary community. There was the prominent and exciting feminist liberation theology group. There was the anti-nuclear arms movement organizing protests and prayer vigils. There was the gay and lesbian support group. There was the seminarians of color group. There were guitar-strumming musicians. There were the organ/choir-loving people. There were daily cocktail parties in a certain professor’s apartment to which not everyone was invited. I wanted to be part of all these groups, but I felt the pressure to choose one or the other. For example, during the seminary’s struggle to address racism in my first year, as the only Asian American I was caught in the battle between the blacks and the whites, and was left bleeding in the middle—pitied by one group, excluded by the other.

Everywhere I turned there was separation and isolation. Some of these boundaries were defined by others, and some were self-imposed. Little real communication existed among these different camps, and misunderstanding abounded. I saw the danger of the

individualistic approach to faith, which might lead to highly specialized groups and individuals claiming they were the ones who had the right answers, while refusing to communicate and understand others' points of view.

Whereas seminary was affirming and exciting in many ways, I found that my concept of God, which was shared by many of my classmates and professors, did not produce the kind of result that I had envisioned for a community of faith. The crisis pushed me toward finding another way to be faithful, and a new concept of God began to emerge. Communication became a major focus for me by the end of my first year in seminary. I began to make the connection between communication and communion. When there was true communication between people, there was God. God was in the connection, and Christ was the medium. My goal in life was to communicate with myself, with others, and with nature.

In a retreat facilitated by a Roman Catholic priest, I learned about a program called Audio-Visual Communication of Faith—a four-month program taught in France. Without giving it a second thought, I sold my car, the only possession I had, and found my way to the Catholic University of Lyon to study with Father Pierre Babin, the founder and director of the program. In this program, we lived in a community that used three languages to communicate—English, French, and Spanish. While studying in this multilingual international environment with students from all over the world, I discovered that I did not get along very well with many of the students, especially the ones from Asia. Because making connections and facilitating true communication was extremely important to me, I tried even harder to communicate with these students. Then they accused me of being too pushy and dominating. What, me—a rude and pushy Chinese? Or was I Chinese? It dawned on me that they were reacting to the “American” part of me. My American individualism had gotten in the way of my ability to build meaningful relationships with others, especially those from Asia.

At the end of the program, I had some personal time with Fr. Babin, who was a very wise person. He said, and I shall never forget, “Eric, you are very talented. But you need to go home to

the United States and work with the poor.” I had no idea what he meant by that. But I was willing to trust him.

When I returned to seminary that winter, I discovered that the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts had started a Chinese Ministry at the Cathedral. Furthermore, I had heard that the ministry had attracted many Chinese refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia. I thought I would check out this ministry to see if this was a place in which I might consider fulfilling my promise to “work with the poor.”

On the first Sunday after I returned to Boston, I went to St. Paul’s Cathedral and saw a small group of about twenty-five Chinese sitting in the sanctuary in a semicircle. A Chinese priest, Father Benjamin Pao, presided at the holy eucharist. I heard the gospel being read and proclaimed with such eloquence in Cantonese, it was like I had never heard it before. Indeed, I was hearing and witnessing another way of connecting with God different from my experience of church in college and in seminary. I looked around the circle, and I sensed an intimate connection between the priest and every person, young and old, rich and poor. This connection was in a fatherly way, but was not the father image I had learned in my childhood. While the priest was consecrating the wine and bread, I had an epiphany: I saw and truly believed for the first time that the gospel could be embodied fully in the Chinese language and culture. I began to think of God as possibly having an Asian face. I knew I had to explore this further if I were to be faithful to my calling. I had to recover my Chinese culture as full potential for the embodiment of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I decided to do my field education at the Chinese Ministry. My job was to preach once a month and to help with the ministry to the youth.

Working in the Chinese cultural environment again, I reencountered the God-concepts I learned in my childhood. God as an authoritative, sovereign Lord and Father was very important to this group of people who had lived through the most perilous and unstable experience—war. To have a God who focused on the family and the collective was most significant to people who had lost their family to war and to the immigration experience. My God-image came around in full circle, but the Father-God

concept was now bigger and greater than what I had thought before. Now, God was not just a parent based on my assumptions of my own father, but a keeper of the community and a protector of the family. God was revealed when community members, like those of a Chinese family, struggled to stay connected with one another no matter how difficult the situation might be. I started to go home to New York City more often during this period of my life, and I spent time with my parents and began to rebuild our neglected relationships.

Since then, I have devoted my life to the struggle to describe God, making God known every day in different communities. I have learned that God is not limited by my own perception and assumption. God might show a different side of God's self according to the different contexts and communities in which we find ourselves. The revelation of God comes through our struggle to discern where God is and how God affirms or challenges individuals and communities in new contexts and different moments in time.

As I reviewed my own "biography of God-concepts" summarized above, I discovered that each time there was a major change in my life, there was an accompanying change in God-concept. In my class, when my students reported their biographies of God-concepts, they also attested that most of the changes in God-concept came at a major transition or change in their lives. They often began their introduction of a new God-image with:

"When my grandmother died..."

"When I got married..."

"When I had my first child..."

"When I came out as gay man..."

"When my parents moved..."

The scenario of how the revelation of a new dimension of God came to us often involved stepping out, and, in some cases, being forced out, of our comfortable cultural environment and into a different context with sometimes opposing values, beliefs, and assumptions about life, individual, family, community, and God. In my need to survive and to make sense of the new world in which I found myself, I called on a different relationship with God. In the crossing and re-crossing of cultures in my life, different

God-concepts and images emerged to help me adapt, persevere, and stay faithful. At times, the God-image was simply an imposition of the dominant cultural group in order to reinforce the dominant cultural values. At times, the God-image was introduced to me as a way to counter the dominant cultural values. Nevertheless, as I encountered these crossings over time, I matured and began to stand outside of myself and my cultural environment and make the distinctions between my own values, the values of my cultural environment, and God's values. As I did this, I began to discover the many dimensions of God that I did not see from staying in one cultural environment.

This does not mean that I rejected the old idea of God when I received the new one. My perception of God just gained another dimension. God did not cease to be a father when I realized that God could also be like a mother to me. God did not cease to be a Lord who demanded justice when I realized that God was also a loving, merciful parent. God did not cease to be the grandparent who held the community together in unity when I discovered that God was the one who traded Jesus, the Son, for my individual salvation. In the crossing of cultures, personalities, value differences, and theologies, I was given the opportunity to see a greater vision of God.

I am grateful to my parents for having the courage to move from their own familiar environment to the United States, putting me in the middle of the crossing of two divergent cultures. I am thankful for mentors and teachers who have led me to the crossings to encounter nature, to live with people from another nation, to work with people from another economic status. Beyond allowing others to take me to the crossings, I have learned not to be afraid of these crossings of differences, but to courageously seek the opportunities to enter these crossings. In other words, the way to see God more clearly or to respond to God more faithfully is to seek out and encounter others who have a different background and may have a different concept of God. At the crossing of these differences, I am forced to stand outside of myself again and see that my concept of God is but one way, one perspective among many in how people relate to God. At the crossing, I am steered away from the danger of my idolatrous claim that my concept of God is universal. At the crossing, the possibility

of the revelation of a fuller vision of God increases as I struggle to reconcile the differences I have with others I encounter. At the crossing, I have a greater chance of staying faithful to God.

At a gathering of theological students, after I gave a lecture on God-concepts similar to what I have written in this chapter, a student asked, "This God-concept is really serious business, isn't it? I'm from Texas and I can remember David Koresh's community in Waco and how his God-concept caused him and his community to come to such a harmful end. And what about Osama bin Laden's God-concept, which he used to justify such terrorism?"

"Yes," I welcomed the opportunity to expound on this theme. "Teaching God-concepts is very serious, and it is dangerous to teach God-concepts in isolation without the benefit of diversity. In both cases that you cited, the leaders had a very narrow idea of God and they taught these limited concepts of God in total isolation. The result can be devastating to the people who are taught that way. Therefore, as people of the church, we have a very serious responsibility in making sure that we teach God-concepts in the context of diversity."

Jesus did not socialize or engage in theological discourse with only one group of people during his early ministry. He did not isolate himself with just the mainstream religious circle of his time, but spent time at the crossings with the poor, women, the outcast, the unclean, tax collectors, Samaritans, and Gentiles. In the crossings of the powerful and the powerless, the clean and the unclean, the intellectuals and the uneducated, the saints and the sinners, the oppressors and the oppressed, death and life, Jesus proclaimed the good news again and again. The gospel came alive and became clearer at each crossing.

Let me go back to the classroom where I had invited my students to share their biographies of God-concepts. After listening to all the reports, which presented a wide spectrum of God-images and concepts, we looked at one another in a moment of amazement. We could hear a collective "wow" in the room. One of the students verbalized our feeling: "Isn't it wonderful that God is so great, so wide, and so adaptive to all of us who had such diverse upbringings and cultural contexts, needs, and struggles?" This same God has many different dimensions and faces. Many of

these dimensions are beyond our understanding and comprehension. This understanding of the “greatness” of God is essential in how we live and proclaim the good news at the crossings of diverse cultures that exist in our communities.

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7).

### **Suggested Exercises**

1. Write a biography of God-concepts. When finished, examine how wide or narrow your God-concepts have been in your life. How do these God-concepts still influence your teaching and preaching now?
2. If you are a preacher, review the last five sermons you have preached. Pull out the God-concepts used in these sermons. Again, ask how wide or narrow were your uses of God-concepts in your preaching. What can you do to expand the images that you will use for your future sermons? Some suggestions:
  - a. Instead of choosing a biblical text to preach on a theme, try using the common lectionary, which “forces” the preacher to read and preach texts that they might not be familiar with. This might challenge the preacher to connect with different images and concepts of God.
  - b. Be conscious of the God-concepts that you use for each sermon and over time; make sure that you cover a wider range of images of God in your sermons.
3. If you are a teacher, review that last five lesson plans that you have used. Pull out the God-concepts used in these lesson plans. Again, ask how wide or narrow were your uses of God-concepts in your teaching. What can you do to expand the concepts of God being taught to your class? Some suggestions:
  - a. Be conscious of what God-concept is being taught at each lesson and make sure that, over time, a wide range of God-concepts is being covered.
  - b. Use a lectionary-based curriculum to ensure a diversity of scriptural texts being studied and therefore present a wider range of God-images.

- c. Find out what your students' God-concepts are by doing an activity that invites them to share their God images. Enabling your students to listen and appreciate others' God-concepts will go far in helping them appreciate diversity in their midst.
4. Invite others in your church study-group to keep track of the different God-concepts being used in the next three main worship services in your church. What God-concepts or images are used in the hymns, the prayers, the sermon, scriptural readings, announcements, and so forth? Again, ask how wide or narrow the God-concepts being used in your worship services are.
5. Invite your class to take a tour of the church buildings—the sanctuary, the meeting hall, the offices, the kitchen, and so forth. As they move around the building, invite them to keep track of the different God-concepts and images presented in the architecture, the art, the arrangement of the furniture, and other objects in these buildings. Invite them to share how these God-concepts affect their experiences as members of this community. Invite them to reflect on the question, How do these God-concepts impact newcomers to the church positively and/or negatively?