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Our Beloved GODS: ‘Our GODS: The Hindrance to the Genuine One

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Abstract: There is an urgency to reflect whether the GODS we love and serve leave us impoverished or give us life. We are overfed by numerous images of God today. Some of these GODs defend inhuman and exploiting approaches instead of liberating the vulnerable. These disfigured faces of God are laid upon us when we are helpless, or we buy them when we want to hide. Since these masks of god possess exploiting capacity, and dehumanise their worshippers they have no place in the kingdom of justice and freedom. All these GODs bring along some essential qualities to our own person and society. Their ultimate evil

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lies in the fact that they feed on the poor, the unemployed, the helpless, the disappointed, the abused. In a world of victims, it is imperative to know in which GOD one is led to believe!

Keywords: Oppressive God, Liberative God, Created gods, Idolatry, God-business

Seeing a poor man eating some puffed rice, someone supplied for him four sacks of it, just because ‘the poor man liked it.’

¹ In similar like-ability we too perform many things of/for God. There is an urgency to reflect whether the GODs we love and serve leave us impoverished or give us life. We are overfed by innumerable images of God today. Some of these GODs defend inhuman and exploiting approaches instead of liberating the vulnerable. These disfigured faces of God are laid upon us when we are helpless, or we buy them when we want to hide. Such GODs are the greatest obstacle in our search for God. This paper intends to show the burdening effect of these puffed GODs, and invites for rejection of these self-centred models that just treat our feelings.

1. In GOD’s Image We Create Our Self and History

What we prefer to imagine about God is not an image of God alone, it is a revelation of our own commitment and activity in our personal and social existence. So, the way we imagine ‘God,’ also indicates the values it symbolises in our lives and shapes our character.² We may have conceptualised convenient images of God since we also search for our own self. We can find justifications for our GOD-concepts just as how we want our disguised interior self to be treated. What we find here is a second-hand GODs framed from favoured feelings, and from imaginative inputs shaped by books, films, or advices. Their characters are according to the conclusions we draw from providences, rewards and punishments, and the

perspectives received from our experiences. Since God is the source of life and existence, the image that facilitates us with life would be truer to the reality of God. Those images that intimidate us, and keep us feeble or in fear are fake.

2. God Feeding on Sin

Society stresses on the accumulation of cultural symbols and rules of social behaviour. While this emphasis promotes formal correctness and adherence to systems, personally convincing and critically reflective approaches are subordinated. 'GOD' functions as a controlling symbol to keep the norms of the society intact. GOD in their imagination would be a massively magnified picture of someone who upholds moral prejudices and judgements in minute details. We need only to see how this loyalty/obedience benefit the authorities or society in order to understand its manipulative power. Promotion of guilt is an easy tool for keeping the people obedient to the system. People 'learn' to envision their faith, morality and mode of living within the system. Promotion of guilt is an easy tool for keeping the people obedient to the system.

Sin is thought to be the failure to observe laws. The misconceived link between sin and suffering has been misused as a fertile field for exploitation.³ An insecure and suspicious person might falsely imagine one's protectiveness as purity and holiness. A guilty-'righteous' person can project suspicion and disapproval onto others blaming, shaming and frightening oneself and others.⁴ They reach a no-escape situation as these persons justify and intensify these feelings.

The feeling of guilt also holds two fears within: being unworthy of oneself (shame), and losing the love of the

other. These fears lead to narcissism or perfectionism consequently affirming an image of a destructive GOD who does not allow his subjects any of their desires, and is content with their life of misery.⁵ Those who have the manipulative power emerges as the exemplary righteous. Reparatory devotions and morality become components within a system of retribution and payment whereby ‘others’ can desire for righteousness.

a. God and the Loathsome World

The contempt of the world, body and sexuality are constructed within several thoughts – the Judaic concern with ritual purity, the rejection of the body by neoplatonic pessimism, and the mistrust of worldly attachments common to stoicism and the Book of Wisdom.⁶

If we could see the signs of God being active in natural, cultural and social changes, we could avoid thoughts such as, “since GOD is in enmity with the world which is evil, we must live in this world as though we just happened to be here. The world we live in is a realm of Satan.” Envisioning a supernatural world in such a way is a form of escape that makes it all the more difficult to solve our problems.⁷ We find our inability to appreciate the world due to our constant encounter with miseries and challenges, and we attribute that loathsome attitude to God. We are pleased to consider evil and suffering as the work of evil and the effect of sin, but seldom acknowledge the reality of an exploited humanity, nor do we ask ourselves what is our responsibility for such a world.⁸ The neotraditionalist blend of seeing medieval ‘ascetic’ symbols as forms of pure spirituality, is either a spiritually justified escape mechanism amidst the complexities of life, or a search to find comfortable identity providers. From a false assumption that GOD who does not like the world would be pleased to see the

avoidance of all joys ‘for his glory,’ we make masochist self-righteous self for ourselves and a sadist GOD.⁹

b. Humanity Condemned to Punishment and Reparations

Guilt conscience of an ‘unworthy self’ compels for reparations either for one’s own fault or for the fault of others, because it holds a vision of the world which is always under punishment. A melancholic attitude becomes appreciated cultural trend within religion. A number of scrupulous frequent examinations of conscience becomes the guiding pattern of life, not in sincerity, but out of fear and to be safe from punishment. One becomes more cautious of a profane and decaying universe and submits to ever-increasing mortifications. It is a collective guilt conscience formed as deviance of a Christianity that focuses its message on the evocation of sin and which narrows its aim to the fight against sinning.¹⁰ There are many salesmen of fake-crosses who say that we must pain ourselves for the love of Christ. They are the modern-day money-changers of the temple. Sacrifices demanded and interpreted to be ‘sacrifice and commitment for the Lord,’ are often unjustly channelled for someone’s ulterior benefits. Guilt is the GOD they serve, and shame is the relation they have with GOD.

Like a child who takes advantage of a sympathetic mother, we frame a GOD who becomes very lenient and loving if we inflict pains on ourselves through severe fasting and afflicting pious practices. Through the Spirit, God gives us the strength to involve in history and keep God’s love alive in the world. God does not want us to hide behind as a fearful or irresponsible child, instead enables us to face conflicts and improve our strength.

Devotions emphasising on reparations have emerged in a historical context when humanity faced atrocities. Christian asceticism is mistaken for indifference or repulsion from the life issues in the world as though God does not appreciate that we have any joy. Being a grace, liberation cannot represent an inhuman apathy towards life, as it is often presented. True asceticism is a quest for deeper truth and authenticity in one's development as a person, in order to achieve an interior calmness undisturbed by emotional extremities.¹¹

It is fear and false-humility that drive many to 'say' that everything is by the grace of God. GOD who feels bad if we don't use flattery is a God of adulators. It is a GOD like a king in his Darbar who is pleased with music, dance and offerings of his choice. Servants of this GOD involve more and more in rituals and piety expecting to please God. Testimonies become advertisements and limit God to be a GOD of the rich and who can spend.

GOD is imagined as a child who is happy when it is given chocolate or when someone entertains it. GOD is happy when pleased, and otherwise can be easily offended. Those who possess such an approach neither use their critical faculties, nor speak the plain truth, nor behave 'naturally' for fear of sinning against this sentimental GOD. Such people's actions, and even their thoughts are led by a false sentimentality which they call as 'loving God.' Forced to be in a sentimental care, they have never been free to love.¹² Yet society often acknowledges this 'saintliness,' because it is never challenged by these saints. They are very nice outside, but inside they suffer because they cannot be themselves.

c. Super-Perfect GOD and Imperfect Followers

GOD is imagined after a monarch sitting on his throne as an omniscient and intolerant judge with the book of all human acts. We are all at fault (guilt), and deserve vengeance (fear),

and unable to look up to God and others (shame). The image of the ‘god of one hundred per cent,’ and his demand on us to be without faults keep us condemned to be always in an imaginary ideal. The more it is considered as God’s demand, the more guilty and miserable people become. What was meant to be a life of perfect freedom has become an anxious slavery.¹³ Some take this GOD to justify their own revengeful attitudes towards others.

d. God’s Costly Laundry

To remedy these imperfections GOD appears as a laundry man. It can be either at the cost of sacrifices, prayers, and rituals, or it can be ‘free’ forgiveness of debts but bound to innumerable obligations. The story of redemption and atonement is dramatized as a monarch offended by the failings of his ungrateful and rebellious subjects, would take vengeance. The act of redemption “is not automutilation as payment of an insolvent debt. It does not seek to pay a debt at all; rather it affirms that there is no debt to pay.”¹⁴ Jesus the saviour-deity becomes a mere object of religious cultic worship. If Jesus is given due importance, it necessarily demands serious modification of the picture of GOD as dictator and moral governor. Cultic image of a bleeding saviour is over-projected to the effect that it further accuses us of sins than reminding of the redemption and life of grace.

e. God of the Righteous Hypocrites

Many behave ‘nice’ because ‘someone is watching’ them. It is a conscience shaped after guilt, shame, and the fear of punishment. The root of their hidden ‘sin’ or ‘rebelliousness’ could be their own responses to persons in authority in their early years.¹⁵ Their behaviour may be appreciated for ‘reverence and piety’ because it supports

not only one's own hiding, but also the hypocrisy and irresponsible stand of the society in the name of fake loyalty and obedience. Unfortunately, these emerge as exemplar within religious systems and become influential contributors in conscientization of others. It is reinforced by retributive theology and ethics that demands perfection, and grants approval and recognition. Gradually it becomes the cultural trend, and 'others' are damned ungodly.

f. GOD of the Holy People

Some tend to take the mind of God into their custody. These isolated groups, as a 'privileged class' believe that their values and patterns of life are the true ways of God, and only they follow them correctly. They are characterised by attitudes of 'separatedness' from others, rather than as a creative responsibility toward others. Since they are 'special,' they are more perfect, real, authentic, and holier than others, and go on creating and discovering 'our GOD,' 'our traditions and customs' etc. They find their false GOD in the manipulation of isolated texts of Scripture.

Faith is set on some calculative beliefs that provide conceptual clarity avoiding all risks of reflection. They fail to accept that what they emphasise are some religious, social or political ideology or culture as if that is the way of God. Their fear to think or imagine outside the box, they call zeal for truth. Those who follow it gradually abandon faith, or begin to use it politically as a pressure group.¹⁶ We can see it in gathering, numbers, prayer protests, faith rallies etc with an appeal of faith. We can understand the political or economic interest in their rigorous demand to adhere to a special scheme of faith emphasising clear difference from others.

g. God of the Exemplar

In defence of these ideologies, some assume the role of hero prophets. They make GOD jump through their rings confining

God to their definitions. The rigid attitudes and arrogant defence of beliefs also function as a convert neurosis defending one's 'distancing from an earlier system of belief.' Religion becomes a new personal or professional identity and can lead to religious fanaticism. Abandoning their profession and responsibilities receives magnified interpretation as 'great sacrifice.' Innocents who see them as 'ideal heroes' follow them and do everything in the name of faith, and the heroes do their new business. Sometimes these GODs seem to be in a hurry looking for an immediate result. These promoters urge themselves and their followers with tension and anxiety. They usually pin their practices to something of the past, and consequently shape a GOD in love with things of the past, understands and likes archaic language or the oldest available form of modern languages.¹⁷

This GOD is always in danger, attacked by enemies, and in need of protection. God who presupposes a necessary enemy, and who cease to exist if no one is there to believe is not God at all. The crisis felt is about the tension of changing the familiar images, structures, and practices.

Encountering the real face of God would make us struggle to rise to life. Our falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing with our society are allied to our distorted images of God.¹⁸ Here we can see the exploitative power of the fake faces of GOD. We defend our own egotism devising countless ways to keep God far away. People do make use of the church and the faithful promoting these fake images while overlooking human liberty by forcing certain performances as the ways of authentic faith.¹⁹

h. GOD on the Cheap Paths

‘This statue’ will give ‘this special favour,’” ‘this prayer’ will work miracles, and ‘Hail Mary’s without breaking,’ ‘write Bible verses for thousands of times’ show distortions of ‘devotions.’ Something that was misinterpreted and idolised in recent times is ‘First commandment’ whose ‘devotion’ has resulted in isolating the faithful, and looking others with suspect. Similarly, certain Scripture verses are attributed to some ‘special power’ that we can use them magically. Some have unknowingly become faithful devotees of the hero prophets and spiritual leaders.

When devotions emphasise heavily on the ‘miraculous objects, prayers, and practices’ they potentially become superstitions.²⁰ Often the emphasis on particular devotions happens at the manipulation of fear, insecurity, uncertainty, and results in personal subjugation or economic gain. Devotions are not a magical process but based on the trust in God’s living presence. Devotions devoid of this can turn out to be opium, a self-consolation onto which we gradually become dependent (even on retreats and some retreat centres).

Within devotional system, for some, the matters of the evil and the ways to have protection has become the primary concern of life. Unknown insecurities triggered by popular preachers make a peaceful stay at home or a comfortable travel nearly impossible. They find the presence and the influence of devils everywhere around them. They are ‘happy’ to have devil because he becomes a cause-answer for all their troubles, and saves them from serious introspection into social and personal responsibilities. Fear and suspect is the service they do, and devil is their GOD though they always attempt to chase him.

3. GOD Business or Competitive Business

Business and market transactions have become a familiar model in religious thought and image of God. GODs are

operating on zones and behaviour patterns of non-liberty that all of us have.²¹ These GODs are effective actors in religious-secular and intra-religious competitions at different levels of society. They want to possess the power to interpret, define and instruct the values and morality, authority over the rules of coexistence, and the monopoly for solving problems. Competition arises because the goods offered by religious and secular suppliers today often satisfy the same needs of customers whether they are served with proper provisions or not.²² We can also see GOD marketized and sold. Remember the advertiser telling to buy ‘our product,’ and we bought what they said to be the best. At the end, we are left with bags of sparkling wrappers.

a. Business Man-Banker

We are welcomed well in a bank if we are to deposit, but there are conditions to get a loan. God will reward with more blessings (interest) if we invest more with the number of prayers, etc (investments). Similarly, God will bless (pay the wages) if we ‘work.’ ‘These prayers, these number of times, for these purposes ...’ is quantification and materialising of faith.²³ Relationship with God is not a business; blessings are not a reward, but it is gratuitous.²⁴ It gives an image of a God whom we can condition by our doings, praying or paying. God is shaped in the tendency to bring Christian life and its effectiveness in terms of money and number. God who blesses according to the money given is not a god at all.

b. God Who Runs Pyramid Schemes

God guaranteeing some sure blessings for sharing pictures or prayers to 1,00,000s functions like chain money, chain letters, pyramid schemes. ‘The prayer’ or ‘the act of

sharing' itself appears to be easy techniques with magical effects; a way of using God. We can expect only 'cheap graces' from a GOD who is pleased with the number of 'Likes,' 'Shares' and 'type Amen' categories, and offer deliverance, healing, and relief of debts in online packages.

c. Robot Programmer

God is seen as a manager or a Puppeteer GOD who controls everything that happens in the world. The subjective unpleasant events, apparently GOD's failures, challenge our views on 'providentialism.' God gives us a world that functions in accord with its proper laws, through human affairs and efforts God leads us to shoulder the task of freeing all its dynamisms for the service of love and the construction of the world.²⁵ We are not mere puppets or robotic creatures who behave very nice, kind and cheerful within God's control. God does not treat the humankind as a kindergarten where he has to discipline everyone every time. It is our discerning power to recognise what should have been done and what we need to do.²⁶

d. Problem Solver Sale

Nowadays many are experts not only creating and selling GODs but also playing a GOD. They provide problem-solving rituals, beliefs, values, and methods of healing, most of them as 'directly revealed by God.' Some gradually form groups around them, while others maintain personal supplier-client relationship, as participants or customers. These hero figures offer particular services (remedies, massages, predictions for the future) as demands arise. These consumers consume spiritual products, books, TV programmes etc., choosing from the options that give them the greatest 'satisfaction.'²⁷ They sell well because these 'services all for the glory of God' gives the best appeal of faith to gather both money and crowd.

This GOD possesses an expertise that no human knowledge and effectiveness has ever reached. Similar to God of the gaps, God who appears as ‘the answer’ for anything not currently explained by human knowledge. This GOD goes on losing the grasp as human knowledge and expertise increase more and more. God is in one way or the another behind all events. If we cannot wonder except when the so-called laws of nature are broken, then we must be in a sorry state.²⁸ We are reducing god to a magician.

GOD is a problem-solver who is approached only when there is a problem. A mythical presentation given to the ways that God intervenes in struggles can bring God only as *Deus ex machina*, a GOD arrives at emergency demands. Often our prayers and devotions are in favour of this GOD. GOD is used like paracetamol, kerchief, or an umbrella according to our convenience and forgotten until the next use comes.²⁹

We can imagine what happens when these GODs fail. The whole religiosity ends with its sad conclusion: ‘God is a Disappointment.’³⁰ Only a faithful believer can trust in a God who is as helpless as the victims themselves, and know that it is God’s way of proclaiming that God loves the victimised of this world.³¹ It powerfully contradicts GODs of prosperity gospels. They present the rich are already in a blessed a state, the needy are so because of their sins, and have to ‘spend’ if they are to be ‘blessed.’ Greed is their God.

Conclusion: Why We Must Reject ‘Our’ GODs?

The first cure from idolatry is to acknowledge that the image of God is distorted according to the religious and cultural caves in which we live. It is true that God becomes

an empty abstraction without those anthropomorphic images. Our only option is to use them with constant critical evaluation. Idolatry of the highest form is seen when we assume that our picture of God perfectly reflects who God is.³²

Since these masks of god possess exploiting capacity, and dehumanise their worshippers they have no place in the kingdom of justice and freedom. All these GODs bring along some essential qualities to our own person and society. Their ultimate evil lies in the fact that they feed on the poor, the unemployed, the helpless, the disappointed, the abused. In a world of victims, it is imperative to know in which GOD one is led to believe.³³ For the sake of the survival of these GODs people are instructed not to think, and believing is taught to be an irrational process. Here we have a God who demands a brainless people. Prophets of these GODs are actually saying that they have no answer to the concerns of today. Here these images have come from distorted views of the world, anthropology, holiness and sin. They do matter for someone who sincerely seeks divine life and these fake faces will not suffice.

Who makes us play a puppet? It is our own liberative process to unmask the face of our GOD; then we will find what we have created of ourselves and our society, and why.

Notes

¹ GOD that we fabricate is always a SUPER-GOD. This article is based on Cyril Desbruslais' idea of a liberative God, instead of oppressive gods, which he has been advocating all through his life.

² Juan Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, Vol. 3 of *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*. 5 Vols. trans. John Drury, (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 90.

³ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity: Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 32.

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- ⁴ John Bertram Phillips, *Your God is Too Small*, (1956; Reprint, London: Wyvern Books, 1960), 54.
- ⁵ Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th-18th Centuries*, trans., Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 300.
- ⁶ Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 446.
- ⁷ Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 11.
- ⁸ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 5.
- ⁹ True faith involves our conviction that God is good to humanity and the world. The power of faith is the power of goodness and truth, which is the power of God. See Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 39.
- ¹⁰ Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 297.
- ¹¹ Juan Segundo, *Grace and Human Condition*, Vol. 2 of *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*. 5 Vols. trans. John Drury, (New York: Orbis Books, 1968), 49
- ¹² God is a loving presence, but this love is not sentimentality. It is a responsible belonging, a mutual giving and receiving of one another. There is fidelity ie an intention of permanence in relationship. There is fulfilment within which there are both union of love, and pain of one's inability to enter completely into the deepest thought, intentions, aspirations, desires, pain and failures of the other. Love is creative, enabling the lover rise to one's potentiality. See Norman Pittenger, *Picturing God*, (London: SCM Press, 1982), 77, 78.
- ¹³ Phillips, *Your God is Too Small*, 28.
- ¹⁴ Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 300.
- ¹⁵ Phillips, *Your God is Too Small*, 15, 17.
- ¹⁶ Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, 79.
- ¹⁷ Phillips, *Your God is Too Small*, 22.
- ¹⁸ Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, 7, 8.
- ¹⁹ Segundo, *Grace and Human Condition*, 52.
- ²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2111
- ²¹ ~~Segundo, *Grace and Human Condition*, 51.~~
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- ²² Jörg Stolz and Judith Könemann, “A Theory of Religious-Secular Competition,” in *(Un)Believing in Modern Society: Religion, Spirituality, and Religious-Secular Competition*, ed. Jörg Stolz, and others, (London: Routledge, 2016), 19, 25, 26.
- ²³ Segundo, *Grace and Human Condition*, 53.
- ²⁴ Right attitude of praying or giving is as a sign of our gratitude and sincere openness before god. It is not to be thought that blessing is conditional as God blesses more as we pray or pay more, and does not bless if we do not. According to the goodness of heart we are able to receive God’s grace.
- ²⁵ Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, 44.
- ²⁶ Cyril Desbruslais, *The Philosophy of God: Faith and Traditions*, Vol. 10,”JDV Philosophy Series,” Edited by Kuruvilla Pandikattu, (Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2019.), 17.
- ²⁷ Jörg Stolz and Thomas Englberger, “Major Churches, Evangelical Churches and Alternative-Spiritual Suppliers,” in *(Un)Believing in Modern Society: Religion, Spirituality, and Religious-Secular Competition*, ed. Jörg Stolz, and others, (London: Routledge, 2016), 111, 113, 121. See also Jörg Stolz, Thomas Englberger, Michael Krüggeler, Judith Könemann and Mallory Schneuwly Purdie, “The Change in Religiosity, Spirituality and Secularity,”*ibid.* 179.
- ²⁸ Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 41.
- ²⁹ Desbruslais, *Philosophy of God*, 17.
- ³⁰ Phillips, *Your God is Too Small*, 47.
- ³¹ Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 9.
- ³² Robert M. Baird, “Picturing God,” in *Journal of Religion and Health*, 28, no. 3 (1989), 234, 235.<http://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/27506026> [http:// www.jstor.org. library. britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/27506026](http://www.jstor.org.library.britishcouncil.org.in:2048/stable/27506026)
- ³³ Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 9.