CHAPTER 5

Learning to Know God

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Overview

Each of the worldviews portrays a different perspective about ultimate reality. The three main (mono)theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, worship the same God and claim Abraham as part of their religious heritage.

Children's views of God are shaped very early in life by their negative or positive experiences with significant adults, inclusive of teachers. Christian teachers can better assist children's developing worldview conceptualisation if they themselves have an appreciation of their own worldviews.

Any quest to know God today should be informed by an understanding of the origins and the history of the Bible, and of the religious thought patterns throughout history. The Bible is God's way of communicating with humans. It is relevant for today's society. Its influence on Western society is well documented, and its influence is manifested in the lives of millions of people living around the world in the 21st century.

What Is God Like?

Focus Discussion

1. What do you think God is like? Explain.
2. How will teachers' lingering pictures of God affect their teaching in a faith-based classroom? Explain.
3. Where does God fit into your worldview? Explain.

Consider this scenario

Sarah, aged 5, arrived home from school full of questions. "Mum, is God almighty and powerful? My teacher says he is!" Later she came back to mum with another question. "Mum, did God make everything like this chair? My teacher says God made everything."

Sarah's questions demonstrate the age-old question of, 'What is God like?' Ask this question to any group of students, and the questioner can be assured that there will be a variety of answers. In the 21st century, the three main worldviews (Figure 5.1) answer this question quite differently. They also refer to a "Higher Power" or "God" by a variety of titles.

Worldview	What is God like?	Examples of Titles referring to a Higher Power/God
Naturalism	God is irrelevant. He does not exist. All reality is explained in terms of physical elements, forces and processes. Everything can be explained on the basis of natural law.	Scientific process Logic and reason Universal morality
Theism	God exists and is an infinite, personal, just, intelligent and loving God. He is the Creator and Sovereign of the universe and involves himself in the affairs of humanity.	Allah Father God Yahweh Jehovah
Pantheism	God is impersonal. Nature is God so all forces and workings of nature are divine. Everything is God, so we are God.	Mother Nature The Great Spirit Brahma Lao-Tien-Yeh The Force Shiva

Figure 5.1. A comparison of three worldviews and their concepts of God.

Theism is the only worldview that includes an infinite and personal God. Pantheism has many gods and Naturalism asserts that God does not exist. A personal God is pivotal to a monotheistic belief structure. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, three of the major 21st century monotheistic religions, all believe there is only one almighty and powerful God. All three monotheistic religions worship God, acknowledge historical and theological links to Abraham, and are collectively known as the Abrahamic religions. "Ibrahim, the Prophet" is to Muslims what "Abraham, the Patriarch" is to Jews and Christians. Abraham's story as recorded in the Torah, Bible, and Qur'an, show the origins of the three faiths. The Bible record of this story is as follows:

- Abraham was a patriarch who lived in the Middle East and was married to Sarah;
- She was infertile and in her culture this was a real disgrace;
- Sarah chose a surrogate mother, named Hagar, to have their child;
- This first son was called Ishmael;
- Unexpectedly, Sarah herself gave birth to her only son, Isaac;
- This caused problems in the polygamous household, and Ishmael and his mother left Abraham's household to live in the desert;
- Ishmael is credited as being the father of the Arabs – Islam; and
- Isaac is credited as being the father of the Jews – Judaism and Christianity.

Despite having a similar heritage, each of the three monotheistic faith traditions has a sacred text that records a unique and distinctive theistic belief about God.

- Islam believes in One God, Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet.
  - Sacred text: Qur'an.
- Judaism believes in One God.
  - Sacred text: Tanakh (Jewish Bible) which includes the first five books of the Old Testament (Torah).
- Christianity believes in the Trinity – A unity of three co-eternal persons – God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.
  - Sacred text: The Bible which includes the Old Testament (Jewish Bible) plus the New Testament.

The three faith structures have evolved as uniquely different, even though Judaism, Islam, and Christianity's ancestors were relatives. When teachers understand the relationship between the three major monotheistic religions, it empowers them to look for and celebrate the similarities in belief, rather than focussing on the differences so evident in a multi-faith classroom. It is also essential that Christian teachers personally know what God is like, so they can prevent any incorrect or erroneous views of God being portrayed and perpetuated.

The Importance of Knowing and Learning about God for Pre-Service Teachers and Students

In 21st century Western society most people are familiar with the word "God," but their views and opinions concerning the concept of God differ significantly. A concept of God, however, is basic to many faith-based traditions and worldviews. For some people the word conjures up fear and retribution; for others God is seen to be a benevolent father figure; God does not exist according to another group of people; God is viewed by others as a distant and disinterested force in this world; still others believe that the gods are to be pacified and placated; and in contemporary society, the word God is often heard as an expletive.

Children come from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds, and their views of God begin to be formed long before they commence school. For some children, their only encounter with the Christian God will come from the planned intentional experiences within the classroom and the spontaneous unintentional interactions with their peers and teachers. Before teachers can convincingly teach what they believe, they need to be able to define, describe, and value their concept of and relationship to their God. If Christian teachers' worldviews are to be authentic and persuasive, then they need to be able to answer worldview questions with conviction: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here?

In a Christian school setting, children ask probing questions about God. They expect teachers to provide them with comprehensible and understandable, age appropriate, logical answers. One of the most common questions asked is: Who is God and what is God like? Habenicht and Burton (2004) suggest the following answer to this question:

> The Creator and sustainer of the worlds in starry expanse. The Saviour of humankind. The Spirit who fills our lives with his presence. The awesome King in the glory of heaven. The judge and defense lawyer in the heavenly court. A guide, protector, and counselor. A companion on life's journey. A forever friend. The revealer of truth. The lawgiver. The builder of heavenly mansions for the redeemed. (p. 348)

Another probing question students often ask about God is: What is the Trinity? The answer to this question involves the abstract concept of a Triune God, that is, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as three co-eternal persons. Mills and Koh (2006) illustrate how this concept of the Trinity may be answered and explained by involving an egg and its three parts: shell, yolk, and albumen. They write, "God is like an egg with three parts: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Three perfect Beings joined together to make one God" (p. 14).

Word images, object lessons and analogies as illustrated above, can help children grasp some of these abstract concepts, though an understanding of what God is like is best gained