

Is God a metaphor?

By [David Williams](#)

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God is a metaphor.

Or so goes a particular line of thought, as it struggles to make the idea of God meaningful.

Metaphors, after all, are symbols used to obliquely describe a deeper reality, to give a sense of the color and flavor of it. And so for some Jesus followers, steeped in the overripe epistemology of deconstructive academe, this seems like a viable way to approach the Divine.

"God," they will say, "is the word we use as a metaphor to describe our aspirations."  
"God," folks will say, "is just a word we use to get at other realities."

And, yes, the Divine and the oblique language of metaphor are necessarily related. You can't approach the inherently unknowable in any other way than indirection, as the ancient prophets and visionaries knew. If you try to come at it directly, it burns out the retinas of your soul. Or, still worse, if you mistake your language and your symbols for God, then you've fashioned an idol that will lead to ruin and failure.

Poetry and storytelling and the subtle intimations of parable are the only way to tease our ways towards that Deep. The Master knew this. It's why he used narrative and metaphoric language to teach and to guide. It is also fair to say that our understanding of the Divine is inherently incomplete. What we understand as "God" does not come close to the ontology of God. The best we can manage is a shadow, a flickering, imperfect reflection. As contingent beings, limited by time and space, we can't ever quite get at that Deepening Deep. It is ever beyond and below and above us. So it is fair to say that our understanding of God isn't quite there, no matter how intellectually sophisticated or heartfelt it might be.

But if God is to be the object of our faith, the transcendent Numinous telos towards which our whole lives are called, then God is not a metaphor. God is the reality to which all our stories and songs yearn.

When we say "God is a metaphor," we are either missing the point of metaphor, or missing the point of faith.

We miss the point of metaphor because we are placing our emphasis on the indirect image, not the thing it describes. If we say that we are as hungry as a horse, we're not talking about horses. We're talking about just how cliché and peckish we happen to be feeling.

Saying God is a metaphor is saying to your lover, My love for you is a metaphor. Or telling the court, The truth I'm speaking is a metaphor. Or telling the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed that justice is a metaphor.

We miss the point of faith because believing that our symbolic language is the goal of faith is no more and no less idolatrous than fundamentalism. The point of faith is not and has never been the symbols we use to express it. It is the reality towards which we orient ourselves.

In each instance, we have failed to understand the purpose of the endeavor.

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