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M Y T H E O L O G Y

JOAN CHITTISTER

AN EVOLVING GOD,
AN EVOLVING PURPOSE,
AN EVOLVING WORLD



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1

Who is God?

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TO BE A CATHOLIC child in the 1940s and 1950s is to have been brought up on *The Baltimore Catechism Vol 1-5*. This fragile little book of about 200 pages was the national Catholic catechism for children in the United States. It was enjoined by the Third Council of Baltimore in 1891 and based on Charles Bellarmine's *Small Catechism* written in 1614. Some of the most difficult questions in theology were reduced to question-answer format and shaped the basis of Catholic school theological education from the 1890s to at least the 1960s. Those answers ring through that generation – and me – to this day.

And yet, at the same time, I heard a story that signaled the end of such rote answers and universal perception. 'Computers are so powerful,' the story-teller declares, 'that pretty soon the country will be run by one computer,

one man, and a dog.' 'Really?' says the hearer. 'How's that work?' 'Well,' the teller says, 'the man is there to feed the dog. And the dog is there to make sure the man doesn't touch the computer.'

Between the rote learning of catechetical surety and the computerisation of modern life lie two different kinds of learning, two different kinds of social development, two different ways of seeing life, and two completely distinct theologies of life. One of the models has all the answers before anyone asks the question; the second model has few, if any, universally held answers at all in a world where change is commonplace, yesterday is a vague memory and tomorrow is a work in progress.

In this current world, 'belief' is more an experience than an encyclopedia of data. It is reasoned, not recited.

Now, laughing at the improbability of non-human dominance over human rationality that the dog and the computer imply, are dying out. And with it, the *Baltimore Catechism*, as well. In fact, who would have thought? In one lifetime –

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yours and mine – the world we expected to live in has all but totally disappeared.

We live from screen to screen now. Our children ‘talk’ to one another on their smart phones sitting across the room from each other instead of across their fences. Our cars run on electricity which means that gas and oil have suddenly become a liability rather than a miracle. Robots do our basic work and are about to become our closest companions. We talk across oceans to people we haven’t really seen for years. We hold Zoom parties with the grand-children we have yet to meet in person. We shop in global bazaars on-line. We begin to save money for that first ticket to outer space. Some people have frozen their own bodies at death in expectation of their own resurrection as science gets closer and closer to extending life indefinitely.

But the way of doing business – on site or online – of raising families, all here or all somewhere else – and our sense of identity, biracial or intermarried or not – are not the only shifting stars on the human horizon these

days. God-talk – religious belief – has swung from hard right, as in we know the mind of God – to scattered leftisms, as in what mind of God? Yours, mine, or ours?

Mainstream churches, too, are reeling and rocking from challenges to ecclesiastical givens such as who may marry whom? Or why churches anyway? Or male-female genders – or not, of course. Then, in the face of new understandings of life and sex and gender an even bigger question: 'Who said so?'

Not surprisingly, in a time of massive global shifting of some very basic but very old principles, many ministers of many denominations are preaching to smaller congregations now. Some past believers have begun to look almost exclusively to science for truth they can count and touch rather than rules that now seem either lifeless or totally out of date.

Life has become more technological than human. More individual than communal. More independent than constrained by a universal conscience.



M Y T H E O L O G Y

The world's leading Christian thinkers explain some of the principal tenets of their theological beliefs.

The God that we were brought up on is not big enough to be God, writes Joan Chittister.

To be both religious and spiritual, modernity must be able to absorb the notion of a cosmic and evolving God and society. Old ideas of who is in charge, who is superior and whose theology is paramount is in a state of flux.

Despite this uncertain state of the world, Sr Joan finds that she believes more now than she ever really understood; a new idea of God is emerging which is greater than the sum of all we have been previously taught.



Joan Chittister is an internationally known author, lecturer, and visionary voice in church and society. She has written more than 50 books and received numerous awards for her writings and work on behalf of peace, justice, and women's rights.



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