

2014

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Melanie Springer Mock

George Fox University, mmock@georgefox.edu

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Recommended Citation

Mock, Melanie Springer, "On (Not) Fearing the Mystery of God (Chapter 8 of The Spirit of Adoption: Writers on Faith, Adoption, God, and More)" (2014). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 79.

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On (Not) Fearing the Mystery of God

Melanie Springer Mock

Just days before our trip to India, birthplace of my second son, a well-meaning relative cornered me at a family gathering.

“We’ll be praying for you!” she said, uttering the Christian phrase that can be, at the same moment, both cliché-riddled and completely sincere.

I chose to interpret it as sincere, needing all kinds of prayer for our journey. My husband and I were flying to India with our then six-year-old sons: Benjamin, whom we’d adopted from Vietnam as an infant, and Samuel, whom we brought home from Mumbai as a three-year-old. This was no ordinary homeland trip. My adult stepdaughter was marrying an Indian, and we were traveling to her fiancé’s family village high in the Himalayan foothills for the ceremony.

Anticipating the trip filled me with terror. I hated flying already, and a fifteen-hour plane ride with two active boys made me even more fearful. I thought about negotiating a busy city with easily distracted kids in tow. And about a seven-hour car ride to my son-in-law’s home, the crazy Indian traffic, the lack of car seats.

I feared malaria and diphtheria. Infections. The Delhi Belly that had brought my husband low during our adoption trip to India several years earlier, and the pinkeye that had plagued me on the same trip. I worried about my sons’ emotional wellbeing and about whether Samuel would wonder—or not—about his birth family and culture. I was anxious about how I might explain the abject poverty evident everywhere in India, and if Samuel especially might connect the poor he saw to his own early life in an orphanage.

In other words, I worried about everything. I needed prayer.

So I cherished my relative’s assurance that she would be praying. Until she provided a follow-up: “I’m afraid that the boys might get influenced by Hinduism during the wedding ceremony, so I’ll pray that doesn’t happen.”

I smiled at her. Said nothing. Fumed.

“Are you kidding me?” I wanted to scream, but knew that doing so might mess with the uneasy equilibrium that characterized these family gatherings. I thought, “My kids will *die* in a fiery plane wreck, and you’re worried that they might learn something new about another religion?”

Her comment didn’t make sense to me. Even now, six years after returning from my stepdaughter’s wedding in India, I remain baffled by her apparent fear that my kids might be defiled by a Hindu wedding ceremony. My sons became Christians only by virtue of their adoption into our home, and they might well have been Hindu or Buddhist had they remained with their first families. Would God really respond to a prayer asking that they be protected from knowledge of the religions into which they were born?

Embedded in my relative’s comment is a significantly more problematic idea, one voiced by those who adopt with a missionary’s zeal, certain that, save for adoption, children would not be saved from eternal damnation.

That, at least, is a theology to fear.

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My husband and I had adopted on a whim. Of sorts. After years of going back and forth about whether we wanted to have children, I decided the answer was yes: children it was. Watching twenty-four-hour television coverage of a terrorist attack and seeing the United States irrevocably changed by the Twin Towers’ collapse can make you reevaluate your own life’s meaning, and that’s what happened. In my reevaluation, I found my life wanting for something more, and concluded—along with my husband—that having children was the more we needed.

A little too naively, perhaps, we believed that adopting might be a better path toward making a family than having biological children. My husband already had two older children, and I felt no strong urge to give birth; so we decided that, somehow, bringing several children into our home would symbolically at least reflect our longing for a reconciled world.

Several of our friends had just started the adoption process for a special-needs boy in India, and we admired their dedication in carrying that child into their home. So we said yes to a family, and yes to adoption, and yes to finding a child (or children) who could make our home complete.

As we signed with an agency, assembled paperwork, and secured our spot on country waiting lists, we did so without considering the many moral and ethical complexities adoption raises. We thought, initially, that we were saving a child from a life of poverty. That was pretty cool for us, two parents who wanted to have a family but didn't feel any intense need to bear more biological offspring. We didn't think about the problems of removing a child from his birth land, or what it meant for us, as relatively wealthy Westerners, to enter a developing country, put down a large amount of money, and bring a child to the United States to live with a new family who could supply his every physical need.

And then some.

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I also didn't consider how adoption would shape my understanding of paradox, held close and reconciled in the mysterious hand of God. Understanding the complexities of adoption and its many paradoxes would only come later, much later, after we brought Benjamin home from Vietnam in 2002, and Samuel home from India in 2005. While I am still grateful moment by moment that we decided to adopt these two children—even when they fight, relentlessly, over every little thing imaginable—I remain perplexed by how I am to reconcile the paradoxes adoption presents to me and, by extension, how I am to understand an inscrutable God.

About paradox? Here's what I mean:

As I've considered my life with Benjamin and Samuel, as we've grown into family together, I've recognized that the capacity of God's love is more a mystery to me than ever before. For while I rejoice in the providence of my children and their miraculous presence in my life, I know the gift of my children is premised on someone else's loss. My sons have lost the opportunity to grow up with their birth families in their own culture. And my sons' mothers, who gave up their children because poverty or illness or other life circumstances made it impossible to raise the children they bore, have lost the opportunity of watching their beautiful sons grow into adulthood.

We know only a little more about Samuel's birth family than we do Benjamin's: we know that Samuel's first mother was very ill, and that she relinquished her son to an orphanage when he was one week old. Of Benjamin's first mother we know nothing, except that her son was near death when he was born, weighing only three and a half pounds, and that she left him at a hospital for extensive care. Despite this lack of information, I am aware—in general terms—of the conditions under which most women in developing countries must relinquish their children: they are poor and cannot adequately feed their children; or they are unwed and cannot resist traditional societal mores; or they are made ill by impoverished lives and will die before their children can be raised.

Because of this knowledge, and because I believe God is also compassionate, just, and merciful, I have struggled to understand this paradox: that for many adoptive parents, joy comes at great pain to others. As much as I love my children, I recognize that my position as a woman who is Western, white, and relatively wealthy affords me the blessing of motherhood, and that I can understand dimensions of God's nature—God's capacity to carry life and beauty and love to me—because I have been given a privilege my sons' birth mothers could not enjoy.

I also recognize the losses my own sons will feel, not knowing their first mothers, their first cultures, their first tongues. Because I love my children so fiercely, I am mourning their losses, long before they are capable of recognizing or acknowledging them. Still, I imagine the time may come when Benjamin and Samuel will wonder about their pasts, and I will not be able to give them the answers about their families that they seek, nor the assurances that all is well with those who carried and bore them.

Here too, then, is deep mystery, felt acutely by my sons in ways I never will. They carry with them the unfinished puzzle of their very origins, shaping their own relationship to an enigmatic God.

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Do others who adopt consider this enigma? Sometimes I wonder.

For some people, the complexities of adoption, its paradoxes and mysteries, seem to matter little. In recent years, a number of evangelical churches have started "adoption ministries," compelled by the biblical mandate to help widows and orphans and certain that adopting is the best way to provide aid to the world's most vulnerable. Adoption becomes an evangelizing tool, allowing Christian families to save children physically but also—more significantly—spiritually, keeping them from the pits of

hell. One proponent of this approach to adoption, Dan Cruver, author of *Reclaiming Adoption*, says this: “The ultimate purpose of human adoption by Christians, therefore, is not to give orphans parents, as important as that is. It is to place them in a Christian home that they might be positioned to receive the gospel.”⁶

This evangelizing impulse of some Christians has always been problematic to me. The theological implications of the idea Cruver and many other evangelical adoption advocates espouse are astounding. If I follow this line of thinking to its conclusion, my own two sons would have burned in hell, save that they were adopted by white, wealthy Christians who could take them to church, have them baptized, raise them up as believers.

Those persons convinced that adoption saves children’s souls seem to have a clear sense of who and what God is, a certainty I cannot fathom. They are certain that God redeems only those who have accepted the gospel. They are certain that a Christian is the best parent to a child. They are certain that adopting will assure that child’s eternal life. (They are certain there *is* eternal life.) They are certain that God can work only through those with privilege and power, rather than through the least of these, no matter if they were born into a Hindu or Buddhist or Christian family.

They are certain a child, attending the Hindu wedding of his sister, will need protection from evil influences, lest his soul be lost forever.

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My own prayers about our journey to India had been answered.

We didn’t die in a fiery plane wreck, nor on the winding road to Garwhal, my son-in-law’s familial home. On the way to Garwhal, my supplications were especially ardent. My sons rode without car seats. Large buses, trying to pass on narrow highways, came charging at our vehicle at speeds convincing me of our soon demise. Still, we survived. No malaria befell us, despite my sons’ unwillingness to swallow the bitter antimalaria drugs we’d brought along. No diphtheria or Delhi Belly. No pinkeye. Our only casualties included a shirt, lost to me when my son barfed on it riding down a winding road, and an evening spent with a son, sleeping off a fast-moving bug, rather than celebrating with the wedding party.

The wedding itself took place on a cool evening, just as the sun was setting over the Indian plain. Our families gathered next to the temple, with Melissa and her new husband, her parents and his, sitting in a square around a fire pit. The priest, conversant in Hindi and in English, promised to narrate each step of the ceremony so that his American guests could understand the symbolism of each act.

My boys and I sat just outside the circle, behind the bride and groom, until they, as the brothers of the bride, were called by the priest to give their sister away in marriage and to sanctify the bonds between her and her new spouse. And so they did: following the priest’s directions to give rice to their sister each time she circled the fire, to wrap her hand with Rahul’s, binding her forever to him. My sons also received a red dot on their heads, a tika which marked each boy as sacred.

I watched them, their smiles betraying the pride they felt at being called into the circle, into the ceremony. As my stepdaughter and her new husband rounded the fire once, twice, several more times, I was caught up in the ceremony’s beauty and the power of being enfolded by Rahul and Melissa and the new family they’d created.

But mostly, I thought about my son Samuel, and about what might have been his fate had he remained in India. I imagined him circling the sacred fire, similar to the one my stepdaughter and her husband circled, celebrating his new family. I imagined him handsome in his kurta, his brilliant smile drawing everyone into his space, just as it does now. I imagined him as a Hindu, bowing faithfully to his own understanding of God. Except for adoption, he would probably have enacted these sacred rituals of his first family’s faith tradition.

Now, he attends a Quaker church, goes to Sunday school, plays tag in the churchyard after services. One day, he will probably be married in a Christian church. There may be no kurta, no tika, no fire to circle. The sacred acts of his life have changed, one for another, because he has become a member of my family. Still, I believe the God to whom those acts are directed remains the same: beautiful, gracious, loving, merciful, divine.

And a mystery, nonetheless.

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Last year, our family traveled to Vietnam, to visit Benjamin’s birthplace. Then as before, when we were preparing for our journey to India, I fretted about airline rides and sickness, drinking tainted water and getting malaria. I worried about crazy Vietnam traffic and about taking an overnight train through the countryside. I wondered how Benjamin would process what he saw, the homeland he couldn’t remember. I prayed ardently and often that Benjamin would feel connected to Vietnam, that he would be remembered at his orphanage, that he would love the country of his birth.

All those prayers were answered. And more, too.

Near the end of our journey, we spent several days in Hu, once Vietnam’s imperial city. Our visit included a tour of several

Buddhist temples located within the red brick walls of the old city. In the quiet space of a temple, I watched as the faithful kneeled before a statue, lost in their own worship. To some, I imagine, this moment would seem fraught with heresy, akin to the idolatry of statue worship that angered the Old Testament God. I imagine, too, that some—including my well-meaning relative—might have advised getting my sons away from the supplicants, lest they be infected by the bad religion being practiced there.

We lingered. My sons, hot and tired and rarely still, walked through the temple quietly, aware of the need for reverence, if not aware of why. For once, they were not poking each other, making jokes, or begging for a treat.

Then, in the corner of the room, I saw him: a boy about Benjamin's age, wearing a simple robe, his hair shaved save for a small curl on his forehead. An acolyte of some kind, he stood beside a monk, assisting him in temple duties. Seeing my son near this young boy, I thought: this could be Benjamin's life, had we not adopted him. Rather than watching Spongebob religiously, trading baseball cards, or grumbling about school, Benjamin could have been here, in a temple, learning the principles of Buddha, studying hours each day under a master, sitting still beside worshipping tourists. And I felt again the sense that has pervaded me since we first adopted my boys. That God, my God, would not have condemned Benjamin to hell had he remained in Vietnam. That he and I needed no prayers of protection from the beautiful traditions of this heritage.

That the mysteries of God would have been open to Benjamin, even if, living in Biên Hòa with his birth family, he had never received the gospel.

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On the last day of our trip, we attended a Catholic mass in Hanoi. We were all a little road weary by then, ready for our imminent return to a quiet cul-de-sac, cooler Oregon weather, and a chance to eat home-cooked food. Wanting to experience just a little bit more of Vietnam, but having grown weary of war memorials and history museums, we decided to try church.

The cathedral was nearly empty for its late-morning service, and we found a space near the middle, while white folks and Vietnamese filled in around us, clearly familiar with each other. This was their church community. When the priest began his first litany, we realized that this service would be in French and that only my husband would understand what was happening. My two tired boys, hot and sticky and bored, leaned their bodies close into mine and I held them against me, grateful for this moment of rest. While they dozed, I listened to the priest sharing sacraments with people I did not know, in a tongue I did not understand. In all its familiarity—the crucifix, the twelve stations of the cross, the priest's vestments—this too was a mysterious space to me, God present to me in both the known and the unknown.

So I open myself to this God who lives through the ministry of a Vietnamese priest sharing the bread and cup in a European tongue I don't understand. And to God speaking through a Hindu wedding ceremony, high in the foothills of northern India. And to God, working through the Buddhist acolyte, kneeling to worship in Hu. This is the same God who has extended grace to me, allowing me—in all my imperfections—to raise two imperfectly perfect boys. While I am perplexed most by the mystery of this grace, of this gift, I do not fear it. Instead, I hold God's mystery as close as I do two tired boys sweating beside me in a Hanoi cathedral. For I am always aware that God loves my sons, cherishes them, cares for them.

And would do so, even had we never met.