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REVIEW OF DOUG FRANK'S A GENTLER GOD

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by Guest Blogger April 25, 2012

REVIEWED BY MELANIE SPRING MOCK

Like most people, my understanding of God's image and character has been transformed over time: in my case, from the bearded old white man of Sunday school lore, giving judgment from atop fluffy clouds, to a much more inclusive—and, to be honest, more ambiguous—deity, whose being is neither male nor female, bearded nor white. One aspect of God has remained fairly constant, however. I too often believe God to be a vindictive figure, eager to smack me down. Miss church a few Sundays in a row? Something bad is bound to happen. Say one too many swear words? God will get me, for sure.

Rationally, I know this understanding of God is messed up, but I also know this thrum of terror defining my relationship to the Divine is not unusual to me.

For this reason alone, I found Doug Frank's *A Gentler God* to be a transformative reading experience. Frank, a faculty member at the [Oregon Extension](#) (located near Ashland, Oregon), sets out to reclaim God's image from evangelicals who, over the last century especially, constructed the character of an angry father God, bent on making His naughty children obey.

The first part of Frank's book traces the history of this image's creation. Frank explores the "defining story" in evangelicalism: that is, our sins are so grave, God cannot forgive us unless someone else dies from them. This petulant God demands blood, the payment for our horrible sins only possible by killing someone. "The story achieves its power, in part, by sheer repetition," Frank writes, and retains its power because we don't take the time to really hear what the story says, about the character of God, of Jesus, of our selves.

A Gentler God sets out to deconstruct this defining story, and does so successfully. Frank examines the historical contexts in which the salvation story gained prominence, showing how twentieth-century evangelicals used the image of an angry father God to advance their own mission—and were used by the image as a reflection of their own troubled relationships with distant fathers. Frank also dismantles the defining story, revealing its inconsistencies, as well as the ways this constructed image of God and Jesus contradicts the character of Jesus found in the Bible.

From there, Frank sets about to tell a different story about God, one founded not on God's desire to "create, control, and destroy," but on a God whose essence is love and who wants to be in relationship with us, rather than judging us from a detached Almighty throne. Frank uses the life and ministry of Jesus in the gospels as his guide, convincingly arguing that Jesus was not crucified to bear God's punishment, but to share in our own human brokenness. *A Gentler God* also shows what might happen to our selves when we choose to believe this biblical narrative, rather than embracing the drumbeat of evangelicalism's defining story and its grumpy Father.

Reading Frank's book, I realize how entrenched that defining story is—so entrenched, in fact, that accepting Frank's alternative message might be difficult. Frank's own life narrative, a significant part of his book, suggests it is possible to reject the defining story for something else, an image of God that provides freedom and joy, rather than fear and self-loathing.

Frank's personal stories are an essential part of his work, and are far more compelling than the many footnotes that pull away from his narrative's trajectory. I must admit I finally gave up reading the footnotes; while interesting and informative, they seemed a distraction to Frank's main argument.

It's clear, though—from the footnotes, the personal stories, the inclusion of literary examples, the book itself—that Frank has an appreciation for story, and for the power of story to shape our understanding of the world. Hopefully, the story Frank values, the story of *A Gentler God*, will find traction in faith communities, where an angry God has reigned for far too long.

A Gentler God: Breaking Free of the Almighty in the Company of a Human Jesus, by [Doug Frank](#) (Menangle, Australia: Albatross Books, 2010).

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Melanie Springer Mock writes: "I am a professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. My essays and reviews have appeared in *The Nation*, *Christian Feminism Today*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Mennonite World Review*, among other places. My most recent book is *Meant to Be*, forthcoming from Chalice Press. I blog about (and deconstruct) images of women embedded in evangelical popular culture at [AintIaWomanblog.net](#). Despite my vocation, I'm not always a bookish person, and like watching bad reality television, running, eating junk food, and taking long naps, under my desk if necessary."