



Your God is Too Small

J.B. Phillips

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The trouble with many of us today, writes J.B. Phillips, is that we have not found a God big enough for our modern needs. In varying degrees we suffer from a limited idea of God. Phillips exposes such inadequate conceptions of God as "Resident Policeman," "Grand Old Man," "Meek-and-Mild," and "Managing Director," and explores ways in which we can find a truly meaningful and constructive God for ourselves.

Your God is Too Small Details

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♥ Ibrahim ♥ says

I really wanted to like this book. I wanted to keep an open mind. But the book is so narrow-minded. It feels like it is written by a fundamentalist Christian. This my spirit can't bear witness with, but apparently the book is wonderful for some other people and I am happy for that. It is just NOT my type of book in the least. I will donate it to the local library.

Andrew says

An excellent little book that struck close to home, as such books should. J.B. Phillips writes with intelligent and psychologically-informed insight and realism.

Phillips (1906–1982) was an Anglican minister, most famous for his contemporary translation of the New Testament. Actually, there's a good story about that. Phillips had observed that young people were struggling to understand the King James Bible - he also believed that people's familiarity with the old text and its beautiful literary value were obscuring the impact of the words and concepts. So he started work on a new translation - doing a lot of the work sitting in an air raid shelter while the Nazis pounded London. Publishers were reticent to touch it, until C.S. Lewis stepped in and persuaded his publisher. The book was very popular.

That was in 1947. In 1952 he published what is probably his second best known book, 'Your God is Too Small' (still in print today - my copy is a lovely old 1953 edition - already the sixth edition just one year into its publishing history).

The (apologetical) premise of the book is that when an individual reacts against the notion of God, they are invariably reacting against a particular limited construct of God (what/who God is). The full first half of the book is taken up with a critique of the 'Gods' we construct (ie the ones Phillips identified in the culture in which he was writing). The book is primarily a work of apologetics (ie an argument for the Christian faith). I don't know how effective it might be in that regard (apologetic approaches can be considered a bit iffy these days), but I can vouch for its incisiveness for me personally as someone who already holds a faith and believes that God exists.

The fact of the matter is that we all have a personal construct of God - even those who identify as atheists, in arguing against God's existence, are responding to a particular picture, or version, of God. And this is no less true for Christians. Though he lands in a different place to Phillips, Pete Rollins does some insightful work on this in his book 'The Idolatry of God'. We all have our preferred angle on who or what God is, and the reasons (largely psychological / emotional) vary. These constructs need to be critiqued.

I read through the descriptions of the various God-constructs (Resident Policeman, Parental Hangover, Grand Old Man, Meek-and-Mild, Absolute Perfection, Heavenly Bosom, God-in-a-Box, Managing Director, Second-hand God, Perennial Grievance, Pale Galilean, Projected Image and some other sundry ones (the names give a hint about each of these Gods, but you'd need to read the book to gain a better appreciation of each)) with happy enjoyment at his insights, tinged with cheerful smugness.

Until I came to the description of the construct that I have most tended to worship... Absolute Perfection (aka 'the God of the 100 percent'), which included a description of the personality type for whom this is most problematic (ie mine). I read it one Saturday morning as I lay in bed feeling heavy and drained from normal life, those feelings that remind me of burnout, and then I cried.

Then I got angry because in the very next section he critiqued the God I'm in danger of constructing in the wake of my deconstruction of the 100 percent God. He hones in on what he calls the 'heavenly bosom' (yes, he said 'bosom')... a place to hide from all life's demands and troubles (c.f. aforementioned burnout). It's a warm picture. Phillips's critique however is of escapism. He acknowledges and upholds the refuge and sanctuary of God but here, as in all instances, his main beef is with one dimensionality.

Culturally, though by no means completely out of date, Phillips's list is of 1950s Britain. I might hazard the risk of positing some 21st century constructs - God the Vending Machine, God the Lifestyle Value-Addition, God the Moral Curmudgeon, God the Doting Daddy, God of My Personal Agenda, God the Universe... In church culture (and Phillips notes this), you could talk about God the Catholic, God the Presbyterian, God the Baptist, God the Pentecostal, God the [insert denomination here], God the Evangelical, God the Progressive, God the Liberal, God the Intellectual, God the Anti-Intellectual, God the [insert theological stream here]...

I would also hazard to suggest that most (if not all) of these constructs have a thread of truth in them, but in and of themselves they're all too small... wizened and unhealthy.

Phillips's move is to then posit, as the title of the book suggests by comparison, a God of vastly bigger scope than any of the constructs above. This is not a God of all-inclusiveness (as my statement above is at risk of suggesting) but rather a God of utterly profound and ultimately unsearchable mystery - a God that defies the scope of human comprehension. A God 'bigger', if you will, than the cosmos and our nous.

Our tendency is always to limit and describe - this is one way we survive in the world. But we get stuck in our constructs and then they skew the way we see things. There are a lot of adamant claims for certainty in this world. And, might I say, the evangelists for Atheism and those who hold to Scientism (ie the belief that science has all the answers) are every bit as prone to this as the staunchest religious fundamentalist. Science is constantly dealing with mystery and the unknown. Many discoveries lead to bigger questions, and the universe functions in very strange ways. Beyond the realms of pop-scientific-certainty, scientists are keenly aware of their own limits and of the limits of understanding (I say this as an observer, rather than a scientific insider).

Any human endeavour that presents itself with total adamancy is running the risk of overreaching itself.

I digress from Phillips's thesis, to return: Phillips posits a God beyond all definition and construct. But how can a person know and respond to such a comprehension-defying God? We need something, or someone to focus on. Something or someone that doesn't simply reinforce our constructs, in fact something or someone that would actively critique them. Well, this is a Christian book, so it shouldn't come as a massive spoiler that Phillips posits Jesus Christ for this role. Christ, he argues, is God in focus.

So in the second half of the book, Phillips presents the Christian message - the underlying thread is established and familiar by long use of the message. But Phillips has a wonderful knack (as was his intent with his contemporary translation of the Bible) at coming at things from an engaging and fresh angle. And, as with his critique of the God constructs, he's not afraid to challenge popularly held ideas.

As I say, I can't guess at the efficacy of the argument for bringing a person to faith in Christ. But for me as an already Christian, it was a valuable and thought-provoking book - a needed critique of my preconceived ideas about God and a refresher on the gospel narrative, all done in a thorough-going but accessible style. Well worth the reading.

Dolly says

After hearing two people I respect recommend this book, I decided to read it. Glad I read it. Worth it.

J.B. Phillips starts off with people's destructive views of God, then their constructive views of God and then why he thinks Jesus represents to us the essence of God's character. I liked how he addressed his book to skeptics (who are willing to dig in and ask questions with an open mind and heart) and to believers. Although he wrote the book in the last century, it is amazing how people's views of God haven't changed much in some key aspects.

Nick says

Good. I found some parts to be more engaging than others. While ultimately I agree with Phillips' final conclusions, sometimes he lost me on the logic of how he got there. 3 1/2 stars.

Cindi P. says

I was completely engaged in this book. I was stretched in my understanding of Christianity, and my view of God did in fact grow. I found parts of it very challenging to me, and I had to read and read and read again some of the passages to get a grasp of the author's meaning. A deep thinker and loyal follower of Christ, J. B. Phillips does a gentle and kind job of making sense of "inadequate conceptions of God." And then provides a logical invitation to move forward. It reminded me of reading Mere Christianity. Not that they are parallel, but that they both explore life and Christ and make it a genuine intelligent choice to follow in belief. This is not what I'd call mainstream cultural Christianity in its appeal. This also felt very philosophical, so if you shy away from broad thoughts and big questions, this will not be your cup of tea. No matter how large a cup of tea you think you bring to the theology party. I will be thinking about several points for days and years to come. My kind of book.

Shawn says

The author begins with a litany of criticisms for popular conceptions of God, explaining unabashedly why these conceptions are inadequate. While the criticisms are largely accurate, they tend to come across with arrogance, as from one who has it all figured out.

I was particularly disenchanted with the author's degradation of the conscience, as an effective communication tool for God. I personally consider the conscience to be a primary means by which God communicates with the faithful.

On the contrary, I'm quite in agreement with the author that smug, complacent orthodoxy has no real place with God. Such people attempt an exhibition of love as a façade, which is only a pathetic travesty of the real thing.

But clearly, even the most devout of us are far from perfect. The author reveals how those who make perfection their fetish become enslaved to rules and lose the joy of spontaneity. Others use their religion as a shield, to separate themselves from the stresses of life, retreating into their religion as one might retreat into a spa. The author describes the “escapist” Christian as one who is constantly in the bosom of Christ, imagining Christ to be cuddling them, while in reality Christ is truly asking them to go out and do for others. God doesn't want people to be stunted, pale, and weak, but full of vitality and courage, empowered with the Holy Spirit, confronting evil whenever possible.

As ineffective and corrupt as it may be, the Christian church is the most organized form of Christianity and every cause has to be organized to be effective. Even though we observe misconceptions of Christianity, as are cited above, we cannot abandon the ship. We must evangelize both inside and outside our Churches, always working to reveal the real God. Revelation is progressive and we must be patient.

We have within our churches many who are beholden to a negative God, as a result of their upbringing, which has given them a morbid, legalistic attitude. For such people, the Old Testament means much more than the New. These people see religion as some sort of contract under which they obey certain rules in exchange for God faithfully looking after their interests. Such people have yet to understand and appreciate the revolutionary accomplishment of God's invasion of the world through Christ. Those who see God in this way are merely worshipping themselves, their self-potential, glamour, power, success, efficiency, or money. Their narrow minded attitudes deny them the freedom to enjoy all of the beauty that exists outside of their own immediate paradigm. It is life-changing when our conception of God becomes something higher than a simple magnification of our own good qualities.

We must understand that the intention and capacity of God extends very much beyond ourselves. God is no respecter of persons. It is by their fruits that men shall be known, not by how self-disciplined they are or by how high their stack of worldly wealth. You are greatly mistaken if you somehow think that your success stems from God's special favor for you and those like you. The author asserts: there is no provision for a “privileged class” in genuine Christianity.

In contrast, you are quite on target if you recognize that all men are brethren born forth of inanimate matter, of mere dust, but bearing within a spark of God. This spark may be kindled into a perpetual flame. We are here to build that flame, to grow our spiritual selves, to become a spearhead of good against evil. In the time allotted to us in our physical existence we mature into our spiritual selves. As the body grows old and deteriorates, our spiritual selves may become increasingly stronger and stronger until, as the physical body fails, the spiritual being may have gained sufficient vitality to continue.

On the contrary, those that never come to love and appreciate the spiritual side may never give birth to their spiritual selves; in much the same manner that a seed sown on hard, barren ground may never produce a plant. Those who discern the spiritual environment are reborn, erupting forth from a physical seed into a new spiritual being, erupting forth into the spiritual realm, just as a seed erupts from the dust into the sky. Such ones are in awe of the spiritual world, their spiritual persona, and the entire spectrum of God's magnificence.

We naturally want others around us to also wake up and see. We are dismayed at closed, unopened seeds languishing around us, enmeshed in barren ground. A ground that is made barren by human discord, dysfunctional families, poverty, and ignorance. Our task then is to grow diligently to spiritual maturity and this

task is accelerated when we nurture the fallow seeds all about us. Our efforts of compassion and philanthropy are therefore not wholly unselfish, as they increase the vitality of our spirit. Servant hood in the physical realm is an opportunity for us to gain increased vitality in the spiritual realm.

The “spiritual” realm is of vastly greater importance than the material, but the vast majority of people do not recognize this. The present life is merely the prelude to the life of the spirit and the latter is reality. The former is but a transitory incident. When we come to see that the true nature of reality is spiritual, it changes our entire outlook upon the world. Christ provides the aperture through which we gain vision to the spiritual realm. The author paraphrases Christ in saying that if any man will come after me, let him deny his tendency to love himself, bear the cost of that denial, and live positively according to the principles I teach. Those who truly love and give themselves for others are more nearly reflecting Christ than anyone else. When Christ said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, it is as if he said: “Do as I do, be as I am, live as I live. I am the example for you. I am the personification of God in man. Accept me and accept God. Become a son of God as I am God’s son. Be my brother.”

Hence, we come to see God as the center and everything else as derived from God. Seeing through this aperture brings the spiritual world into focus. We see that it is people, not things, that matter. The purpose of life clearly becomes to love God and others. This author suggests that the most serious sin is to restrict ones love energy from flowing out to God and to other people. To attempt to retain it all unto yourself is an act of diabolical selfishness. People exhibit self-love in their persistent narcissism, exploitation of others, pride, pedigree, and arrogance.

Men are not isolated units. Every action of man affects other people. The multiplication of the effects of countless acts by millions of self-centered individuals is destroying the world. When a man suddenly realizes the hurt he does to others by his own self-centeredness, he becomes wholly changed. This may happen when he observes a child mimicking his self-destructive behavior, his parents growing old with worry for him, or when someone is killed by his negligence. Once wholly changed in this manner, a man will more readily sacrifice himself for others. But to what extent? Would any of us, like Christ, choose death for humanity’s sake? If not our life, what would we sacrifice for humanity? Would we eat less so that the starving could have more? Would we give of our time to benefit those in need? Would we give up our riches so others might have more? Our churches are full of people who verbally commit to such sacrifice but who continue to hoard their surplus resources. Where do you stand on this scale between self love and love for humanity?

Christ was unique because he was flush with love for humanity and void of self love. Christ refused to modify God’s message the least little bit, even when the consequence was death. Could we ever do the same? Could we ever stand so firmly for the truth? Could we unequivocally stand forth as a Son of God no matter what was thrown at us? On the contrary, we typically acquiesce to self preservation when merely confronted with the social awkwardness of peer pressure. God’s message has endured for over 2000 years because Christ refused to mar or compromise God’s message to save his physical skin. The psychological impact with which Christ’s act of sacrifice engaged mankind was so great that it has endured for over 2000 years. Why? Because no other man has ever been capable of making such an unwavering, uncompromised sacrifice. The magnificence of Christ’s sacrifice is fully illuminated only when you compare it against your own minuscule and comparatively pathetic sacrifices.

Perhaps the greatest sacrifice that you can make is to forgive any and all of those who have trespassed against you. Can you? Have you? We cannot understand how our sins are forgiven through Christ until we actually forgive others. Christ said: “except ye from your hearts forgive everyone his trespasses, neither will my heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses.” Once we ourselves forgive, we can then understand how God communicated to us, through the death and resurrection of Christ, that we are ourselves forgiven. We

are forgiven when we abandon self love and embrace the love of all by joining Christ's church and thereby becoming a part of Christ's body, systematically sacrificing ourselves for others unto our physical death, upon which we shall live further as a spirit, as Christ has persisted in the spirit.

Modern proof of Christ's resurrection exists in the presence of Christ today in the hearts and minds of millions. It is undeniable that Christ exists now in spirit because so many are affected by Christ. A man can cry out to Christ today and receive spiritual reinforcement and vitality. Similarly, we who see the spiritual world will ourselves be sustained after death, not as we are now, but in spirit. Millions around the world constantly attest to the presence of spirits. The resurrection of Christ, and ultimately ourselves, is therefore not deniable. In fact, death may be a completely negligible experience to those who have already begun to live life of the eternal quality.

A very important question is: what impact will we have in the physical world while we are temporarily in the physical realm? Will we lament that we didn't do more while we had the physical hands and feet to do it? Or will we peer back into the physical world, satisfied that we contributed to progressing and moving the physical world forward toward what God wants it to be? Will we have spent our God-given time in the physical world doing God's work or piling up luxuries for ourselves that we can't even take back into the spiritual realm? How magnificent it must have been for Christ to return to the spiritual world, having effectuated such a great revelation in the history of the physical world? Will we lament that we wasted our time pursuing physical distractions, having returned empty handed, or will we be able to point to changes that we inflicted to the physical realm by our actions? For it was by actions that Christ influenced the world and so it will be by actions that you or I will so influence it! Be a spearhead of advance against the massed ignorance, selfishness, evil, and apathy of the majority of the human race! Be a pioneer for a new world order.

David says

This book could probably be considered a classic. It is relatively short (140 pages) though a lot of good, thought-provoking material, is packed into those pages. I would recommend it to any Christian.

First he deconstructs a number of unreal gods that many people worship: the god who is a policeman, a hangover to our memories of our parents, a kind old man, and more. My favorite here was the "God-in-a-box" where he attacks the idea that many Christians have that God is only working in their own denomination, heritage or community. They might deny it, but many conceive of God as approving their style (say, Baptist or Catholic) and disapproving others (Pentecostal or Reformed). God is so much bigger than that.

The second half of the book is focused on constructing the God who is big enough. To do this, Philippians simply tells the story of the Incarnation, of God becoming flesh, and what this means. At first I found this a bit surprising in its simplicity, but I think that is the point: the big enough God is the one who becomes flesh, like we are, to save us.

Overall, this little book is a good and helpful read.

Ron Lohrbach says

Looking forward to reading and discussing in small group at Christ the Cornerstone Lutheran church on 5 Tuesdays starting July 8. I am familiar with J.B. Phillips paraphrased New Testament from the 60s when I was a young man. Looking forward to his insights in this subject of the size of God.

I have adapted the attitude and expression that "God is still large and still very much in charge" to help me for balance in difficult trying times.

Ron

Douglas says

First published in 1961, this exposé of populist notions of God as spiritually naive and theologically truncated has endured as a classic. Phillips reviews and dismantles more than a dozen views of God that have turned people off and even hardened and hurt many, leading them to abandon any spirituality and community in the Christian tradition because of spiritual injury. Phillips then articulates a reasonable defense of a way to construe the presence of God in human life, and in particular, in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Those who have turned away from the Christian tradition because of an inability to believe in, trust in, or love the God projected by Christians and their traditions should know that such views of God are the problem, not the God who is otherwise obscured by their caricature.

Andrew says

The book certainly has its limits. For instance, the relatively conservative cast of Phillips' evangelicalism comes to the fore as his 'hypothetical' characterization of what a God, who became present in a way human beings could understand, would be like sounds suspiciously premodelled to sound just like Jesus as popularly imagined by a mid-century English evangelical. Nevertheless, this is a great book that I use regularly in teaching to provoke students to reflect critically on their own theological imagination.

Ninke says

Wow!

Richard says

This is a very old book (relatively speaking) it wasn't on my "must read list" at Candler - I don't know why! It is truly wonderful. I find myself wanting to underline almost every line that Phillips has written. It is very relevant. Should be on the MUST READ list of: Clergy, laity, teachers, students, Chaplains, Christians, non-

Christians, and general readers of all stripes!

Cogent, short, and smart. Suffers from a bit too Anglo orientation but considering that Philips was an Anglican Bishop at the time of writing that's to be expected. Wish that he had written more but perhaps he said it all in one volume (Yes! I'm looking at YOU Will Willimon).

G Clay Leonard says

Succinct and thought-provoking, this book challenges misconceptions of God and of Christ following that we may not even realize we have accepted.

Sue says

An excellent short book, outlining several fallacies that Christians (and others) often believe about God, followed by a straightforward and comprehensive outline of who God is. Recommended.

Jonathan Brooker says

Phillips has such a wonderful candor to his arguments that draws you in much C.S. Lewis when he's getting particularly pointed in an argument. Even the ending line of this book takes a poignant stab at what the reader and the world as a whole will do with Christ and Christianity that left me going, "Ouch!" My challenges were his dated writing style, at times, and then a lengthy argument he made on "Baby A." For starters it seemed like a bit of a jerk to the side in his otherwise linear argument. And more importantly it was nearly impossible to not look at it as reading into what the gospels already say of Jesus and then saying, "If God were to come into this world, this is how He'd have to act and live." I'm a believer, but any skeptic would see that as arguing your point backwards with what you already believe. It just wasn't necessary for the message of the book, in my opinion.

But other than that it was a rather enjoyable read with a great look at how vast our God is, how we ought to respond to His greatness, and how the coming of Jesus as God into this world gives us opportunity to see exactly how we can live in response and relationship to a great God.
