

GOD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Experience of living is experience of God

As we approach the end of the second millennium we find ourselves living in a new day and age, when many of the principles and categories of thinking with which we grew up simply do not apply. Traditionally we divide western civilization into three periods: ancient, medieval, and modern. But we are now living in a time that we have to call post-modern. The world we live in has little in common with the 16th or 17th century world, or even the 19th century world. For the older among us, the world we now live in has little in common with the world of our own childhood.

This is bound to affect the way we think about God. How will the idea of God survive in the years to come? For 4000 years it has constantly adapted to meet the needs of the present. Today there is less feeling for need of religious ideas and God is being relegated to the past.

In Aldous Huxley's notable, futuristic novel, "Brave New World," there is a scene in which the Savage and the World Controller are looking at a Bible and some books that deal with the subject of religion.

The Savage inquires whether the Controller believes in a God.

"No," he answers, "I think there quite probably is one....But he manifests himself in different ways to different men. In pre-modern times he manifested himself as the being that's described in these books."

"How does he manifest himself now?" asks the Savage.

"Well," says the World Controller, "he manifests himself as an absence; as though he weren't there at all."

Today only the naive believes in God the same way in which the most lukewarm and skeptical believed in him 200 years ago. One of the positive achievements of the "God-is-dead" movement in theology a couple of decades ago was to clear the air of some of the outworn ideas of God that were still cluttering up the backs of our minds: the watchmaker god who set the planets in their courses; the errand-boy god waiting to do our bidding if we said the right prayer; the benevolent old grandfather god in heaven, guaranteeing pie in the sky by-and-by to those whose wretched condition here on earth we could therefore ignore; the god of the gaps, invoked to account for anything the scientists hadn't figured out yet.

All these gods are dead. Thank God! They were really only idols, not truly God. And humans are idolatrous animals. Ancient, modern, or post-modern, we love to manufacture idols and then fall down and worship them. We have been at it a long time, molding golden calves and calling them gods. Unfortunately this is not a harmless pastime. We find ourselves becoming owned by them.

(No Absent God, cont'd)

How should twenty-first century knowledge give content to faith in God?

Karen Armstrong in her book, "A History of God," states, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1993, page 378) that today "many are unmoved by the prospect of life without God. Others find his absence a positive relief. Those of us who have had a difficult time with religion in the past find it liberating to be rid of the God who terrorized our childhood. It is wonderful not to have to cower before a vengeful deity, who threatens us with eternal damnation if we do not abide by the rules. We have a new intellectual freedom and can boldly follow up our own ideas without pussyfooting around difficult articles of faith, feeling all the while a sinking loss of integrity. We imagine that the hideous deity we have experienced is the authentic God of Jews, Christians and Muslims and do not always realize that it is merely an unfortunate aberration."

This is where God comes in - the God who is really God. The theologian, Nels Ferre, stated that humankind's history is a cosmic swoosh, a blitz-emergence within the mystery of creation. On a scale of three billion years to thirty days, humankind's history, roughly, is 10 seconds. But the next half-second may show more changes than the last 5 seconds. For the Christian, God as seen in Jesus Christ suggests God as the creative and reconciling love that makes up the transcendent element of the universe.

The knowledge that we have is but a swift, flaming arrow across a dark sky. *God is the spirit of love and truth.*

Ferre goes on to say that "If God is ultimate love, his true worshippers cannot become fanatical.

The more that genuine love is practiced, the more is identification made with concrete need." ("Searchlights On Contemporary Theology," by Nels Ferre, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1961, page 182f).

God is Transcendent

Joseph Campbell in the book, "The Power of Myth." (Doubleday, New York, page 56f) says: "'God' is an ambiguous word in our language because it appears to refer to something that is known. But the transcendent is unknowable and unknown. God is transcendent, finally, of anything like the name of 'God.' God is beyond names and forms. The source of temporal life is eternity. Eternity pours itself into the world. It is a basic mythic idea of the god who becomes many in us. In India, the god who lies in me is called the 'inhabitant' of the body. To identify with that divine, immortal aspect of yourself is to identify yourself with divinity.

Now, eternity is beyond all categories of thought. This is an important point in all the great Oriental religions. We want to think about God. God is a thought. God is a name. God is an idea. But its reference is to something that transcends all thinking. The ultimate mystery is beyond all categories of thought. As Kant said, the thing in itself is no thing. It transcends thingness, it goes past anything that could be thought. The best things can't be told because they transcend thought. The second best are misunderstood, because those are the thoughts that are supposed to refer to that which can't be thought about. The third best are what we talk about. And myth is that field of reference to what is absolutely transcendent."

(The Realm of God is Real, cont'd)

God as love, made known and to be made known in concerned, creative, and cooperative community is in the deepest sense the reality of God.

This can happen in many ways and under many forms. It can happen politically, for example, in a welfare system that restores to its citizens human dignity and responsibility. Or it can happen in a foreign aid policy that deals not in prejudices and stereotypes, but in terms of a world-wide human community.

It can happen ecclesiastically in a church whose work and worship reflect the spirit of a Lord who came not to be ministered to but to minister to the friendless and the needy. It can happen personally, whenever genuine forgiveness and forbearance are shown.

This is where God is; this is what God is doing. Christians have wasted an enormous amount of energy worshipping buildings and traditions instead of God. In a book on worship, John Killinger ("Leave It to the Spirit," page 153) makes this pertinent comment:

"The truth is - and in this Judaeo-Christianity differs from many primitive religions - that the sacred is only where God is, not that God is where the sacred is. When he has moved on, the place where he was is no longer sacred. Whatever is holy about unused temples or cathedrals, superseded prayer books, and hocked communionware is so only by virtue of the humanity invested in them, not by virtue of any residual divinity. There is obsolescence about everything he uses and every place he inhabits. The holy is always in process of becoming the profane.

The profane, on the other

hand, is always becoming holy. When it has become most empty of God, most barren of his presence, it is most in the way of being a bearer of grace, a vessel of the divine. What was 'without form and void' becomes a world. What was 'uncomely and not to be desired' becomes the Messiah. What was mostly, untutored, and subject to ridicule becomes the church."

When Moses asked the name of the divine in the incident of the burning bush, God's reply was cryptically, "I am who I will be."

God is to be found wherever things are happening - creating, sustaining, restoring. And where God is may we be found also.

The realm of God is not a visionary scheme. It defines for us what has always constituted the most real and the most ample factor of life. It formulates a principle that lies imbedded in the whole of the relations of domestic, social, economic, and civil life that constitute what is called civilization. It is the real goal of whatever of humanity there is in us. It is the reality of our life, and all that contradicts it has only illusory existence. There is no genuine success in life, or motive for life, or prospect of good for humanity, that is not rooted in it.

Love and Life are Inter-connected

The Christian elder who wrote the First Letter of John in the New Testament declared, "God is love." The writer then went on to say, "if we love each other God does actually live within us, and his love grows in us towards perfection."

In the preceding chapter the writer exhorts: "My children, let us love not merely in theory or in words - let us love in sincerity and in practice!"

God is truth and love.

God Is The Smallest Object
by
Robert Hilles

God is the smallest object in a room. Some of us see it and speak to it as if it were a pet or a lover. Others imagine it was bigger and could not fit into this room at all. Others still fall in love with it and take it to bed with them every night.

Some of us can't even get into the room at all and must stare at the object from the doorway like a prisoner staring at the sea from their cell window.

This object does not move or breathe or even love. It merely thinks about ways to get out of this room for good. It thinks about wings, about legs, about fingers, but none of them is adequate. In the end this object decides that it is stuck for good in this room.

Those that truly love it will pick it up and throw it out the window. Those who despise it will try to hide it beneath some large piece of furniture. Most of us however will take no notice of it merely sitting next to it once in a while and glancing at it from the corner of our eyes hoping that sometime we will discover what to do with it.

(Taken from "Cantos From A Small Room," published by Wolsak and Wynn)

"I can say that I do not think of God as a concept, but as an immediate and ever-present fact - an occasion for continuous dialogue.

- Marshall

McLuhan

Love is the essence of religion.

GAMBLING EXALTS SELFISHNESS

Gambling is the vice of the speculator, the person who likes to take chances. Those who indulge in it describe it as gaming, playing a game for a prize or a stake.

Today, with the emphasis upon subjecting our economy to the whims of the marketplace, gambling becomes a part of our way of life. Competition and winning viciously creates winners and losers. It is simple, and rather natural, to carry this modus operandi to our recreational life as well.

Competitive commerce breeds gambling, and both exalt selfishness. It pits people against one another in a gladiatorial game in which there is no mercy and in which the majority lose out.

Our competitive life has so deeply warped our moral judgment that it is becoming commonplace for greed and self-preservation to overthrow loyalty and sharing. It is easy to fail to realize that ones winnings are at the expense of others losing. It becomes evil when it is exploited to redistribute wealth without relation either to merit or to responsibility.

Moral decay starts within individuals and introduces a process of decay which nothing can stop except moral and spiritual regeneration.

As Mark Twain wrote, there are two times in a person's life when they should not gamble; when one can afford it, and when one can't.

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