

God's Confronting Partners
Unity Unitarian Church
December 8, 2013

I begin this morning with a statement that my adult students regularly make at the beginning of a course on world religions. It is usually delivered with some intensity: "I am spiritual but not religious." What they mean is that they no longer believe in the God of their childhood or affiliate with organizations that continue to proclaim that God, but still earnestly seek a higher purpose for their lives.

In attempting to describe the power of the word "God" in the lives of believers, one theologian wrote: "God is the anchor-symbol for a whole world view and way life." He meant, I think, that how we imagine God (or the ultimate, if you prefer) profoundly affects how we see reality and choose to live our lives. What my students are telling me is that the God in whom they were raised to believe no longer anchors their world views and ways of life. They have found or are searching for other anchor-symbols.

As we heard this morning, William James concluded that the religious (or spiritual, if you prefer) intuition of us human beings is that there is more to life that we can see, and that our well being depends on living in harmony with that more. We can't see it, but must order our lives to it, if we desire peace: This is the religious (or spiritual, if you prefer) challenge we face. Religions tell differing stories about the unseen order, and through differing rituals (like the one we are engaging in together) teachings, and rules for community life provide ways for their members to live their lives in fidelity to those stories. Sacred stories all carry some understanding of the ultimate. The understanding most familiar to Westerners is, of course, God .

It is hard to find a pithier, more powerful example of a religion doing its storytelling/life orienting work than the familiar verse from the first letter of John that we have just heard: "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God and God abides in them." The story it tells is that God is not a person, a noun, but rather a verb—a process, a commitment, a spirit, a way of acting in relationship, a force. The way to live in light of that sacred story is to love. When we love, we abide in God and God abides in us—a moving, mystical image of the intimacy possible between God and us, mediated through loving relationships.

I would like to share with you a transformation of my original anchor-symbol that has been unfolding for many years.

The great Jewish teacher Henry Slonimsky describes God's need for humanity in these stunning words:

God's real actual power in the universe is at present still pitifully small, and that fact itself entails the drama. The power of God must be increased and the active agent in this crucial event is humanity. God and humanity are a polarity. They are both heroes in the same drama. They need each other, they grow together but they also suffer together.

This is not the God that this Catholic boy from Peoria grew up with in the 1950's, nor the one taken for granted and preached in most Christian pulpits today. That God is

omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent—needing nothing from anyone. In addressing the omni-God in prayer and worship, some Christians proclaim: “You’re God all by Yourself.” What kind of relationship can human beings have with a perfect God who needs nothing from us and is unaffected by our actions, a God all by Himself? The answer must be: Only a unilateral one—God influences us. Period.

In the religious tradition that formed me, and many of you, I imagine, the notion that God exists in real, mutual relationships with human beings is not just strange, it’s heretical. And, if God is indeed the anchor-symbol for a whole worldview and way of life, then letting go of the omni-God transforms one’s whole worldview and way of life. That is what encountering the God who needs covenant partners to bring peace to history, who needs us in order to become God, as we need God in order to become ourselves, the God I meet in the writings of the ancient rabbis and the philosopher Whitehead, has done to me. That God quickens my social imagination and confirms my conviction that the web of relationships is the womb that gives birth to both peace and strife, that all relationships are two-way streets of mutual influence, and that from such connections all becoming flows.

The words of Professor Slonimsky again:

Humanity becomes from now on God’s confronting partner, and the two together a re-enforcing polarity of give and take. They become allies in the most redoubtable of all struggles and for the greatest of all stakes. They are inevitably lovers, and both of them tragic heroes. But in a very real sense the fate of God and of the future rests on the heroism of humanity, on what it elects to do.

As confronting partners, God and humanity can become ever more fully themselves and advance the work of peace together—or not.

Slonimsky, one last time:

We come now to the boldest, most forward-reaching thought concerning God in the ancient rabbinic literature, one which anticipates the most modern speculation concerning the nature of God and his relation to humanity. It is this: God depends on humanity for his strength and for his failure, for his growth and for his retrogression. In a world in which both God and humanity are growing, or in process, it is human beings who by their acts increase or decrease the stature of God. God, in the full meaning of the term, is seen to stand at the end, not at the beginning. “On that day he shall be one and his name shall be one.” God must be made one, and humanity is the agent in whose hands it is left to make or mar that supreme integration.

A religious (or if you prefer, spiritual) world where the full stature and integrity of the Eternal One is a work in progress and humanity plays the key role in supporting or

limiting the integrity, the wholeness, of God is truly another world to live in than the one into which I was born. In it, the meaning of the “God” symbol is profoundly transformed and along with it the whole world view and way of life of those who embrace a fully relational God.

Because I was not able to reconcile a God developing in real relationships with humanity, with the God-all-by-Himself that I inherited, I have chosen to allow my anchor-symbol-of-origin to be transformed. That transformation has been going on for more than 30 years. (Anchor-symbols do not let go of our imaginations easily.) I find a liberating loneliness in letting go of the omni-God. The grace of meaning that flows from re-imagining God energizes and sustains my public work and my private life in ways that the omnipotent, already complete God of my childhood does not and cannot.

How important are relationships from this perspective? So important that God becomes God, human beings become human, and peace comes to history only when God and we accept our respective responsibilities as confronting covenantal partners. God is still God, and we are still human, but we stand in a relationship of mutuality with each other. And this changes everything.

An early father of the church wrote: **“The glory of God is humanity fully alive.”** Perhaps, nearly 2000 years later, we are prepared to imagine the related, and equally important, truth: **The glory of humanity is God fully alive.**

Michael A. Cowan