

Wrestling with God

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God is Dead. I saw the headlines. It was a scandal of course. Meant to provoke us into some engagement with our belief system. God is Dead. It is a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher. Of course, Nietzsche is dead too. Since 1900. And for the last ten years of his life, he was clearly suffering from mental illness. Some say it was tertiary syphilis. Others suspect it was the suffering of a soul that systematically fought believing in something.

At the great risk of once again over-simplifying, I do in fact agree with old Friedrich's pronouncement about God. The God that most of us were taught about, that we grew up with, is dead. Dead. Actually, never lived at all except as an idea. That all-knowing, all-powerful God who was terribly jealous and vengeful and created levels of hell to torment us, his children, for all eternity, that God was never real.

Even apart from all of the horrible meanness, there were other essential flaws. Philosophers and theologians have tried throughout history to figure out how we can have both free will and an omnipotent God. Does God create and then withdraw or step back so that we can have choice?

I mean, you simply can't have omnipotence AND free will.

And what do we make of a God who would allow the kind of suffering that is routine upon this earth? Natural disasters. The wanton destruction of life that seems to be nature's way, and the even more haunting destruction that people cause to other people. Aren't we an odd species? What other animals besides us and our close cousins the apes kill one another systematically? That kind of violence does happen with other apes, but so far as I know, not more broadly. Lots of animals compete for food, but waging war is limited.

What meaning do we make of large-scale suffering? How do we reconcile God and bad things happening to good people? To innocents? What do we make of it when those who are deeply committed to leading moral and ethical lives lose what they need for basic survival? If there is some kind of personal God, how can such tragedy be part of our lives?

There is a haunting tale of Jewish men meeting in a concentration camp. The subject of their conversation was God's allowing the Holocaust. How could this extinction of people happen? Not only people, but the "Chosen People?" Where was God in that suffering? According to the story, the men argued for hours, trying to make sense of the atrocities visited upon them. Finally, it was concluded that God was guilty of misconduct. God was guilty of abandoning his children. God, who had promised to be constant with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, had ignored the terrible suffering of his children. God had failed. Then someone noticed the time and the men went back to their barracks to begin their evening prayers.

Any ordinary concept of God we experiment with has those two challenges embedded in it instantly. The omnipotence dilemma and its corollary that suffering exists. Without omnipotence, what kind of a God-concept is it? Well, there are some new answers to that old question in process theology, but more on that later.

I believe that our concept of God matters and I believe that all of us have one, even if it is one that we reject intellectually. We will believe in something, as our hymnal reading says. Ask the question, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." And stay tuned for an interesting conversation. I mean that I can't imagine anyone in our culture who is not

wrestling somehow with *God*. What differs is what we have in mind when we use the term. It can make *God* plausible or absurd, distant or near. How we understand *God* shows up in our day-to-day walking in the world even if we declare that he is dead. Even if we are atheists. And what about that haunting question, "Why is there something instead of nothing?" Or, "What started this particular ball rolling through eternity?" Or, "What is at the edge of the universe?"

I know that some of you made the declaration years ago that *God* is dead and feel that the conversation is over. I'll argue that. I don't think such a conversation is ever really over. Like every other great conversation there is always a new facet, a new possibility, a new construct that offers something juicy to our lives — perhaps as a moral guidepost if not the source of redemption. I am willing to back off if you have read all of Alfred North Whitehead and you still want to make that atheist statement. However, until you tell me that you have wrestled that great philosopher and theologian down to your point of view, I declare that you are not yet finished with your final exams.

Alfred North Whitehead, who died in 1947, was a British mathematician, logician and philosopher best known for his work in mathematical logic and the philosophy of science. In collaboration with Bertrand Russell, he authored a landmark three-volume Principia Mathematica and contributed significantly to twentieth-century logic.

During his time at Harvard, from 1924 onward, he worked on more general issues in philosophy, including the development of a comprehensive metaphysical system that has come to be known as "process philosophy".

In his book Process and Reality, rather than assuming substance as the basic metaphysical category, Whitehead introduced an idea that there is no "there" there in the universe or the atom, and that the elemental "thing" is not a thing at all but an "event." This notion he called an "actual occasion." In Whitehead's view, an actual occasion is not an enduring substance, but a process of becoming.

If you followed any of that, then you have either been doing your homework in quantum physics or you have an intuitive grasp of process theology. That is why process theology and process thought is so way cool. It is in fact knowable through intuition and it is coherent with all we imagine in modern physics.

But let's return to the more common images of *God*. There are at least four fundamentally different concepts of *God* in our culture and the Bible.

The first describes a being "out there," separate from the world and from us. The "watchmaker *God*," this idea is sometimes called. This *God* created the watch, or the world, and then stepped back to let it run. This *God* made the parts but takes no hand in how things turn out. This idea lets us see suffering in the world and not blame *God*. This kind of *God* cannot be experienced but is known through faith alone. The sophisticated name for this is "supernatural theism" — *God* is supreme to and outside of nature. If you conjure the idea of a remote sky *God* somewhere up there, out beyond earth, a *God* who is not affected by our suffering or special requests, you are a supernatural theist.

This is the kind of *God* that can lead to the disenchantment of the world. *God* is out there. What is here is ours to use. After people, the universe is made up of stuff and since we are the obvious top of that pyramid, we are free to make use of all of the lower stuff. For many reasons, I am uncomfortable with the direction this kind of *God* idea leads us toward. Frankly, I wish this *God* were known to be deceased everywhere.

Then there is the kind of *God* modeled after ancient kings. *God* is imagined as a super king ruling with fierceness. When the ancient Israelites came down out of the Judean hills, and clusters of people began to farm in the valleys, rulers grew up whose main task was the protection of the land and perhaps secondarily the people. We can guess that the main work of these kings was not public works but protecting boundaries. Now exaggerate the qualities that would be important to that kind of work and you get a tough, protective *God* who rules with an iron hand and the threat of punishment. This *God* shows up commonly in the Hebrew Bible. If bad things happen, it is because we failed to follow the rules. Bad things are a punishment. *God* is just, but willing to lay waste to whole cities if his rules are not obeyed.

If bad things are a punishment, we are left with an unsolvable problem about loss and suffering. If you are suffering you must be out of favor with *God*. Now, there are too many people who are good and who suffer disease and loss for us to accept this without some major questions. Yet, I think our fundamentalist neighbors are pretty much stuck with this magical interpretation. Out of that *God-as-King* construct comes the idea that prayer can change the course of suffering, because suffering is a punishment and it is possible that *God* can be invited to change his mind. If you are suffering and you pray sincerely and your friends pray for you, the punishment may be lifted. I hate where that leaves us when we have diseases or

losses. In addition to the losses, we are asked to believe that we were out of favor and being punished. No wonder it used to be an embarrassment to have cancer.

Another concept of God is as something like a spirit that is in all things. This God, or Gods plural, animates everything. There is God in the trees and God in the stars and so forth. These Gods may be experienced by connecting with each thing individually. "Pantheism," it is called. "Pan" meaning "everything." Each thing has its own God-spirit. This is sometimes considered a naïf point of view, or a primitive way of explaining our sense that the world is filled with magic.

The Gods of Pantheism are not separate from the universe but are emergent in everything around us. Different faces of God are visible in each creation. It is these Gods we often meet in tribal religious expressions. It may be an elementary form, but surely every one of us has from time to time had a sense that a tree has a kind of consciousness. Or perhaps we know comfort by returning to a particular large rock. Perhaps lying flat on the earth has brought you peace in a time of terrible loss. In those times, we may be connecting ritually in a sort of dance between the object and ourselves as actor. I hope that you have had such a sense of connection whatever you call it, whatever you make of it.

I personally have never had a sure sense of what was living and what was "inanimate." Imagine my delight when I learned that physicists have the same difficulty. Inanimate objects perhaps have a slower form of animation, but are not without some kind of energy that we might call consciousness. Think of it: rock consciousness.

One of the healing possibilities of this kind of theology is that we can have an experience of something rather like energy outside of ourselves on a scale that we can take in. We can feel intimately connected with something. It is tough to feel connected to that great God in the sky, but to sit by a tree in the forest, and feel something like kinship, brings the experience of connection to something outside of ourselves down to a scale that we can know. I know many people who use this kind of meditation for entering the mystical realm.

I have a wonderful friend, a Unitarian Universalist minister, who has an elaborately detailed Hindu God tattooed on her hip. Ganesh, the elephant-headed God of new beginnings. Her theology is sophisticated and expansive, but she knows that she needs a more concrete visualization of that which is beyond naming. Ganesh is her doorway into that other world. I get it. I can count on a connection with mystery by being in a forest, especially at night. I

love the darkness when my own boundaries disappear and my sense that I am part of the forest is enhanced. Actually, I have many rituals to remind me of my place in the family of things. For example, I often put a drop of blessed oil on my heart as a reminder to keep it open. I don't have to believe in the magical properties of oil that is blessed, but the ritual act of applying it helps me to hold on to trust. I think it works because the ritual act makes more concrete my intention.

In yet another model, God is here in our midst and includes everything and is more than everything. A kind of non-material ingredient and layer. The universe is in God. And God is larger than all of creation. Everything has God-spirit, and God-spirit is the animating spark in all things. This idea is called panentheism or alternatively it may be called process theology. Now we are back to Whitehead. And John Cobb and our own Henry Nelson Weiman and Charles Hartshorne.

Part two of this God-talk will be about process thought, but a question which you may be holding right now is, "What does it matter?" If we don't live with a judging God who is going to punish us for eternity, if the best we can ever do is lead the best life that we can and help other people in all the ways that we can, what difference if we do it in the name of God or humanism? And of course there are almost as many kinds of humanists as there are theists. A full spectrum of possibilities.

I can only point to my own answer. I want to belong. Belong in my life and in the universe. When I think of my place in the family of things as being part of a living system and when I believe that what I do with my life inside that system matters to the whole, then I am willing to use God-language for that sense of connection. You might not need to. For me it opens up possibilities that were minimized in my more hard-core rationalist period. New possibility seems a good thing.

It has taken a lot of years to get over my own scar tissue enough to want to reclaim any God-language. Why wake up that old dead guy who caused so much suffering? Why reclaim that guy in whose name such terrible things were done and who inspires dreadful things today? I find that I don't want to surrender God-talk to the small of mind and hardened of heart any more than I want to surrender my country to the fundamentalist notion of how things should be.

Now it still scares me to wrestle with this new God, but I am drawn to the feeling that I am not merely an accidental emergence. I like to feel that I belong here and that the universe is affected by my life. The universe created in the conversation about process thought is a bit more homelike than the universe of mechanistic cause and effect. I am a product of processes that can partly be explained by science, but the relationships that I have are important in ways that science has not yet explained. I feel something like greater participation in the astonishing and intricate and mysterious dance that is life when I use this process language.

Really, process theology is about our first and last principles writ large. Every life has worth and we are all part of the interdependent web. It is not other than those two principles and it reinforces my commitment to living more purposefully. I find that I am moving in the direction of claiming more profoundly that we are all connected and that how I live my life within this network of mutuality has greater magnitude than I ever previously imagined. Reason enough to push myself over that wall of old-fashioned and limiting language.

Process theology says that life should be about "joy." Haven't I said that from my first sermon here? Charles Hartshorne the Unitarian theologian and ornithologist came to explore process theology because he came to believe that birds sing for gladness. If we believe that, and I do hope that you do, you cannot believe that human beings are separate from all other life forms. If you will entertain that notion we are participants with other life forms in the cosmic dance and things that were heretofore considered inanimate, then you cannot imagine life as a simple pyramid with people meant to rule the world. Rather, we are in a system of mutual care and relationships.

Your life matters. Your life affects everything. Your life and how you choose to live, how you define and live your morality, how you contribute to this world has significance beyond your imagining. Your gifts are unique. There never has been and never will be another being just like you. Know that your life is precious beyond all reckoning and that all of our lives together, all of the relationships interacting in the cosmos, all of the events of our being here together, all of this both is and creates the God of process.

Now that should give you something to ponder for a while.

Blessed be.