

THEOLOGY OF THE RIVER
 (Process Theology)
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Bulletin Quote: Human Beings naturally possess different interests and inclinations. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that we have many different religious traditions with different ways of thinking and behaving. But this variety is a way for everyone to be happy. As the Dalai Lama said, “If we only have bread, people who eat rice are left out. With a great variety of foods we are able to satisfy everyone’s different needs and tastes. And people eat rice because it grows best where they live, not because it is either any better or worse than bread”.

Happy Easter! We share the joy and wishes of peace and good will with the approximately 33,000 denominations and sects of the Christian Church worldwide who celebrate this day. And may we celebrate the joy and wishes of peace and good will with all religions on all their various holidays until every day of the year is a celebration of joy, peace, and wonder.

OPENING WORDS:

Bob Weekly was so kind as to share with me reprints of a series of six “God Talks” by Rev. Mike McGee of the UU Church of Arlington. Rev. McGee summarized the series thusly: the series covered atheism—being religious with no invisible means of support; agnosticism – daring to doubt; mysticism—a religion of love; theism—in compliance with federal full-disclosure laws, I am required to tell you that I’m really not sure about any of this stuff; and naturalism—the song of Gaia and let’s bash those who don’t see environmental protectionism the way we do. Rev. McGee reports one of his biggest surprises was the number of people who came up after his first talk saying, “I never knew I was an atheist before, but you’ve convinced me that I am.” And then after the next God Talk sermon the same person would come up and say, “I never knew I was an agnostic before, but you’ve convinced me that I am. “ The next month the same person had turned into a theist, and so on. I’ve always known that we UU’s are flexible in our beliefs, but I never knew how flexible we could be. He was gratified, however, since what seemed to be happening was that people were resonating with the values he was expressing that tie together all of these beliefs, the values of oneness, spiritual depth and ethical commitment.

Theology of the River:

The following is a mixture of my own words, those of various sources, and those of Rev. McGhee.

Our world is full of religions. Why? Nietzsche, Marx, Russell, and other philosophers of the last 150 years or so regarded God as just another vestige of an unscientific past that humanity would soon outgrow. However, there is undeniable truth to the graffiti – “God is Dead, signed Nietzsche --- Nietzsche is Dead, signed God.” Around today’s world, the gods are far from dead in the minds of the general population. Various theologies and religious practices guide and even dominate the lives of many. Sometimes with tragic results. Many modern rationalists claim that humans cling to God because they lack the strength and courage to face the world without Him.

But there is another theory with some scientific support that the celebrations, enlightenment, communing with your inner self-components of religion are actually a deep desire of our basic being. And that the boost that comes from prayer, meditation, song, dance, ritualization, or merely intense contemplation of a spiritual existence is hard-wired, so to speak, into the human brain. Andrew Newberg, MD and brain researcher discusses brain science and the biology of belief as it relates to these experiences, all loosely categorized as “mystic feelings”, making all of us mystics to a degree.

From Newberg’s “Why God won’t go away”, What is important to remember is that no matter how unlikely or unfathomable the accounts of mystics may seem (Newberg’s mystics means all with spiritual experiences), they are based not on delusional ideas but on experiences that are neurologically real. The mystics of all times and cultures have used the same expressive terms to describe their experiences: bliss, rapture, ecstasy, and exaltation. They speak of losing themselves in a sublime union, of melting into elation, and of a total satisfaction of desires. Newberg, the brain guy, explains the process through exceptional interactions between parts of the brain: the amygdala and hypothalamus with efforts to balance the two by the hippocampus that results in complete disorientation between self and reality. He proposes that the evolutionary capability of humans to bring on these phenomena through deep meditation, either mind cleansing or mind focusing type, have ties to the ecstasy of sex. He draws the parallel of wings – possibly they evolved for cooling of the body to the point they helped in gliding then took off, so to speak, evolving on their own right as instruments of flight. However, this whole area of whether the brain is hardwired for God is for another time.

That certainly puts a positive spin on why celebratory and meditative religions persist. And for those of us who have never experienced a level termed ecstasy in the process, but only a little bit of feel good, it gives us something to look forward to.

For those of us who put possible irrational demands that our “religion” be rational, this concept that the brain is hardwired to encourage meditative ecstasy is helpful. It may help explain why some scientists make leaps of faith. An example is when the Cosmic Background Microwave Explorer satellite went operational in 1992, mission scientist George Smoot remarked “If you’re religious, its like looking at God.” The media loved it. One tabloid front page showed the face of Jesus (as interpreted by medieval artists, of course) outlined on a blurry picture of the cosmos. Free Inquiry magazine takes the story from there:

Reporting on the conference “Science and the Spiritual Quest” held at the Center for Theology and Science in Berkeley this summer, the July 20 cover of Newsweek announced: “Science Finds God.” The several hundred scientists and theologians at the meeting were virtually unanimous in agreeing that science and religion are now converging, and what they are converging on is God. South African cosmologist and Quaker George Ellis expressed the consensus: “There is a huge amount of data supporting the existence of God. The question is how to evaluate it.”

The Newsweek story noted that, “The achievements of modern science seem to contradict religion and undermine faith.” However, “for a growing number of scientists, the same discoveries offer support for spirituality and hints at the very nature of God.” We learn that, Physicists have stumbled on signs that the cosmos is custom-made for life and consciousness.” Big-bang cosmology, quantum mechanics, and chaos theory all are interpreted as “opening a door for God to act on the world.”

Surveys, however, do not confirm the contention that “a growing number of scientists” are finding support for spirituality in their scientific studies. A recent poll of U.S. National Academy of Science members indicated only 7% believe in a personal creator, down from 15% in 1933 and 29% in 1914. If anything, most scientists seem to be moving away from spirituality rather than toward it.

Apparently, what we are hearing is not the voice of a growing majority of scientist, but the well-funded, growing voice of a decreasing minority. The Berkeley meeting was a kind of “Premise-Keepers” rally for academics seeking to keep alive their premise that God exists, while science continues to operate successfully with no need for that premise.

The Premise-Keepers recognize that they cannot prove the existence of God. They simply express the strong feeling that intelligent design is demonstrated by the very order of the universe. Unfortunately, science has little sympathy for feelings and desires no matter how sincere their intent. The universe is the way it is, regardless of what anyone might want it to be. If humanity is in fact a grain of sand in an infinite Sahara, as our telescopes increasingly indicate, then we cannot wish it otherwise. We should accept the fact and learn to live with it.

Recent trends in Christian theology and its rapprochement with science have moved Christianity closer to a position where a deity is to be found in the order of nature as a creative entity transcending space, time, and matter responsible for that order. Indeed, the modern Western theological notion of God is probably closer to Plato’s Form of the Good (that’s Good with a capital G) than the white-bearded Jehovah/Zeus on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or the beardless Jesus/Apollo on the wall.

As Paul Davies has put it: “The very fact that the universe is creative, and that the laws have permitted complex structures to emerge and develop to the point of consciousness – in other words, that the universe has organized its own self-awareness – is for me powerful evidence that there is “something going on” behind it all. The impression of design is overwhelming” Note the use of “evidence” rather than “proof” in this quotation.

The shamans in ancient forests taught that “spirits” caused rocks to roll down a hill – until Newton said it was gravity. Priests taught that “God” created humans in his own image, until Darwin said evolution created us in the image of apes. And now we have this new breed of scientist-theologian arguing yet again that just because science cannot explain this, that, or the other thing, then we still have room for God.

We cannot explain why the constants of nature have the curious values they have, so maybe God made them so. We cannot explain the “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics,” so maybe God invented mathematics.

Maybe. But is this modern God of the gaps any more plausible than the God of the shamans and priests? Maybe one-day science will fill in these gaps without the premise of God.

Now that's a bit skeptical on the part of Victor Stenger writing for "Free Inquiry". However, as professor of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Hawaii, maybe he figures he's already found his heaven, or should I say, heavens.

Without implying we all have not found our heaven also, is there a perspective within which we can meld our demand for the rational and accommodate an occasional tickling of the amygdala to get a little bit of rapture – of course not so much that, as Mother said, we might go blind.

Teilhard de Chardin, the 19th century Catholic theologian, wrote: "God is that evolutionary force that keeps pushing life into more and more ordered forms, into higher and higher consciousness, that motion and movement toward life and love."

Process theology eloquently describes this active, growing God. The two fathers of process theology, Charles Harshorne and Alfred North Whitehead, both promoted their beliefs in the early and mid-20th century.

Modern process theology is an amalgamation of Christian theology, humanist philosophy, and scientific insights. From Christianity come the concept of God, the sacred, and holiness; from humanist philosophy comes the faith in the power of humanity to change our world for the better; and from science we gain the insights of the theories of relativity and evolution. But the main ingredient to process theology is human experience: our attempt to cope with suffering and death in a meaningful manner.

Process theology begins with the assumption that the world as we know it is a process, an ongoing event, rather than a collection of objects. All of existence is rushing along in the river of time and space, constantly moving, never stopping. And always in the process of becoming.

Like the Rappahannock from which our fellowship gets its name, it is the culmination of every stream, creek, and drop of rain that merges with it; each of us is a culmination of every event that has ever taken place in our lives and even before our lives. And God is the ocean in which all of our experiences are merged.

In every moment of your life you are becoming another person. This is the essence of process theology: Life is constantly changing from one form of being to another. Many of those changes we have no control over. But there are others we can control.

In this river of being, each of us is drawn irresistibly to choose life over death, joy over pain, and love over hate. Sometimes we make the wrong choice, but even in time of utmost despair there is something inside of us that yearns for life and joy and love.

The nitty-gritty of process theology is that it is creative. Although the force of entropy is pulling all of existence irresistibly toward the void of nothingness, there is another force that is eternally creating an incredible; amazing variety of beings and that urges every being toward evolution and growth.

God is no longer the unseen puppeteer controlling life while remaining aloof from it. We are God. All of us are a part of this new intimate divinity. When we change, God changes. Just as life is growing and evolving, so God is growing and evolving.

There's a creation story from the Jewish mystical tradition called the Kabbalah that is quite different from the Genesis story. It pictures a creation where there was God and nothing else. God desired to create something to relate to, but even the All-Powerful could not create a world out of nothingness. So the only thing God could use for the stuff of creation was God.

And so this divine Oneness fragmented itself, breaking into millions and millions of tiny pieces that rained down upon the earth. Each of these fragments became a living being: a plant, an animal, a human. And the purpose of each fragment of God now is to, by using our compassion and love, connect with one another and unite, knowing unconsciously that with each union God is re-created a little more. Perhaps that's the purpose of our lives: to sense our connection with one another so that we may re-create the sacred and divine in life.

Rev. McGee adds to this perspective: One of the most helpful metaphors for me to see divinity more clearly is the Great Cathedral of the World used by Forrest Church in the book "Our Chosen Faith". The Great Cathedral has a multitude of rooms with windows. In each room are the followers of a different religion or sect or denomination. Each group is

seeing the same light come through its window, but each one proclaims that its light is superior to all others.

The Great Cathedral is a Tower of Babel with everyone claiming sole possession of the truth while condemning others as outcasts. But as our own UU tradition reminds us, there is only one light that shines through every window.

We can call that light by any name – God or Allah or Nature or Humanity or Evolution – the name doesn't matter. What does matter is that you see the illumination of insight, you feel the warmth of compassion, and you are inspired by the revelation of truth.

As Huston Smith says in “The Religions of Man”, each of us is called to be a cosmic dancer, not grasping any belief too tightly but letting our minds and spirits learn and grow from a symphony of concepts.

I LIKE THAT

Closing: May all of us dance lightly and joyfully with the divinity we choose to believe in – or to reject. Let all the beliefs and believers be welcomed here. May this be a place to share our deepest convictions and grow them deeper and grander. And may we never stop dancing with the divine.