

# THE VOICE



Mennonite Brethren Bible College  
Quarterly

JANUARY, 1971

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MENNONITE BRETHREN BIBLE COLLEGE  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

# The Voice

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Vernon Ratzlaff

The Voice, founded in 1952, continues to serve its constituency each year by dealing with theological and church-related concerns and issues.

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## EDITORIAL COMMENTS

### THE GOD WHO ACTS

The Bible begins that way; our God is the creating, shaping, forming, directing God! Not a God in some corner of the universe contemplatively viewing the world from a distance, and dipping into history whenever He finds it necessary for His purposes. He sustains all life. He providentially rules over all. He is near every one of us for "in him we live and move and have our being."

Believers understand and experience God as the living, acting God. That is why knowing God always creates change and new direction in one's life. Pascal's moving experience is repeated over and over again in human history, even if not always as dramatically. He described that "fire in the night" in the following words:

God of Abraham, God of Isaak, God of Jacob  
not of philosophers and scholars  
certainty, certainty, feeling, joy, peace  
God of Jesus Christ.

He is not to be found except by ways taught in the Gospel  
grandeur of the human soul  
Just Father, the world has never known you but I have known  
you.

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.  
My God, will you abandon me!  
Jesus Christ  
Jesus Christ . . .

I was separated from Him, I fled Him, renounced Him  
crucified Him

May I never be separated from him  
reconciliation, sweet and complete!

Total submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.

Abraham through faith knew God as one who calls, commands, blesses, promises, and tries. Moses knew God as one who fulfills promises, hears the cry of believers, redeems with an outstretched arm, overcomes the powers of evil, creating a people for himself and sending them as a kingdom of priests into the world. Isaiah knew God as one who ruled from the throne, judging unfaithful Israel, calling the nations to assist his purposes, using Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus, the anointed, taking note of the forsaken exile and encouraging him to wait on God; planning for the Prince of Peace, the coming Messiah. God was always at work in history! He was and continues to be the God who acts.

The glory of the act of God in Jesus Christ is a new situation in our history. He came to give the blow of defeat to Satan and his kingdom of darkness in order to set free those who are captive. In these acts of life, death, resurrection and ascension he changed the course of human history. As Victor who paid the ransom price of redemption he sat down on the right hand of God—the place of power and authority. He was placed over princes and principalities, rulers and all powers. He is the Lamb who opens the scrolls to execute the purposes of God in history. He has broken the vicious circle of man's unrighteous decisions; he responds to the prayers of the saints; he enables them to be conquerors by the blood of the Lamb; all hell cannot triumph against his own for he made them into a kingdom.

Faith enables the believers to see what God has revealed about himself in the realities of history. Our glasses of faith need constant cleansing lest they become grimy with the non-Christian idea world which presses on us all. By faith—by clear sight (though not yet perfect)—given by the Lord of the universe, we can see what are the issues of life and death in the world; what the greatness of his power to us; what the glory of his task to which He has called us—the glory of the proclamation of the Good News, that the Christ who reconciled us to God lives, rules, and permits us to participate in his victory. By the indwelling of his Spirit he molds and shapes us, enabling us to be sensitive to God's commands.

It is faith in the Lamb, slain, who is now on the right hand of God, which needs to be at the center of our perspectives on life today. Christ changed the world's situation; Christ changed the course of history. The fact that he is Lord needs to become our frame of reference for thought and life. That fact is the most powerful incentive for confidence in our acts today. Because God acts, our acts are meaningful. We are confident in the plans and the deeds of believers because we believe in the reality of God's acts in Christ who will consummate history.

Victor Adrian

## HOW TO SEEK THE PRESENCE OF GOD DAILY

by John Regehr\*

Our topic may lead us quickly to seek a safe, reliable methodology, because most of us feel secure when we can assure ourselves that we are doing the right things in the right way. We tend hastily to retreat to the safety of ritual when the profundity or the complexity of the requirement baffles us.

To have an audience with God is a matter of extraordinary importance. If God is God indeed, then, of course, he is beyond our manipulation or cajoling. In our hearts we feel helpless, because we know that a God of infinite wisdom will not cater to my whim, nor hasten to my demand, nor accommodate himself to my comfortable patterns of life. He remains God—unfathomable, unsearchable, powerful, high and lifted up.

For this reason we find real comfort in devising a plan, a pattern, a ritual, by which we can assure ourselves that God will respond. We feel remarkably good when we know that we are doing precisely what must be done.

This paper, however, is not an attempt to arrive at some new and guaranteed methodology. Those who seek their salvation or a continued relationship with God merely through ritualistic procedure, must hear the words of judgment which the prophet shouted to the religious folk in Jerusalem centuries ago: "Who requires of you this trampling of my courts? Do you really think you will be heard because you are painstakingly performing all the prescribed practices?"

As God did then, so he now seeks the heart that seeks him. "You shall find me, when you shall seek for me with all your heart." Therefore, when we ask how we are to seek the presence of God, we are essentially asking a question about our hearts. He who seeks the presence of God, must have a set of heart which allows God to enter his experience and do his divine work. What is this set of heart?

**A. The heart that can expect to find God to be real is one that has a sense of personal need.** This sense of need will give our search for God a direction, a focus. Not the how of seeking is primary, but the why.

1. **Often our sense of need is not crystalized.** We suffer from a general sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. Life may lack direction, and the daily routine may seem to be a treadmill forever

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turning but going nowhere. Often the world in which we move feels like a vast wasteland with all its horizons obscured.

God is eager to meet this need, and his desire is matched on our part by an intuitive awareness that only God can fill the need. The need which disturbs us, drives us to God. This move to seek God is an act of faith, since faith is both an acknowledgment of our dependence on God and the conviction (at times a faltering conviction) that God can supply what the inner being craves. We seek God in the confidence that he will fill the emptiness, and will give meaning to what has become a mechanical existence.

The specific methodology is not important. Whether the search is in the morning or evening, whether we walk or kneel, whether we talk or sing, whether words are vocal or silent—these things are not crucial. What is crucial is that we communicate with God. There must be dialogue.

## **2. More often the need can be more precisely determined.**

There may be a specific sin—a deed, a word, an attitude, a neglect—which haunts us. We feel its weight, and pine under its destructive paralysis. Because we know that God is a merciful God, this condition drives us to seek him and to experience again the forgiveness he offers. The record is cleared and once more we know ourselves accepted.

Again it is not the procedural methodology that is important, but the genuine set of the heart to turn from the sin, to hate it, and to become victorious over it.

The sense of need may be related even more specifically to the functional aspects of our Christian service. In the life-work which God has given us to do, or in the isolated tasks he thrusts upon us, we may sense a very real inadequacy. Even if we have been specially fitted by endowment and training for a particular ministry, it is well for us to live on the farther borders of our ability. To be sure, a sense of assurance and firm identity is essential for effective work; yet there is a danger that we become too secure and self-confident. We prefer to function well within the borders of our skill. We find it more comfortable to accept tasks which we can perform with ease. But even in the work we are well able to do, we ought to function at the growing edges of our being and our ability.

We must keep probing into the new, the untried, the unknown. There must remain alive in us the urge for exploration and discovery. In this way we will retain a very real sense of dependence on God, and our openness will allow him to keep giving insight, direction, and skill.

You ask how you can seek the presence of God? One answer has just been given: Keep moving ahead in your work for God and on behalf of his Christ, and you will keep needing his presence. That need will keep you searching for him in his promises. His

presence is in his promises; the presence becomes real in their fulfillment. Therefore, do not shrink back from a task that creates a real need!

The need may emerge elsewhere. We need God, too, when we live on the borders of our endurance. Some of us have misunderstood, and have run amuck because we thought we were so special that we didn't require adequate sleep, relaxation, rest, and food. We cannot live beyond our endurance, at least not for long. The result of such pious stupidity is slipshod work, half-hearted involvement, or profound depression and perhaps physical collapse.

Yet for some of our brothers the danger is greater on the other side. They are so concerned about their physical and emotional well-being that they live well back of the threshold of exhaustion. They are so afraid of pressure from work-load that they never accept one assignment before the other is well forgotten.

Some of us fear emotional pressure like the plague. We refuse to work under any kind of authority, whether people or system. We keep our eyes shut selectively so that the distress of people will not oppress us unduly. We shun team-assignments or group enterprises because we do not wish to subject ourselves to the misunderstanding or the demands of colleagues.

If we are about the Lord's work at all, emotional draining is going on constantly. Distrust of capable but wary co-workers is difficult to live with. Misunderstanding of family and kin weighs heavily. The demands and ideals of the group are often burdensome. These emotional pressures drive us to seek God. We require clear vision to make judgments, keen insight to anticipate outcomes, sober discernment in choosing true values and in detecting unwholesome motivation. These needs God supplies.

It would appear, then, that one who wants God to meet his personal and functional needs is one who is not afraid to live neighbor to peril. He will face squarely the perplexing questions of his own existence, of life and death, of meaning and goals. He will live dangerously, too, in matters of Christian service and witness,—bold to enter new frontiers, to attempt new projects, to try his wings in new enterprises, approach new people, explore new possibilities. In all of these thrusts he is demonstrating a faith in God—dependence, obedience, trust, confidence. He will be living perpetually on the edge of discovery, with the constant need of being open to God for the adventure of living.

In terms of methodology, this discussion may be reduced to a single maxim: If you want to seek the presence of God, let your discipleship push you into situations where you must do so in order to survive.

What has been said appears to make the seeking of God a very pragmatic thing. We know that something is to be accom-

plished in us and achieved through our efforts; consequently, we seek God to ensure that the things that need to be done, will actually be effected.

Nor is this wrong. God is a God of action. His deed is his glory. If, then, in my concern for seeing a necessary thing accomplished, I seek God, I am in fact asking him to prove himself to be the God he declares himself to be. After all, God promised he would prove himself in his deeds. When Moses hesitated to get his task done, God revealed himself as the great "I Am," as the God who will prove himself in saving action again and again as his servant goes about the adventure of his task.

B. However, there are other motivations for seeking God. One who is driven to seek God at one time because of his sin or because of a feeling of inadequacy, may at another time be **driven to him by a deep love and devotion**. As a young lad calls his fiancée by phone just because he loves her and wants to have her voice near by, so a believer may have the simple need of spending time with one his heart loves, and the need of pouring out to him the sentiments of his soul. The soul that loves God will seek opportunity to speak with him and to listen to him.

Love may come to expression in gratitude. God responded when we sought him in a moment of need. He answered, and we found his presence to be real in the midst of our life routine. Therefore, we are driven back to him to express our thanks. This is the gratitude of love responding to the divine ministry of love.

Love and devotion also prompts us to seek God's presence so that we may acquire his attributes. When I was a young lad, the late C.F. Klassen made occasional visits to centres in which I lived. I held the brother in high esteem. He objectified for me the life of true Christian faith and commitment. After the meetings I would seek to move close to him. On one occasion I even approached him directly, took his hand and said, "I just want to look into your eyes." The wish to share his thought, his faith, his character, was a compulsion of my soul.

In much the same way the Christian seeks the presence of God, and yearns to look at Jesus Christ to find the depths of the heart of God. We want so much to be like him, to be fashioned into the image of Jesus Christ, to grow up into him. We clutch at the promise that we shall be satisfied when we awake in his likeness, that we shall be like him when we shall see him as he is. But already here we are driven into his presence so that something of what he is may become a part of us. We yearn to have our inner soul reflect his beauty.

It is clear that the one who is rather satisfied with himself will not seek the presence of God and the transforming experience it promises. The smug are not driven by a need to love and be loved. They are rather self-contained, and self-complete. But the

soul that knows its dependence and has drawn from the rich promises of God, will return in love to say thanks. The soul that knows its need for personal fulfillment and has come to know God as the great completer of our being, will seek to love and be loved by the one who in accepting our love ennobles us, and in loving us makes us whole.

C. There is another necessary state of heart. No one can seek God genuinely and not be **prepared for a shift in the status quo**. We take a risk when we seek God's presence, for, though God never changes, his presence frequently demands change. His will for us often requires change.

The encounter with God will probably bring to mind the age-old promises that God has given to his saints time and time again. These promises are sure, more firm than Gibraltar, as firm as God himself. But the already greatness of the promises is a good indication that they were given for people who are growing, moving forward, and encountering new demands and new obstacles. Promises are designed for progress.

If we are unwilling to engage in progress, we will find the presence of God to be a threat. If we resist new understandings, new undertakings, new directions, new responsibilities, we will find the encounter with God a very disturbing experience.

Could it be that some of us shun the presence of God because we want things to remain as they are. Things are really quite satisfactory, indeed pleasant. We are afraid God will unsettle us if we converse too much with him. So our religious life deteriorates to a hasty brushing with the Word, and the measured prayer of hurried castanets. We would like God to establish us in our comfort, but we are a little afraid that he has something else in mind. Therefore, we seek religious ritual rather than God himself.

If we would truly seek God, our heart must be willing to go where the encounter leads. Only he who is open to God's further instructions, is open to God; and any religious exercise not characterized by an openness to God, is stunted, wooden, dead.

D. As a concluding umbrella, let me point to one more essential set of the heart. Only he can honestly seek the presence of God who has **the confidence that God himself will draw near**.

There is a frenzied groping for reality which is not a seeking for God. Such groping may continue in the dark for long, painful years. There is a search for truth that is limited to a man's reason. Such a search may end either in despair or in arrogance. In either event it fails to encounter God.

Yet those who seek God may seek in confidence. God himself seeks the contrite and repentant heart; where the repentant and contrite seeks God, they will not miss each other. God seeks those who will allow themselves to be loved; where a heart hungry for

love seeks God, they will find each other. God seeks those whom he can direct into his service, whom he can thrust into others' lives for purposes of redemption; where one who wants to find God's way for him draws near to God, God will reveal himself and his will. God draws near to those who draw near to him. He never misses an appointment. He does not disappoint.

The presence of God will be the presence of his Word. The encounter with God is a person-to-person communication. God speaks, and listens. I speak, and listen. God speaks through His Spirit, and always in the Scriptures. I speak from a heart that knows its need, its love, its commitment. Such conversation makes God's presence a dynamic presence. Something happens.

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## GOD THE CREATOR

by David Ewert\*

The Old Testament writers never indulge in speculation about the *arche*, the origin of the world. "The doctrine of creation is not a speculative cosmogony but a confession of faith, of faith in God as Lord."<sup>1</sup> God's wisdom and skill in creation lead to wonder, awe and worship, not to rational comprehension. It is in this spirit that we approach the text of Genesis 1. The spirit of reverence and humility fundamentally distinguishes the man of faith from the flippant debater in the arena of ideas. The doctrine of creation speaks to the deepest concerns of human existence and so the creation story is not to be relegated to the field of astro-physics, for it speaks to man's life, here and now. If in the course of our interpretation some traditional conceptions should be questioned, the purpose shall always be to find the rock foundations; to lead to the confession, "I know whom I have believed" (2 Timothy 1:12).

In our study of Genesis 1:1-25 we shall, first of all, discuss the prologue to the hexameron (vv. 1 and 2); next, we shall make general remarks on the hexameron (vv. 3-25)—our two previous lectures were intended to resolve some of the basic problems of this passage and our task now is to be a bit more descriptive; finally, we shall take a look at some of the underlying theological meanings of this chapter, although most of these meanings will be alluded to in the description of hexameron.

### I. Before God's 'Yehi' ("let be")

#### A. An Unargued Cause ('Elohim').

Although the form of the noun Elohim is plural, the context forbids us to read it as a plural. A medieval Divine said wittily that the Devil was the first grammarian, for he taught men to give a plural to the word 'God.' Moreover, the singular of the verb *bara*' also makes it clear that the One who came to be known in Israel as the Yahweh of the covenant, is at the same time the Elohim of creation. To read the trinity into the plural is uncalled for.

The existence of God is nowhere proved in Scripture. Think

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of the audacity of puny man—a mere speck in God's universe—attempting to prove or to disprove the existence of God! In pagan mythology, where the gods create the world, we are always left asking: Who made the gods?<sup>3</sup> and so the genealogical lists get longer and longer. The fundamental ideal of paganism is that there is a realm of power to which the gods are also subject. This primordial realm may be described as chaos, darkness, water, spirit, earth, sky, or even as 'god.' But there is no divine will, sovereign and absolute, who is the ultimate 'Cause' of all. The mark of monotheism is not merely the concept of a god who is creator, but rather the idea that the creator is not subject to any cosmic power and not emergent from a pre-existent realm.

Our writer in no way taxes our gaze to see what might be the ultimate cause of all things. God is at the beginning of all things. Calvin tells of an old Christian man who was accosted by a sophisticated young fellow with the question: "What did God do before creation?" The old man gave for an answer: "He was creating hell for foolish questioners." The question of what is the ultimate origin of all things can be answered only by divine revelation. It lies outside the realm of human investigation.

To put Elohim, the unargued Cause, at the beginning of the record, is to put him apart from all that is created. He is transcendent; he is no part of creation. Implied is, too, that everything that exists is dependent on God, and that God alone gives meaning to everything that exists. To speak of God as Creator, then, is vastly more than to say that he manufactured the world. It means that you and I find our support in God, that he gives meaning to our life, and that our lives are to be lived under his sovereignty and lordship.

#### B. The Undefined Era (**bereshith**)

A rabbinic tale has it that all the letters of the alphabet begged God to create the world through it. All were refused until, finally, 'b' was given the honor, hence '**bereshith**,' "in the beginning." **Bereshith** refers to the absolute beginning of all created things, and although John 1:1 has **en arche**, as the LXX has in Genesis 1:1, the reference of the Gospel is not to the beginning spoken of in our text. It is gratuitous to ask when this beginning was, but it is important to remember that there was a beginning.

In the religion of some peoples, chaos stands at the beginning of all things; chaos is unfashioned matter. The world arises out of chaos because in it are seeds, or an egg, or a bud.<sup>2</sup> But in the Biblical account God stands 'in the beginning'. To say, "In the beginning God," corresponds to the prophetic expectation: "In the end God."<sup>3</sup> God is the Lord of time, of history; by putting God "in the beginning" the Biblical writer witnesses to the fact that history has meaning. The history of the world does not move in a

vast, meaningless circle, it began in God and we can rest assured it is going somewhere. Israel not only traced a historical line back to creation, it also looked forward to the day when the creator's purposes would be fulfilled.

#### C. An Inexplicable Reality (**bara eth hashamayim we eth ha aretz**).

**Bara** (created) is used some 55 times in the Old Testament, and denotes divine action. Whereas it means 'create' in our text, it may refer, also, to other sovereign acts of God in history (e.g. Exodus 34:10; Numbers 16:30). But always God is the subject when **bara** is used. The more common word is **asah** (2,600x), which is also used of man's making (**qanah**, **jatzar**, and **pa'al** are also used but less frequently). Although the doctrine of **creatio ex nihilo** was first formally asserted by Theophilus of Antioch, our author has it **en nuce**.<sup>4</sup> Though the word **bara** in itself does not necessarily teach **creatio ex nihilo**, since man, the stars, the people of Israel and miracles are also "created" by God, nevertheless, in Genesis 1:1 **creatio ex nihilo** is meant. In 1:21 for the creation of man in the image of God.<sup>5</sup> The question of whether God created mediately or immediately is hardly answered by the word **bara**. However, the writer makes it clear that all things have their beginning in God, and by using **bara** he confirms that there is no human analogy for what happened in creation.

Whereas oriental cosmogonies view creation as a struggle between opposing forces or gods, the Biblical faith affirms that the universe comes out of the hand of God. It is this insight which gives the man of faith confidence, for the God who made all things is also able to hold all things together and to keep them from reverting back into chaos. "He is before all things and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). The universe did not come into existence by chance, by blind groping of unconscious energies, some dark welter of lifeless matter, inexplicably evolving into life, but it came from God's hand. Although the universe in its vastness may at times be bewildering for man, yet by faith he knows that back of everything are the hands of God.<sup>6</sup> And, if God created it, he can also annihilate it. It exists only as long as God wills. Creation is a free divine act. This makes us very humble, but it also takes away all fear, for the God of creation has turned to us in benevolence.

The inexplicable reality is "the heavens and the earth." The Old Testament does not have a word for universe (as the Greek word **kosmos**—which, historically, suggests that background is left behind when **kosmos** is used in the Greek Bible). Hebrew man speaks of the universe in terms of "heavens and earth" or, simply, as "everything (**ha-kol**). 'Heavens' is always a plural, pointing to the heavenly spheres or regions which rise one above the other. The different parts of the universe are called heaven, earth, and

sea, in Exodus 20:11; heaven, earth and water under the earth, in Exodus 20:4; heaven, earth, sea and the deep, in Psalm 135:7; heaven, earth and underworld, in Job 11:8-9. Obviously for the Biblical writer the earth is the center of the universe, and so the account of creation is geocentric in orientation. He is interested primarily in that sphere in which redemption history is being written.

#### D. An Undefined Constitution (v. 2a).

This is expressed, first of all, by **tohu wabohu**, which both Speiser and von Rad, in their Genesis commentaries, take to be a hendiadys for "formless waste" (Speiser) or "das Gestaltlose" (von Rad). If taken independently, **tohu** suggests that the world has not yet been given form, and **bohu**, that it is still empty. The words seem to point in the direction in which creation will move: it will be shaped and formed and it will be filled. Although **tohu wabohu** may be reminiscent of the primeval matter of pagan cosmogonies, there is no recourse to this primeval stuff, but God creates **ex nihilo**. That certain creatures seem to arise out of primary substances (man, animal) is to stress their close relation with the earth.

Another way in which this undefined constitution is described is "darkness was upon the face of the deep." 'Darkness' and 'deep' (**tehom**, which is philologically related to Tiamat) are common terms in oriental cosmogonies, as is **mayim** (waters) in 2b. However, the similarity of words does not make the Biblical account derivative of Babylonian sources. What is indeed very significant is that the Biblical record does not even suggest a conflict between God and chaos or darkness or the waters. God is in complete control. For the man of faith, this absolute lordship of God over chaos, is the assurance of the Creator's power to keep the universe from returning to primeval chaos. He watches over chaos (Job 7-12), and if the waters lift themselves up he rebukes them and they flee (Psalm 77:16). Moment by moment the creation is supported solely by the will of the Creator.<sup>7</sup> "Therefore we will not fear though the earth change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult" (Psalm 46:2, 3). One cannot dismiss such biblical language as the expression of an outmoded cosmology.

#### E. An Unlimited Power (v. 2b)

**Ruach Elohim merachephet 'al pene ha-mayim.** **Ruach** means 'wind,' 'breeze,' 'breath,' and also 'spirit.' The appended **Elohim** can be either possessive ('of' or 'from' God) or adjectival (divine, supernatural, awesome). Von Rad renders it "Gottessturm," i.e., adjectival. It has been suggested that **ruach elohim** could possibly

refer to the strong activity of God. However, it may be possible to think of "the Spirit of God," also, but not on Luther's grounds; who had 'Wind' originally, but then changed it to 'Geist' because, he said, "Wind ist damals noch nicht gewesen." Regardless of how we render **ruach**, it is God at work. Just how to render **merachephet** is hard to say. Albright and Speiser, from their study of the Ugaritic, suggest the idea of 'sweeping' or 'soaring.' (The same stem is used in Deuteronomy 32:11 of eagles in relation to their young). Those who translate it 'brooding' run the risk of suggesting the idea of a cosmic egg which was hatched by the brooding Spirit, as by a bird, to produce the universe. Of course, even if the language should actually have this background, the idea is foreign to the text. B.W. Anderson, who sees mythological backgrounds in the language of our record, makes the important observation: "Mythological allusions have been torn out of their ancient context of polytheism and nature religion, and have acquired a completely new meaning within the historical syntax of Israel's faith. The pagan language survives only as poetic speech for the adoration of Yahweh, the Lord of history."<sup>8</sup>

The 'waters' are frequently seen as God's enemies in the Biblical language. But consistently the Biblical writers witness to God's lordship over the sea, and when in the consummation all enemies of God are put down, the writer of the Apocalypse adds: "The sea was no more." However, our text does not suggest a struggle between God and malignant forces. Over the deep, the waters, over what is waste and void, his Spirit moves creatively according to his holy purpose which nothing can turn aside. It is good to remember in a day when the sin of man threatens to turn our world into chaos, and where men live dangerously on the borderline of being and not being, that God's Spirit governs the created universe.

## II. The Hexameron (vv. 3-25)

### A. Creation by the Word of God

"And God said . . . and it was so" is the constant refrain which punctuates the drama of creation. The same thought is echoed by the Psalmist: "He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth" (Psalm 33:9). Creation by the Word expresses the free and spontaneous initiation by God, his sovereignty. God's word is not merely a sound or an idea but it is an act, an event, a command which accomplishes something. It is by the word that God establishes a relationship between himself and his creation. (It was also by the Word made flesh that God came "unto his own" in Jesus Christ, John 1.) Not only does he create by his word but he also bears up everything by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:3). "God's freedom in the creation of the world is the



primary message in passages where God is said to create 'by his word'."<sup>9</sup> Creation by a divine word is found also in other oriental cosmogonies, but in these myths the word is a magic word, when word is not merely a sound or an idea but it is an act, an event, a command which accomplishes something. It is by the word that God establishes a relationship between himself and his creation. the correct formula is used, the power to bring order out of the chaos is released. In Genesis, however, the word of God is the expression of his will. (There appears to be a slight change in emphasis as we move from Genesis 1—where creation by the 'word' is stressed—to creation by 'acts,' as we have it in Genesis 2.)

#### B. The Creative Acts of God.

By eight acts of creation the universe is fashioned in six days. The first three days are devoted to the work of separation (he made light and distinguished between day and night; he made the firmament and distinguished between the upper and lower waters; he distinguished water from land and made the plants). The second triad shows how these localities prepared by such a separation were adorned and filled. There is obviously an equation between day one and four (light and luminaries), between day two and five (firmament and air/water), between day three and six (land/plants and animals/man). Perhaps the first three days are an answer to **tohu** (formlessness) and the second triad an answer to **bohu** (emptiness).

Graphically presented, the picture would look like this:

|         | Formlessness ( <b>tohu</b> ) |        | Emptiness ( <b>bohu</b> ) |
|---------|------------------------------|--------|---------------------------|
| Day I   | Light                        | Day IV | Luminaries                |
| Day II  | Raqia'                       | Day V  | Air: Birds                |
|         |                              |        | Water: Fishes             |
| Day III | Land                         | Day VI | Animals                   |
|         | Plants                       |        | Man                       |

A few general remarks should now be made about the creative acts of God which are here distributed by our writer over six days. Should someone see a correspondence between this record and the modern scientific knowledge he should bear in mind that the primary intention of the author is to set forth the conviction that the universe has its origin solely in the will of God. When, for example, the creation of light is reported before the creation of sun, moon, and stars, our author seems to say to us, that for the enjoyment of light man is dependent not on the heavenly bodies but on God. (In the New Jerusalem there is no need for the sun or the moon, Revelation 21:23.) Moreover, in a day when men's lives were determined by the planets, when the world was enslaved to astrology, the Biblical writer knew what he was saying when he put the **or** before the **me'orim**. The lamps merely transmit

the light God created, they are cosmic stewards, are trustees of light. And, to make an application, in the words of Thielicke, the believer's life does not depend on black cats, lucky numbers, charms and nocturnal dreams, but on God (in "When the World Began"). To darkness, also, God gave a name and place, which means that he exercises dominion over that realm as well—a realm which is commonly the realm of terror and misery.

By creating the **raqia'**, "das Breitgeschlagene," "das Festgestampfte," Greek **stereoma**, Latin, **firmamentum**, on the second day, man is assured for the firmness of God's created order. The **raqia'** keeps the waters above and those below separated, man can therefore, live with confidence in his Creator, who keeps the universe from reverting to chaos. (When God judged the earth by the Deluge the waters above and those below flowed together; there was chaos.) The **raqia'**, i.e., "something made solid," is an important element in Israel's faith, as can be seen by comparing it with oriental cosmogony. Since creation is frequently viewed in terms of a primordial battle between divine powers, it was required of man to perform certain rituals to repeat the mythological drama in order to be sure of the status quo of the universe. But in our account the firmament is called into being by divine fiat, and man can live without fear.

That plants should be created before the sun presents no problem to our writer, since for him the sun is a dispensable instrument in the hand of God. That they should be there before man appears, is a reminder for man that God cares for him; he prepared for his needs even before he made him. And whereas in the ancient fertility rites man tried to gain control of nature in order to secure his existence, our writer assures us that God has put fertility into the earth; has put the ability to reproduce into herbs and trees. That they produce "after their kind" would suggest that there are divinely graded levels of life; and this applies to the animal world, as well. Zimmerlie, in his Genesis commentary (**Prophezei**), points out that the stories of primeval antiquity current among other nations mention "mixed beings, demonic demi-creatures, and hybrids" (p. 54), but our account witnesses to the great truth that the God of Creation is a God of order (I Corinthians 14:33). When Israel is forbidden to cross-breed, to sow the field with two kinds of seed (Leviticus 19:19), and also when men and women are not to wear clothing that looks alike, it is very likely, for the purpose of teaching God's people a deep respect for the Creator, who created creatures which are different from each other. Such prohibitions would hardly be used against scientific research in cross-breeding and cross-fertilization, but a respect for the difference between sexes is suggested. The Creator is dishonored when men become feminine and women masculine (cf. I Corinthians 11).

First to be populated by "living creatures" are those regions which are distant and strange to man. "Where man thinks he sees the open jaws of death, precisely there God causes animals to swarm and fly."<sup>10</sup> And whereas the sea monsters (Leviathan, cf. Psalm 104:26) are usually viewed as man's great enemies, here it is stated that God created the tanninim, and to them, also, is applied: "God saw that it was good," meaning of course, that God is in complete control of all his creation; man has nothing to fear. That animals should be designated as nephesh chayyah (1:24), in the same way that man is (cf. 2:7 where God gives man the "breath of life"; that the plural of 'life' is used in 2:7 is of no great consequence, for in 7:22 the plural is used of animals), should not surprise us. Both man and animals depend on God for their life. The fact that man breathes, eats, procreates like animals does not make man merely a subject of a chapter in a zoology text-book. If there is anything that is stressed at all, in our account regarding man's relation to the animal world, it is his uniqueness.

### C. The Hebrew Weltbild.

Before we make any further theological observations on our chapter, we should get the Hebrew Weltbild before our minds. Quite naturally the Biblical writers describe the universe in terms of three stories. The earth is like a saucer surrounded by water and resting on water, or better, resting on pillars sunk in the waters of the deep. These pillars are the hills (Psalm 46:3). From the 'lower waters' arise springs and rivers; above the earth and its surrounding sea is the vault of the firmament which also rests on pillars, in this case upon the mountains at the rim of the earth. Above the firmament is more water; the firmament has doors and windows; if these open, it rains. Above the heavenly ocean God dwells as in a balcony (Psalm 194:3, 13); this is the 'highest heaven.' The underworld is located in the depths of the sea or the deepest part of the earth.

Surely such cosmology cannot be written off as outmoded. It is a meaningful description of an observer who lives in a pre-scientific age, and it has relevance, also, for a scientific age. I think we will agree, that if we leave aside the 'science versus Genesis' standpoint, the message of this account is certainly profound.

### III. Theological Implications of the Creation Record

Although the theological implications of our record are too numerous to mention here, and although we have already made casual theological observations throughout this lecture, in conclusion we intend to life up a few of the more basic teachings of our text for special observation.

#### A. The Transcendence of God.

Throughout the record the distance between God and his creation is reverently stressed. God is not part of this cosmos. The world did not emanate from God by a natural process; it is not identical with him in nature (as in Pantheism). He existed prior to this world. All nature worship is ruled out; God alone must be worshipped.

In this respect the God of the Bible and the gods of paganism are vastly different. Since in paganism the gods originate in the 'world stuff' there is no fixed boundary between them and the world of men and other creatures. Thus we find no clear-cut distinction between worship of nature and the worship of the gods of nature. But in the Biblical account the gulf between God and his creation is clearly marked out.

#### B. The Sovereignty and Lordship of God.

He who gives the name to a person or thing is the lord over it, and that is what our text means when it speaks of God giving names to light, darkness, etc. He who sets the boundaries of sea and land is the lord over chaos. God is almighty and omniscient. He creates and sustains the universe without effort. All polytheism is ruled out; there is only one God. In Biblical thought, the regularities of nature are not expressions of 'natural laws' but of the sustaining power of God. In pagan theogonies the gods are part of the processes of time. The Biblical God, however, is outside of the flux of becoming or of change; he controls times and sets seasons. To say that God made the earth means that all belongs to him, and this calls for adoration, trust and obedience.

#### C. Every Creature Has a Place in God's Plan.

By assigning a specific role to every creature, by calling each creature by name, he assures us that we have a place in this universe. Every creature, the heavenly bodies included, is God's servant; carries out a God-given function. Particularly is this true of man, who is given a special dignity. (Note, he gives names to the animals.) Dr. Tournier tells of a French girl who grew up in a secular environment and who suddenly got the bright idea that everything in a person's life was meaningful only if it were related to the meaning of the world as a whole. But what was the meaning of the universe? Finally someone told her that she could get the answer in the Bible. That the universe had a beginning, suggests that there is also an end; history is going somewhere. If this were not so, life would indeed become a senseless merry-go-round.

#### D. "He Has Done All Things Well."

Repeatedly our author confesses that what God did was good, and, finally, in 1:31 he exclaims, that it was **tob meod** (very

good). In dualistic cosmogonies the world is bad, but in the Bible it is good. Perhaps *to*b is used more in a teleological sense than the aesthetic, but certainly the Biblical writers had an eye for the beauty of God's handiwork, as well, and it is only when men's hearts rebel against God that their eyes are closed to the wonders of God in nature. It may be that *to*b simply expresses the creator's satisfaction with his creation; he acknowledged what he had created as his own. The Genesis writer, in chapter 3, wants us to understand that the world as it came forth from the hand of God and the world as you and I know it, under sin, are separated by an iron curtain; and that the groaning of creation—pain, death, and tears—is also to be heard in 'the music of the spheres.'

#### E. The Doctrine of Providence

Our text teaches us that all creatures are completely dependent on God, and that God graciously sustains them and cares for them. "The hand that beckoned the stars and the flowers at the world's dawning and made the day and the night, has also fashioned my life and guides it. If he knows that the plants need rain and animals need food, he will also know the needs of the Queen of England, the orphan in the children's home, the aged pensioner. If a thousand years are a yesterday then the tiny stretches of my daily journey, for which I ask his blessing, are just as important as the light years that measure the reaches of cosmic space."<sup>11</sup>

"Der Wolken, Luft und Winden, gibt Wege, Lauf und Bahn,  
Der wird auch Wege finden, da dein Fuss gehen kann."

1. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, p. 15.
2. Foerster, "ktizo" in *TWNT.*, trans. Bromiley, III, p. 1003.
3. B. W. Anderson, "Creation" in *Interpreters Bible*, I, p. 730.
4. Pelikan, *Creation and Causality*, p. 34 — but see 2 Maccabees 7:28, *ex ouk auton epoiesen auta ho theos*.
5. Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 147.
6. *Interpreter's Bible*, I, p. 468.
7. B. W. Anderson, *Interpretation*, 1955, "The Earth is the Lord's," p. 13.
8. "Creation," *Interpreter's Dictionary*, I, p. 726.
9. Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 149.
10. Barth in *KD III/I* p. 189.
11. Thielicke, *When the World Began*.

## GOD IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

by Vern Ratzlaff\*

(This paper is heavily indebted to Huston Smith's concepts embodied in his *The Revolution in Western Thought*. Although it was published in the late '50's, recent developments in theoretical physics and trends in literature have only substantiated his major thesis: that the concept of order has disappeared from western man's articulated consciousness.)

Quietly, irrevocably, something enormous has happened to Western man. His outlook on life and the world has changed so radically that in the perspective of history the twentieth century is likely to rank—with the fourth century, which witnessed the triumph of Christianity, and the seventeenth, which signaled the dawn of modern science—as one of the very few that have instigated genuinely new epochs in human thought. In this change, which is still in process, we of the current generation are playing a crucial but as yet not widely recognized part.

The dominant assumptions of an age color the thoughts, beliefs, expectations and imaginings of the men and women who live within it. Being always with us, these assumptions usually pass unnoticed—like the pair of glasses which, because they are so often on the wearer's nose, simply stop being observed. But this doesn't mean they have no effect. Ultimately the assumptions which underlie our outlooks on life refract the world in ways that condition our art and our institutions: the kinds of homes we live in, our sense of right and wrong, our criteria of success, what we conceive our duty to be, what we think it means to be a man, how we worship our God or whether, indeed, we have a God to worship.

Thus far the odyssey of Western man has carried him through three great configurations of such basic assumptions. The first constituted the Graeco-Roman, or Classical, outlook, which flourished up to the fourth century A.D. With the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire, this Graeco-Roman outlook was replaced by the Christian world view which proceeded to dominate Europe until the seventeenth century. The rise of modern science inaugurated a third important way of looking at

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things, a way that has come to be capsuled in the phrase "the modern mind."

It now appears that this modern outlook, too, has run its course and is being replaced by what Dirk Jellema of Case Institute and others have begun to speak of as the Post-Modern Mind. What follows is an attempt to describe this most recent sea change in Western thought. I shall begin by bringing the Christian and modern outlooks into focus, for only so can we see how and to what extent our emerging thought patterns differ from those that have directly preceded them.

From the fourth-century triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, the Western mind was above all else theistic. "God, God, God; nothing but God"—in the twentieth century one can assume such an exclamation to have come, as it did, from a theologian. In the Middle Ages it could have come from anyone. Virtually without question, all life and nature were assumed to be under the surveillance of a personal God whose intentions toward man were perfect and whose power to implement these intentions was unlimited.

In such a world, life was transparently meaningful. But although men understood the purpose of their lives, it does not follow that they understood, or even presumed to be capable of understanding, the dynamics of the natural world. The Bible never expands the doctrine of creation into a cosmogony for the excellent reason that it asserts the universe to be at every point the direct product of a will whose ways are not man's ways. God says: "Let there be"—and there is. That is all. Serene in a blaze of lasting light, God comprehends nature's ways, but man sees only its surface.

Christian man lived in the world as a child lives in his father's house, accepting its construction and economics unprobed. "Can anyone understand the thunderings of God's pavilion?" Elihu asks Job. "Do you know the ordinances of the heavens, how the clouds are balanced or the lightning shines? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth, or on what its bases were sunk when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" To such rhetorical questions the answer seemed obvious. The leviathan of nature was not to be drawn from the great sea of mystery by the fishhook of man's paltry mind.

Not until the high Middle Ages was a Christian cosmology attempted, and then through Greek rather than Biblical inspiration, following the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. Meanwhile nature's obscurity posed no major problem; as the cosmos was in good hands, it could be counted on to furnish a reliable context in which man might work out his salvation. The way to this salvation lay not through ordering nature to man's

purposes but through aligning man's purposes to God's. And for this objective, information was at hand. As surely as God had kept the secrets of nature to Himself, He had, through His divine Word and the teachings of His church, made man's duty clear. Those who hearkened to this duty would reap an eternal reward, but those who refused to do so would perish.

We can summarize the chief assumption underlying the Christian outlook by saying they held that reality focuses in a person, that the mechanics of the physical world exceed our comprehension, and that the way to our salvation lies not in conquering nature but in following the commandments which God has revealed to us.

It was the second of these three assumptions—that the dynamics of nature exceed man's comprehension—which the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began to question, thereby heralding the transition from the Christian to the modern outlook. The Renaissance interest in the early Greeks revived the Hellenic interest in nature. For the first time in nearly 2000 years Western man began to look intently at his environment instead of beyond it. Leonardo da Vinci is symbolic. His anatomical studies and drawings in general disclose a direction of interest that has turned eye into camera, in his case an extraordinary camera that "could stop the hawk in flight and fix the rearing horse." Once again man was attending to nature's details as a potential messenger of meaning. The rage to know God's handiwork was rivaling the rage to know God Himself.

The consequence, as we know, was modern science. Under scrutiny, nature's blur was found to be more apparent than final. With patience the structure of the universe could be brought into marvelous focus. Newton's exclamation caught the excitement perfectly: "O God, I think thy thoughts after thee!" Although nature's marvels were infinitely greater than had been supposed, man's mind was equal to them. The universe was a coherent, law-abiding system. It was intelligible!

It was not long before this discovery began to reap practical rewards. Drudgery could be relieved, health improved, goods multiplied and leisure extended. As these benefits are considerable, working with intelligible nature began to over-shadow obedience to God's will as a means to human fulfillment. God was not entirely eclipsed—that would have entailed a break with the past more violent than history usually allows. Rather, God was eased toward thought's periphery. Not atheism but deism, the notion that God created the world but left it to run according to its own inbuilt laws, was the modern mind's distinctive religious stance. God stood behind nature as its creator, but it was through nature that His ways and will were to be known.

Like the Christian outlook, the modern outlook can be

summarized by identifying its three controlling presuppositions. First, that reality may be personal is less certain and less important than that it is ordered. Second, man's reason is capable of discerning this order as it manifests itself in the laws of nature. Third, the path to human fulfillment consists primarily in discovering these laws, utilizing them where this is possible and complying with them where it is not.

The reason for suspecting that this modern outlook has had its day and is yielding to a third great mutation in Western thought is that reflective men are no longer confident of any of these three postulates. The first two are the ones that concern us here. Frontier thinkers are no longer sure that reality is ordered and orderly. Ayn Rand makes a desperate attempt in *Atlas Shrugged* to claim such coherency, but it is an attempt which she is incapable of substantiating by her categories of rationality. Perhaps the deepest awareness of this dilemma is expressed by Whitehead when he points to the impossibility of demonstrating the validity of the inductive methodology (*Science and the Modern World*). In fact, the difference between the modern and post-modern ages may lie exactly in this: the modern age accepted unquestioningly the inductive approach to "truth"; the post-modern age has become aware of the presuppositional basis of such an acceptance.

Even if reality is ordered and orderly, many are no longer sure that man's mind is capable of grasping its order. Combining the two doubts, we can define the Post-Modern Mind as one which, having lost the conviction that reality is personal, has come to question whether it is ordered in a way that man's reason can lay bare.

It was science which induced our fore-fathers to think of reality as primarily ordered rather than personal. But contemporary science has crashed through the cosmology which the seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century scientists constructed as if through a sound barrier, leaving us without replacement. It is tempting to attribute this lack to the fact that evidence is pouring in faster than we can throw it into perspective, but although this is part of the problem another part runs deeper. Basically the absence of a new cosmology is due to the fact that physics has cut away so radically from our capacity to imagine the way things are that we do not see how the two can get back together.

If modern physics showed us a world at odds without senses, post-modern physics is showing us one which is at odds with our imagination, where imagination is taken as imagery. We have made peace with the first of these oddities. That the table which appears motionless is in fact incredibly "alive" with electrons circling their nuclei a million billion times per second; that the chair which feels so secure beneath us is actually a near vacuum—such facts, while certainly very strange, posed no permanent problem for man's

sense of order. To accommodate them, all that was necessary was to replace the earlier picture of a gross and ponderous world with a subtle world in which all was sprightly dance and airy whirl, as Eddington does in his *The Nature of the Physical Universe*.

But the problems the new physics poses for man's sense of order cannot be resolved by refinements in scale. Instead they appear to point to a radical disjunction between the way things behave and every possible way in which we might try to visualize them. How, for example, are we to picture an electron travelling two or more different routes through space concurrently or passing from orbit to orbit without traversing the space between them at all? What kind of model can we construct of a space that is finite yet unbounded, or of light which is both wave and particle? It is such enigmas which are causing physicists like P.W. Bridgman of Harvard to suggest that "the structure of nature may eventually be such that our processes of thought do not correspond to it sufficiently to permit us to think about it at all . . . . The world fades out and eludes us . . . . We are confronted with something truly ineffable. We have reached the limit of the vision of the great pioneers of science, the vision, namely, that we live in a sympathetic world in that it is comprehensible by our minds."

This subdued and problematic stance of science toward reality is paralleled in philosophy. No one who works in philosophy today can fail to realize that the sense of the cosmos has been shaken by an encyclopedic skepticism. The clearest evidence of this is the collapse of what historically has been philosophy's central discipline: objective metaphysics, the attempt to discover what reality consists of and the most general principles which describe the way its parts are related. In this respect the late Alfred North Whitehead marked the end of an era. His *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* is the last important attempt to construct a logical, coherent scheme of ideas that would blueprint the universe. The trend throughout the twentieth century has been away from faith in the feasibility of such undertakings. As a tendency throughout philosophy as a whole, this is a revolutionary development. For 2500 years philosophers have argued over which metaphysical system is true. For them to agree that none is, is a new departure.

Equal but quite different objections to metaphysics have come from the existentialists who have dominated twentieth-century European philosophy. Heirs of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoevski, these philosophers have been concerned to remind their colleagues of what it means to be a human being. When we are thus reminded, they say, we see that to be human precludes in principle the kind of objective and impartial overview of things—the view of things as they are in themselves, apart from our differing perspectives—that metaphysics has always sought. To be

human is to be finite, conditioned and unique. No two persons have had their lives shaped by the same concatenation of genetic, cultural, historical and interpersonal forces. Either these variables are inconsequential—but if we say this we are forgetting again what it means to be human, for our humanity is in fact overwhelmingly shaped by them—or the hope of rising to a God's-eye view of reality is misguided in principle.

Despite the existentialist's sharp rebuke to metaphysics and traditional philosophy in general, there is at least one important point at which he respects their aims. He agrees that it is important to transcend what is accidental and ephemeral in our outlooks and in his own way joins his colleagues of the past in attempting to do so. But the existentialist's way toward this goal does not consist in trying to climb out of his skin in order to rise to Olympian heights from which things can be seen with complete objectivity and detachment. Rather it consists in centering down on his own inwardness until he finds within it what he is compelled to accept and can never get away from. In this way he, too, arrives at what he judges to be necessary and eternal. But necessary and eternal for him. What is necessary and eternal for everyone is so impossible for a man to know that he wastes time making the attempt.

Turning from philosophy to theology, we recall that the modern mind did not rule out the possibility of God; it merely referred the question to its highest court of appeal—namely, reality's pattern as disclosed by reason. If the world order entails the notions of providence and a creator, God exists—otherwise not. This approach made the attempt to prove God's existence through reason and nature the major theological thrust of the modern period. "Let us," wrote Bishop Joseph Buttler in his famous **The Analogy of Religion**, "compare the known constitution and course of things . . . with what religion teaches us to believe and expect; and see whether they are not analogous and of a piece . . . . It will, I think, be found that they are very much so." An enterprising Franciscan named Ramon Lull went even further. He invented a kind of primitive computer which, with the turning of cranks, pulling of levers and revolving of wheels, would sort the theological subjects and predicates fed into it in such a way as to demonstrate the truths of the Trinity and the Incarnation by force of sheer logic working on self-evident propositions. Rationalism had entered theology as early as the Middle Ages, but as long as the Christian outlook prevailed, final confidence was reserved for the direct pronouncements of God Himself as given in Scripture. In the modern period, God's existence came to stand or fall on whether reason, surveying the order of nature, endorsed it. It was as if Christendom and God himself awaited the verdict of science and the philosophers.

This hardly describes the current theological situation. Scientists and philosophers have ceased to issue pronouncements of any sort about ultimates. Post-modern theology builds on its own foundations, Instead of attempting to justify faith by appeals to the objective world, it points out that as such appeals indicate nothing about reality one way or the other, the way is wide open for free decisions—or what Kierkegaard called the leap of faith. One hears little these days of the proofs for the existence of God which seemed so important to the modern world. Instead one hears repeated insistence that however admirably reason is fitted to deal with life's practical problems, it can only end with a confession of ignorance when confronted with questions of ultimate concern. In the famous dictum of Karl Barth, who has influenced twentieth-century theology more than anyone else, there is no straight line from the mind of man to God. "What we say breaks apart constantly . . . producing paradoxes which are held together in seeming unity only by agile and arduous running to and fro on our part." From our own shores Reinhold Niebuhr echoes this conviction. "Life is full of contradictions and incongruities. We live our lives in various realms of meaning which do not cohere rationally."

Instead of "These are the compelling reasons, grounded in the nature of things, why you should believe in God," the approach of the church to the world today tends to be, "This community of faith invites you to share in its venture of trust and commitment." The stance is most evident in Protestant and Orthodox Christianity and Judaism, but even Roman Catholic thought, notwithstanding the powerful rationalism it took over from the Greeks, has not remained untouched by the post-modern perspective. It has become more attentive to the extent to which personal and subjective factors provide the disposition to faith without which theological arguments prove nothing.

It is difficult to assess the mood which accompanies this theological revolution. On one hand there seems to be a heightened sense of faith's precariousness: as Jesus walked on the water, so must the contemporary man of faith walk on the sea of nothingness, confident even in the absence of rational supports. But vigor is present too. Having labored in the shadow of rationalism during the modern period, contemporary theology is capitalizing on its restored autonomy. Compensating for loss of rational proofs for God's existence have come two gains. One is new realization of the validity of Pascal's "reasons of the heart" as distinct from those of the mind. The other is a recovery of the awe without which religion, as distinct from ethical philosophy piously expressed, is probably impossible. By including God within a closed system of rational explanation, modernism lost sight of the endless qualitative distinction between God and man. Post-modern theology has rein-



stated this distinction with great force. If God exists, the fact that our minds cannot begin to comprehend his nature makes it necessary for us to acknowledge that he is Wholly Other.

These revolutions in science, philosophy and theology have not left the arts unaffected. The worlds of the major twentieth-century artists are many and varied, but none resembles the eighteenth-century world where mysteries seemed to be clearing by the hour. The twentieth-century worlds defy lucid and coherent exegesis. Paradoxical, devoid of sense, they are worlds into which protagonists are thrown without trace as to why—the world which the late French novelist Albert Camus proclaimed “absurd,” which for his compatriot Jean-Paul Sartre is “too much,” and for the Irish dramatist and short-story writer, Samuel Beckett, is a “void” in which men wait out their lives for a what-they-know-not that never comes (as in his *Waiting for Godot*). Heroes driven by a veritable obsession to find out where they are and what their responsibility is, seldom succeeded. Most of Franz Kafka is ambiguous, but his parable, *Before the Law*, closes with as clear a countermand to the modern vision of an ordered reality as can be imagined. “The world-order is based on a lie.”

To the extent that the novelist stands as both mirror and judge of his society, to that extent the emphasis on lack of order (order which for the modern mind obtained in God) is highly significant. If we keep in mind that one of the most persuasive formulators of public opinion and social mores remains the widely disseminated paperback, then the role of the best seller cannot be over-emphasized; whether a given book can be dismissed as non-literature misses the point—it is being read and with a cumulative effect influencing (consciously or subconsciously) the thought pattern of the public.

It is striking to note the attention given in contemporary novels to the notion of God. While for some he is virtually ignored, for others he stands in the background as the malevolent bringer of death and final retribution. Even where he has no personal bearing, he crowds into the consciousness of the actors. In John Updike's *Couples*, Piet “believed that there was, behind the screen of couples and houses and days, a Calvinist God who lifts us up and casts us down in utter freedom, without recourse to our prayers or consultation with our wills.” It is a God who is simply identified as “Big Man Death. I smell Him between people's teeth every day.” It is a God who “doesn't love us any more. He loves Russia. He loves Uganda. We're fat and full of pimples and always whining for more candy. We've fallen from grace.” It is a God who haunts, but who has no meaning, who can be referred to as “Allah,” but who makes no difference for the expression of society's values. God, the modern novelist's keystone in the moral cosmological architecture, can be talked about with the same de-

tachment as Woden and Zeus. For Günter Grass, a Good Friday celebration is the jaunt to the seashore (in the *Tin Drum*); complacent society, saturated with whip cream, would take pictures if Christ were crucified on Kurfuerstendamm, and push to get into the front rows (*Local Anaesthetic*).

Particularly of interest is the concept of God which emerges in some of the Jewish novellists, e.g. Philip Roth in *Portroy's Complaint*, God is someone prayed to.” even though I didn't believe him to be there”; the identification of God with a people is repudiated—“Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already the saga of the suffering Jews . . . I happen also to be a human being!”

Spilling over in this is a view of the religious shaman, the priest or minister. In Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, the minister Eccles emerges as one who knows God only at third-hand. And although Eccles is the only one in the book who believes Rabbit to be worth saving, there is no substance beyond the weekly golfing game. The minister is the shadowy servant of a shadowy god. Neither does Rabbi Warshaw emerge with a better image in *Portroy's Complaint*. For him, serving God is “uttering beautiful banalities to people scared out of their wits”; he is “a fat, pompous, impatient fraud, with an absolutely grotesque superiority complex; the synagogue is how he earns his living and that's all there is to it. Coming to the hospital to be brilliant about life . . . to people who are shaking in their pajamas about death is his business.” And so the objective personal reality of the modern man—God—has become passe. The tragedy is, Merrill Abbey points out, that God is not so much denied as ignored.

And objective morality has gone the way of cosmic order. Even where it has not been moralistic, most Western art of the past has been created against the backdrop of a frame of objective values which the artist shared. As our century has progressed, it has become increasingly difficult to find such a framework standing back of the arts.

A single example will illustrate the point. One searches in vain for an artistic frame of reference prior to the twentieth century in which matricide might be regarded as a moral act. Yet in Sartre's paly *The Flies*, it is the first authentic deed Orestes performs. Whereas his previous actions have been detached, unthinking or in conformity with the habit patterns that surround him, this one is freely chosen in the light of full self-consciousness and acceptance of its consequences. As such, it is the first act which is genuinely his. “I have done my deed, Electra,” he exults, adding, “and that deed was good.” Being his, the deed supplies his life with the identity which until then it had lacked. From that moment forward, Orestes ceases to be a free-floating form; his acquisition of a past he can never escape roots his life

into reality. Note the extent to which this analysis relativizes the moral standard. No act is right or wrong in itself. Everything depends on its relation to the agent, whether it is chosen freely and with full acceptance of its consequences or is done abstractedly, in imitation of the acts of others, or in self-deception.

We move beyond morality into art proper when we note that the traditional distinction between the sublime and the banal, too, has blurred. As long as reality was conceived as a great chain of being—a hierarchy of worth descending from God as its crown through angels, men, animals and plants to inanimate objects, at the base—it could be reasonably argued that great art should attend to great subjects: scenes from the Gospels, major battles or distinguished lords and ladies. With cubism and surrealism, the distinction between trivial and important disappears. Alarm clocks, driftwood, pieces of broken glass become appropriate subjects for the most monumental paintings. In Samuel Beckett and the contemporary French anti-novelists the most mundane items—miscellaneous contents of a pocket, a wastebasket, the random excursions of a runaway dog—are treated with the same care as love, duty or the question of human destiny.

One is tempted to push the question a final step and ask whether the dissolution of cosmic order, moral order and the hierarchic order of subject matter is reflected in the very forms of contemporary art. Critic Russel Nye thinks that at least as far as the twentieth-century novel is concerned, the answer is yes. "If there is a discernible trend in the form of the modern novel," he writes, "it is toward the concept of the novel as a series of moments, rather than as a planned progression of events or incidents, moving toward a defined terminal end. Recent novelists tend to explore rather than arrange or synthesize their materials; often their arrangement is random rather than sequential. In the older tradition, a novel was a formal structure composed of actions and reactions which were finished by the end of the story, which did have an end. The modern novel often has no such finality. In fact, a recent "novel" consisted of 270 printed loose-leaf pages, which could be "arranged" at will and read in any "order"—what order didn't matter. It was an attempt to demonstrate the dismembered nature of life. After all, Paul Weiss asks, what is order? Any sequence of events constitutes an "order" of some kind; the real question is to ask, "What constitutes chaos? disorder?"

In music, Aaron Copland characterizes the music of some of our young composers as a "disrelation of unrelated tones. Notes are strewn about like *membra disjecta*; there is an end to continuity in the old sense and an end of thematic relationships."

When Nietzsche's eyesight became too poor to read books, Smith tellingly observes, he began at last to read himself. The act was prophetic of the century that has followed. As reality has

blurred, the gaze of post-modern man has turned increasingly upon himself.

Even theology, for all its renewed theocentrism, keeps one eye steadily on man, as when the German theologian Rudolph Bultmann relates faith to the achievement of authentic selfhood. It is in art, however, that the shift from outer to inner has been most evident. If the twentieth century began by abolishing the distinction between sublime and banal subject matter, it has gone on to dispense with subject matter altogether. Although the tide may have begun to turn, the purest art is still widely felt to be entirely abstract and free of pictorial representation. It is as if the artist had taken the scientist seriously and responded, "If what I see as nature doesn't represent the way things really are, why should I credit this appearance with its former importance? Better to turn to what I am sure of: my own intuitions and the purely formal values inherent in the relations of colors, shapes and masses."

Huston Smith argues that the distinctive feature of the contemporary mind as evidenced by frontier thinking in science, philosophy, theology and the arts is its acceptance of reality as unordered in any objective way that man's mind can discern. This acceptance separates the post-modern mind from both the modern mind, which assumed that reality is objectively ordered, and the Christian mind, which assumed it to be regulated by an inscrutable but beneficent will.

The change from the vision of reality as ordered to unordered has brought Western man to as sharp a fork in history as he has faced. Either it is possible for man to live indefinitely with his world out of focus, or it is not. I suspect that it is not, that a will-to-order and orientation is rather fundamental in the human make-up, as both the philosopher Kant and the existentialist psychiatrist Viktor Frankl have claimed. And it is in this perspective that the Christian approach must be seen, a perspective which affirms once again the theist view of the God of the Documents, who has made himself known in history in both person and word, and who stands as the objective base of ordered reality.





## BOOK REVIEWS

THE PROTEST OF A TROUBLED PROTESTANT, by  
Harold O. J. Brown.

Zondervan Publishing House, 1969. 282 pp. \$5.95.

We have been almost inundated in recent years by the deluge of protests—vociferous protests which, at their source, reveal disillusionment or disenchantment with some unhappy trend or abuse in our society. Such protests have come, to a very large extent, from secular and searching—sometimes merely rebellious and defiant youth, a youth which somehow senses that all is not well in society but which (oftentimes) is unable to analyze clearly the nature of the dilemma or to articulate intelligently the nature of the solution. But protest in our time—and perhaps fortunately so—is not restricted to this youthful segment of secular society, nor to its characteristic kind of vehement but often ambiguous and ineffective reaction. One of the more reasonably-argued, though always ardent, protests to come from within the evangelical Christian Church of our day is that embodied in Harold Brown's

### **The Protest of a Troubled Protestant.**

Brown, currently Theological Secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in Lausanne, Switzerland, is seriously disturbed by an entire "quiver full" of contemporary ills and errors—almost one for each of the book's fourteen chapters—and is disturbed because, as he views the situation, these ills and errors actually reveal large scale "treachery within one's own ranks." His vivid portrayal and bold analysis of insidious developments, false conceptions, and precarious stances manifest a considerable knowledge of the Christian Church and of the religious and theological cross currents which have affected its changing shape and spirit in recent decades. One may not always agree entirely with Brown's particular interpretation or assessment of a specific development or trend, as for instance, of the future prospects of the ecumenical movement, of the political activism of

the Protestant Church today, of the final effects of the civil rights movement in the U.S.; or of efforts at Protestant-Catholic rapprochement in our time); one may sometimes suspect that the author has not analyzed deeply or truly enough the thought or influence of a particular theologian (as in the case of Karl Barth or Dietrich Bonhoeffer); but one feels compelled to admit, frequently, that his knowledge of the facts surrounding these developments and trends is unusually wide and current.

Among the religious developments and theological stances and approaches which Brown discusses and whose noxious or unsavoury influence upon the Christian Church he deplures, or at least exposes critically, are the following: (1) the gradual substitution of a spirit of social and political activism, or of peculiar kinds of unreality and hypocrisy in church worship, for the spirit of evangelical truth and integrity—a spirit which links correct doctrine (instruction) closely to the honest application of Biblical truth in the world of everyday living; (2) the increasing appeal, in some quarters, of the notion of a "Christian America" which can successfully legislate moral conduct and successfully achieve full racial equality; (3) the efforts of modern theologians to radically reinterpret the Christian faith, in the conviction that traditional Christian doctrine is far less important than the present "life of the church" and that the only way to "save the church" in our day is to jettison unpopular doctrines or at least the more literal understanding of these doctrines (the "flights from doctrine," to use Brown's own phrase); (4) the publication of religious books (like Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God*, for example) by theologians today which "no longer try to convert or convince" opponents of the historic faith but simply feel out "what people are thinking," and which mainly stimulate and entertain; (5) the over-eagerness of the Roman Catholic Church to engage in ecumenical dialogue with the more "liberal" and "radical" segments of the Protestant Church—a dialogue which (Brown contends) involves generally "more career ecclesiastics and church politicians than committed Christians"; (6) the naive readiness of certain Protestant Christians to embrace Roman Catholicism with all of its "excess baggage" of doctrinal heresy; (7) the uncritical acceptance, on the part of many in the Christian Church today, of dialectical theology which minimizes, or even denies, historical reality and historical verifiability; (8) a current antipathy to high conceptions of Biblical authority and Biblical inspiration and an unusual openness to secular notions of individual freedom and sexual indulgence; and (9) the unwary acceptance of an illusory ecumenism which ignores the importance of crucial Biblical doctrines or which urges organizational unity at the expense of Biblical truth, and which does not recognize the genuine measure of ecumenicity which Christians may already enjoy in view of Christ, their common Lord.

It is very obvious from such an array of developments and issues in modern Christianity that Brown's protest is a **widely-ranging one**; it may also be described as a **fairly discerning protest**—although here we are obliged to qualify our commendation somewhat in view of Brown's occasional lapses in acuteness of analysis, in generosity of spirit, and in justice of argument. It is certainly a **distinctly personal and candid protest** which, unlike much else published in the name of theological literature today, has come directly out of the seething cauldron of bold participation and enquiry at first hand and of intense personal conviction.

Herbert Giesbrecht

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John W. Miller, **The Christian Way**. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1969, Pp. 136. \$1.50.

The Sermon on the Mount continues to command the attention of the thoughtful Jesus-disciple. In **The Christian Way**, John Miller for 12 years a member of Reba House, an experiment to implement Christian living in a community setting) gives a brief exposition of Matthew 5-7, focusing on essential components of the passage in a format that is especially useful for small group study, or for private devotional reading. An important part of the book is the concluding section of some 12 pages of questions and aids which relate the text to the major levels the reader's life be involved with. The book is intensely personal, and would be useful as study guide for a new Christian.

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Richard Caemmerer, **Jesus, Why?** St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969. Pp. 93. \$1.95.

Here is a series of nine meditations concentrating on the Passion Week, prefaced by an excellent summary of the preparation of sermons for Lent and Easter. The series deals with issues confronting all of us: "Why Aren't We Better Disciples?" "Why Do Our Families Crumble?" Written by Richard Caemmerer, Lutheran sermon-craftsman, **Jesus, Why?** provides prime starting material for both the pastor and the occasional preacher, as well as for the individual who is looking for devotional reading material of a high order.

—Vern Ratzlaff