

World-View: Room For God?

Spirituality in the Modern World

Text: Psalm 16:5-11; Luke 17:20-21

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Last week in sunny Naples, Florida, Nancy and I invited a couple of Christ Community members to go to breakfast with us. The breakfast had to be at a later time, because the gentleman had to attend his regular Tuesday morning Bible study group. I get a little nervous when my people get under other tutelage, but what can one do? So we gathered at this lovely restaurant, got settled down, and after giving our order, his wife looked at him and said, “Are you going to ask him the question?”

He said, “Oh, yes. The earthquake in India; where was God?”

Obviously, it had been a topic of conversation in the Bible study, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it had crossed his mind before the class, just as it has crossed probably all minds who think seriously about such things. Who cannot be moved by the deep tragedy, the devastation that came so quickly into the lives of so many thousands and thousands of people?

So there we were, just the four of us, with the question posed. I knew that either I would have to do what pastors usually do and fudge, or I’d have to be honest. So I said to him, “God doesn’t have anything to do with earthquakes.”

This was not one of those intense, existential moments, of course. It was a moment in which it was not difficult for me to be candid, and what I said to him was honestly what I believe. If you want to know about earthquakes, you have to go to the geologists and you have to study the formations of the earth and all of that which makes up the cosmic reality, this material universe in which we dwell. You don’t go to the Bible to learn about the why or the wherefore of earthquakes.

I smiled to myself, because I had just been reading John Hicks’ *The Fifth Dimension*, and in the early pages Hicks speaks about the spiritual dimension of our life and of our cosmic reality, and he refers to what has been a classic paradigm of this issue, the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755. I have read references to this earthquake in many, many books, because it is that classic case study of the

relationship of God to human suffering and tragedy. There is a book actually entitled *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755*.

The Lisbon earthquake shattered the optimism of the eighteenth century, for at this time people were operating with an image of God as the sovereign ruler and governor of the universe who controls all things. Suddenly it was necessary for the Church to explain the earthquake's devastation. And so the Church fathers said that Lisbon was a very wicked city and the earthquake was the consequence of a very angry God. One of the more difficult dimensions of the explanation, however, was the fact that many of the great churches of Lisbon were decimated while a street with a whole row of brothels wasn't touched. True story. The clergy was left to explain how the churches had become the object of God's wrath by misusing sacred spaces while God had mercy on those miserable sinners that visited the brothels.

Well, I had just read that earthquake story again, and it was so ironic to me that this classic case coming out of the eighteenth century should have confronted me at breakfast. It is an ancient question, but in the whole modern period that has ensued since that eighteenth-century earthquake, with our tremendous knowledge of the natural world and all of the amazing discoveries of the natural sciences, we have not brought our images and conceptions of God into line with our knowledge of the reality of which we are a part. We still use images from ancient cultures. We still tell ancient peoples' stories and pass them on uncritically, even though they collide with our present knowledge of the world.

To re-imagine God is a scary business, of course, and it is an arduous business. But once again, the fact that the earthquake question is still being raised tells me so many of us, so much of the time, operate with a world-view that has not ever been brought into relationship with the knowledge of the world as we have it and as we know it. And so this morning I want to begin a month's sermons on the subject of Spirituality in the Modern World. By that I mean how one can live a vital, spiritual life here and now in this world, in full light of all that we know. And it will involve re-imagining and calling into question many of the uncritically held presuppositions with which we operate.

All this is really a question of world-view. Our world-view, whether consciously or unconsciously held, is the big picture of things: how things are; how everything is—God, the world, and human existence. The world-view is the lens through which we encounter all of reality. Our world-view is the unquestioned, uncritically held assumptions with which we meet everyday experience to carry on our ordinary lives, making our judgments in this mundane, day-to-day world of which we are a part.

We all have a world-view. It is not something we have arrived at critically. Most likely it is something that we have inherited or picked up along the way. It is just the way we see things. We take it for granted until someone calls it into question,

until perhaps someone wonders where God is with the earthquake, and someone else says, “God doesn’t have anything to do with earthquakes.” And then we say, “Umm, I have to think that over.”

My point in dealing with this, let me assure you, is deeply pastoral. My hope is that we live with integrity and with honesty, with freedom and with joy in a vital faith posture that takes account of all of the knowledge available to us about this reality of which we are a part, and when that knowledge is accounted for, one is able to say, “And there’s something more.”

Part of the consequence of the Church not keeping up to date with the knowledge available to us, reconciling it with its own faith understanding, is that a conflict between religion and science has developed in the modern world. As so often happens, the Church digs its heels in and becomes defensive out of the threat to its preconceived notions and ideas. On the other side there is a culture dominated by academics, by the scholarly elite that operate very largely with a naturalistic world-view in which there is no room for God.

I could give you statement after statement, clear and concise, which indicate that the world-view or the whole of reality of some who are scientific naturalists or materialists is what can be measured or put into a test tube or a mathematical formula. That is all there is and there is nothing more. That has been the dominant world-view of much of the elite intellectual leadership of our twentieth-century culture in the West. It is the consequence of a breakdown of communication and conversation and an adversarial relationship between those who would be people of faith and those who would follow the scientific method with empirical verification as the only measure of what is true or real.

I can remember the day in Europe when it struck me with a special clarity that the real divide in the world was not between the respective religions, but between the religious and the atheist. Many of you know my story. In 1960 I came to this congregation out of seminary as the most orthodox, conservative and evangelical graduate of the class. I had gone through all of my education without learning. Instead, I learned the system. I came to buttress all of the presuppositions with which I began. I used whatever intellectual skill and power I had to reinforce that faith of my childhood Sunday school, catechetical training.

Four years here and three years in New Jersey with pastoral situations that didn’t square, that made me uncomfortable, unable to deal honestly and forthrightly with people who were facing life, not in its joy and wonder, but its horror and terror and devastation. It put a crack in the foundation of the system I espoused. And so I left for four years of study in Europe, not so much for a degree as the need to struggle with my own faith understanding.

I remember the day I read an essay by Wolfhart Pannenberg, whose theology I was studying. I read it in the heavy, theological, philosophical German, trying to

translate that miserable stuff. The essay laid forth the presuppositions and the consequence of atheistic naturalism. It was as if I looked into a deep abyss of darkness. I began to see that the position of naturalistic atheism was a position of faith just as much as an opposing position that posited the creator God whose heart is love. It was a watershed experience for me. I recognized there was a fundamental world-view that was not ascertained by the scientific method, but rather, was a presupposition, a predisposition, a fundamental posturing of the heart. The ultimate divide in the world, I could see, was between those who affirmed God and those who denied that there was anything beyond this material reality of the cosmos of which we are a part.

As I said, for me this was a watershed experience. I have struggled ever since to understand my own Christian faith in terms of that fundamental insight, coming finally to see, as you have heard me say many times, that religion is a human construct—our response to the Ultimate, to the real, to the Infinite One. The respective religions may differ from one another, but they are alike in that fundamental predisposition to believe the deep intuition of the human heart, the intuition that there is something more. Our reality is not simply free-floating, a chance occurrence wandering willy-nilly without meaning or purpose. Rather, in the midst of this life that we share together, with all of its wonder and its glory and its miracle; its beauty, its terror, and its horror; its tragedy and its suffering; its joy and its freedom, there is something that cannot be touched, that cannot be put into a mathematical formula or examined in a test tube. For me that fundamental question of world-view is the ultimate divide, and to come to understand that is then to be ready, I believe, to deal honestly with the reality of life as it presents itself to us. It is time for us to heed the voice of our dear friend, Huston Smith.

What a fine, remarkable gentleman Huston Smith is, and his just published book, *Why Religion Matters*, reads as though he were talking to us here (which he did). Huston Smith is a voice no longer in the wilderness, but a significant voice among others that is calling into question the dominant world-view, the view that says there is this cosmic, material reality and nothing more. As he bears witness to his own faith, and as other works call attention to the question of world-view, we realize that we are at a very exciting time in this whole journey of faith and faith understanding. It is a great time to be wrestling with these issues and to come to see that a world-view that has room for God is a world-view that can stand with integrity and honesty in the marketplace of ideas.

There are some things I think we have to acknowledge in the Church, and one is that our images of God portray a God too small. J.B. Phillips wrote that book years and years ago. The title itself says it all: *Your God Is Too Small*. God is not a God of earthquakes. I had thought about the question before it was posed to me, as I am sure you had as you saw the tragedy written across the face of a mother who is praying for her child trapped inside a fallen structure. I would pray, too. It's the emotional, instinctual response of the human heart.

But I know that the finger of God does not hold up the floor, the concrete slab of a story of a flat, to give breathing room to a child. The reality with which we live teaches us that there is a world out there which runs on its way according to its course, according to its forms and structures. We have to grow up and become mature and face the reality of the cosmos without a God who fixes things.

That is not to say that prayer is not effective and does not affect things in the material world, the physical body, or whatever. I don't want to get into that. But I want to say this morning that if we are going to be spiritually alive with a vital faith in the modern world, there are images of God that simply won't work anymore, and it is high time that people in my position are honest with you about that. We know in this congregation all too recently that cancer grows in saintly persons, and infection rages in the best of us until it kills. And we know that we are all subject to all of the vicissitudes of the human condition. God is not picking one here and letting one off there.

That's not the way it is, and if we are honest with our human experience, we know that. It is time we think together about how we can re-image God in light of all the knowledge we have about the world of which we are a part.

Thank God for someone with the credentials of a Huston Smith. He can look at the most erudite scientists in the world and call them to account. He says to them, "When you have said all you can say, when you have told us all you can tell us, you haven't told us all there is, for there is more." There is still room for God in a world-view purged of ancient fantasy and honest to today's knowledge.

Yes, we have to let science tell us about our world. But we can still find God here and now in the celebration of life, in its beauty and its terror, in its triumph and in its tragedy, where flowers grow on manure heaps and cancer grows on beautiful bodies, in a world where children are born and baptized, with all of the wonderful potential, and where earthquakes wipe out thousands. You see, that is life, and God doesn't play favorites, fix things, pull strings, shift gears. God is and God is with us and God is experienced in those "thin places" of our human experience. That deep intuition within us that longs, yea, knows something more. It is the spiritual dimension that is a part of a world-view with room for God. To be able to live honestly before the face of God, in the light of everything we know, and to celebrate and to know joy and freedom—that is to be fully alive, by God.

References:

Huston Smith. *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. HarperCollins, 2001.