

The Human Hunger for God

Psalm 42:1-2

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Ganges, Michigan
September 14, 2008

Prepared text of the sermon

For me, the most enjoyable aspect of coming here on these Sunday mornings is the opportunity it affords me to think through seriously some of the dimensions of religious experience and the whole human enterprise of the religious quest. As I have said, I have been on a journey that has brought me from a position of Christian exclusivism, believing salvation was to be found through Jesus Christ alone, to a pluralist understanding that all the great religious traditions that arose in the era around 800 BCE were mediators of the knowledge and experience of the Ultimate, the Absolute, the Sacred Mystery, the One, the real – in my idiom – God.

What these Sunday mornings afford me is, in the leisure of retirement from active ministry, the occasion and the joy of looking back over that pilgrimage in light of the continuing contemporary discussions of the phenomenon of religion. I have always found it interesting to find that series I announce at the beginning, in their unfolding, take on a life of their own. I chose to reflect on the poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures – the Psalms as we speak of them – because I am more comfortable with religion in a poetic mode and those utterances have come down to us as profound expressions of the human spirit, expressions of grief, anger, love, praise and deep trust.

As I have been working on this series – this is the third of four, I have found myself moving from the expression of a Psalm itself, to reflect on what that expression tells us about the religious quest and the phenomenon of religion in general. In part at least, this adjusted direction has come from encountering an interesting contemporary work entitled *Why God Won't Go Away*, whose subtitle is "Brain Science and the Biology of Belief". The book was recommended to me by Peter Hart who three weeks ago gave a fascinating presentation here about the human brain and the mystical religious experience of unity with the infinite reality. Therefore today I will use Psalm 42 as a poetic expression of the human hunger for God.

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
So longs my soul for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God,
For the living God.
When shall I come and behold
The face of God?

It would appear that the Psalmist was in a situation of exile, cut off from the setting of the Holy Hill of Zion – the Temple, the Altar, the Priesthood – the symbols by which God’s presence, “the face of God” was experienced by him. In that foreign setting he remembers festive worship, the worshipping community and all the joy and fulfillment he found in such religious observance and he confesses his soul is cast down. He talks to himself, trying to encourage his heart that he will yet again praise God, being restored to his spiritual home, while his adversaries taunt him – “Where is your God?”

I need do no more with the Psalm beyond hearing the eloquent expression of longing for communion with God, communion mediated with the rich symbols of Israel’s religious celebrations, except to refer to a hymn taken from *The Hymnbook*, used for years at Christ Community Church:

As pants the hart for cooling streams
When heated in the chase,
So longs my soul, O God, for Thee,
And Thy refreshing grace.

For Thee, my God, the living God,
My thirsty soul doth pine;
O when shall I behold Thy face,
Thou Majesty divine!

Why restless, why cast down, my soul?
Trust God; and He’ll employ
His aid for thee, and change these sighs
To thankful hymns of joy.

Why restless, why cast down, my soul?
Hope still; and thou shalt sing
The praise of Him who is thy God,
Thy health’s eternal Spring.

A hymn in a Christian Hymnal using the expressions of Israel’s faith tradition – of course the Christian Church is rooted in the faith of Israel so that is not remarkable. Still it is an instance of two great religious traditions where such a hunger and thirst for communion with God is shared. And it is not just Judaism and Christianity; similar expression of longing, yearning for the experience of union and communion with God is expressed in all the great religious traditions.

In all the traditions there are varying teachings, moral codes, symbols and religious observances, but finally it is union and communion with the Sacred Mystery of Reality that is longed for. This comes especially to expression in the mystical experiences witnessed to in the great majority of religions. This is documented in the work of Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Acquili entitled *Why God Won't Go Away* (2002).

The authors, by their own testimony, admit they pretty much operated on the organizing principle of science that everything that is real can be measured, and scientific methods are the only measurements that count. Quoting Freud, "Science is not an illusion! An illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give we can get elsewhere." Thus the reality of the mystics cannot be considered real; it cannot be scientifically verified. This is what they write:

Gene and I began, as all scientists do, with the fundamental assumption that all that is really real is material. We regarded the brain as a biological machine, composed of matter and created by evolution to perceive and interact with the physical world.

After years of research, however, our understanding of various key brain structures and the way information is channeled along neural pathways led us to hypothesize that the brain possesses a neurological mechanism for self-transcendence. When taken to its extreme, this mechanism, we believed, would erase the mind's sense of self and undo any conscious awareness of an external world.

This hypothesis was later supported by our SPECT scan studies, which began to shed light on the neurological correlates of spiritual experience. In the narrowest scientific view, it would be possible to believe that we had reduced all spiritual transcendence – from the mildest case of religious uplift, to the profound states of union described by mystics – to a neurological commotion in the brain.

But our understanding of the brain would not allow us to rest with that conclusion. (p. 145 f)

Their experimentation involved wiring the brains of Buddhist monks in meditation and Franciscan nuns at prayer. The SPECT scans gave similar results – recording the brain's activity during the movement into the mystic experience or the moments of most intensely religious experience or meditation. On the basis of their study they were convinced that the mystical experience is biologically observable and scientifically real. In their words:

As our study continued, and the data flowed in, Gene and I suspected that we'd uncovered solid evidence that the mystical experiences of our subjects – the altered states of mind they described as the absorption of

the self into something larger – were not the result of emotional mistakes or simple wishful thinking, but were associated instead with a series of observable neurological events, which, while unusual, are not outside the range of normal brain function. In other words, mystical experience is biologically, observably, and scientifically real. (p. 7)

Without attempting to describe their discussion of the anatomy of the brain, a task beyond my competence and purpose, I simply record their conclusion.

The inexplicable unity of the biological brain and its ethereal phenomenon of mind is the first aspect of what we have defined as the mind's mystical potential. The second characteristic, which was hinted at in our SPECT scan studies, is the ability of the mind to interpret spiritual experience as real. This ability, based on the mind's capacity to enter altered states of consciousness, and to adjust its assessment of reality neurologically, is a fundamental link between biology and religion. (p. 34)

What follows, for those interested, is an extended discussion of "Brain Architecture;" for our purposes I jump over that discussion as well as a chapter on myth-making, ritual, mysticism and the origins of religion, to their discussion of the mind's search for absolutes and their primary claim – "Why God Won't Go Away."

The authors ask "a provocative question":

"Can all spirituality and any experience of the reality of God be reduced to a fleeting rush of electrochemical blips and flashes, racing along the neural pathways of the brain? Based upon our current understanding of the manner in which the brain turns neural input into the perceptions of human experience, the simplest answer is **yes**." (p. 143).

But they go on to ask: "Are we saying, then, that God is just an idea, with no more absolute substance than a fantasy or a dream?" They answer that, based on their "best understanding of how the mind interprets the perceptions of the brain, the simplest answer is **no**." They reduce the possible conclusions of their work to two:

Either spiritual experience is nothing more than a neurological construct created by and contained within the brain, or the state of absolute union that the mystics describe does in fact exist and the mind has developed the capability to perceive it. (p. 147)

And, acknowledging that they cannot objectively prove the actual existence of Absolute Unitary Being, nonetheless they assert,

Our understanding of the brain and the way it judges for us what is real argues compellingly that the existence of an absolute higher reality or

power is at least as rationally possible as is the existence of a purely material world. (p. 155)

Their research led them to the hypothesis with which they worked –

“That spiritual experience, at its very root, is intimately interwoven with human biology. That biology, in some way, compels the spiritual urge.” (p. 8)

Such a conclusion led the authors to see all religions as branches of the same tree. Whatever the founding vision, whatever the respective paths that lead to the Absolute, the Sacred Mystery, or to God, the same human brain/mind complex is at work. The authors begin their final chapter, “Why God Won’t Go Away” with a poem prayer by C.S. Lewis, the great English literary scholar. At a later age he was convinced of the truth of Christianity, and, in his early years, wrote a rational defense/exposition of the Christian faith tradition. One can find such in his widely popular *Mere Christianity*. I was greatly surprised to read his poem “A Footnote to All Prayers” – a far different Lewis than was revealed in his early writings. Whether this poem followed the profound grief experience he suffered in the death of his wife whom he had married later in life and chronicled in his work, *A Grief Observed*, I do not know. In any case the poem is an amazing and beautiful expression:

The one whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow
When I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring Thou
And dream of Phaedian fancies and embrace in heart
Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing thou art.
Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme
Worshipping with frail images of folk-lore dream,
And all in their praying, self-deceived, address
The coinage of their own unquiet thoughts, unless
Thou in magnetic mercy to Thyself divert
Our arrows, aimed, unskillfully, beyond desert;
And all are idolators, crying unheard
To a deaf idol, if thou take them at thy word.
Take not, O lord, our literal sense. Lord, in thy great,
Unspoken speech our limping metaphor translate.

Here is C. S. Lewis acknowledging the respective images, symbols, incarnations by which the respective religions access God all fall short of perfect vision of the One, the Absolute, the Final Reality – our prayers utilize language which are but “limping metaphors”. Our authors comment:

The conclusions of the mystics seem clear: God is by his nature unknowable. He is not an objective fact or an actual being; he is, in fact,

being itself. The absolute, undifferentiated oneness that is the ground of all existence. (p. 159)

While thinking about our reflection today, I saw an announcement of a book whose title seemed to indicate a similar claim to the one made by Newberg and D'Aquili but from quite a different perspective. The title, *Is There a Universal Grammar of Religion?* By Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Huston Smith. Huston Smith is probably the best known authority on World Religion. His 1958 publication on *The Religion of Man*, later revised as *The World's Religions*, changed the way the American public thought about religion. Widely respected and loved, Huston Smith is a world-class scholar and marvelous human being. In 2000 he was our guest in Spring Lake as lecturer for the Center for Religion and Life. The recent work is an expansion of The Fifth Master Huuan Hua Memorial Lecture, including portions added by Smith's discussion partner, Henry Rosemont, Jr. who wrote an introduction, an initial response, a recorded discussion with Huston Smith and a final reflection. Smith's lecture is summarized in the Preface:

Professor Smith offers, in the present small volume, a final distillation of his lifetime of study, practice, and insight. He describes a Universal Grammar of religion, in which he claims fourteen points of substantial identity among all the great traditions. Since these points, he argues, are universals, it is evident that a capacity to respond to them must belong to the innate psychophysical makeup of human beings. Borrowing language from the generative linguist Noam Chomsky, who was his friend and colleague at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Professor Smith concludes that we are hard-wired with a capacity for religious experience in the same way that Chomsky claims we are hard-wired to speak our native tongues within the constraints of the syntactic patterns that collectively comprise "Universal Grammar." (p. viii)

Smith and Rosemont were colleagues at M.I.T. along with Noam Chomsky who is a leading linguist and has claimed we are hard-wired to speak our native tongues. In his response to Smith's lecture, Rosemont gives a brief explanation of Chomsky's idea of a universal grammar hard-wired into our brains.

Chomsky's reasoning is straightforward: if there are principles that speakers of a language or dialect demonstrably follow from childhood on, but that were not or could not have been learned solely on the basis of direct linguistic experience or tutoring, then those principles must form part of the cognitive endowment that all normal human beings bring to bear in acquiring their native tongue. And it is the task of theoretical generative linguists to formulate hypotheses about what those highly abstract principles might be, and then "test" those hypotheses by observing linguistic behavior (which might be their own, with the observations introspective). (p. 23)

Rosemont concludes that Huston Smith is using Chomsky's claim of human hard wiring for language accurately when he claims the same for human hard wiring for religion. He writes,

In the same way, Smith is claiming, if I understand him aright, that human beings have a "capacity" to have intimations of the infinite, to apprehend what is beyond or behind our normal sensory experiences. And the evidence for this claim can be found in the sacred texts and practices of all of the world's religions, distant from each other in time and space. I believe Smith would call these intimations "religious experiences," and I would call them that, too... (p. 31)

I find it interesting that, while Rosemont stops short of agreeing with Huston Smith's claims of an ontological reality as the counterpart to the human "intimations of the Infinite", he nevertheless joins him in understanding the human being as having a capacity to receive such "intimations of the Infinite."

My claim would be that just as we are "hard-wired" to respond in certain ways to human speech – the Universal Grammar – so are we wired equally to feel a sense of belonging in the natural world we experience with our sensory organs. But beyond that I make no ontological commitments, in the same way I do not want to say that nouns, verbs, or linguistic structures of any kind are "out there" apart from human mental organs. Nor would I argue that such a religious response to our environment is or is not in any way adaptive for the species; we just have this capacity for response, that's all. (p. 47)

In his own self-description he writes,

I am not a Christian, do not believe in God or gods, am terrified at the possibility of surviving in any way the destruction of my body, and believe the idea of a transcendent realm is not only false, but mischievous, to the extent it causes us to lose sight of the splendor, majesty, and spiritual significance of this world – the only world I believe we will ever know.

Thus we have a deeply religious person in Huston Smith claiming a religious capacity is hard wired into the human being and one who does not believe in God who agrees that that native given is indeed part of being human. In his own way Henry Rosemont is religious but his religious experience is limited to this world of nature; it is an inner-human phenomenon with no ontologically existing Higher Order.

I make this point because of the parallel to the authors of *Why God Won't Go Away*. There, too, no ontological claims were being made beyond the fact that the reality of human religious capacity which is a brain/mind function points to the

possibility and calls in question the claims of atheistic naturalism that claims only that is real that can be measured by empirical scientific means.

I confess my affinity to Huston Smith. In the conversation with Rosemont, Rosemont made the point that although Smith had traveled the world over studying and practicing almost all of the world's religions, he has remained a Protestant Christian in his childhood Methodist church. Rosemont asked him why, to which in vintage Huston Smith, he replied, "A friend who knows me very well said, 'Huston, you know full well that the only thing that keeps you in that wishy-washy Methodist church is ancestor worship and filial piety'."

Quoting the Dalai Lama who, when asked about conversion, replied, "Well, it's best if you can stay in the heritage that raised you because your impulses are just attuned thereto."

As I was thinking about this whole subject I began to wonder about a religious experience that is inner-human and one that has an objective referent. It was the great German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, considered the Father of Protestant Liberalism, who found his evidence for the existence of God in the feeling of absolute dependence. This was the turn from the 18th century – the Age of Enlightenment – to the 19th century. Emmanuel Kant's epistemological writings had destroyed the traditional proof for the existence of God. Traditional Christian theological claims were seriously challenged and Scriptural authority was coming under siege. Schleiermacher was looking for an alternative foundation for believing in God. He shifted the location of authority from Biblical revelation and church dogma to the human being – the feeling of absolute dependence. This was the initial move but the 19th century saw the rise of modern atheism, pioneered by Ludwig Feuerbach whose projection theory claimed God was the human projection of his own deepest yearnings and virtues on to the screen of reality before which the human then bowed in worship. There was no God out there; God is created by the human in his own image.

Taking Feuerbach's claim for the Truth were Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and finally Fredrick Nietzsche and Nihilism.

I bring up Schleiermacher and the trend he initiated by his move to the human as the seat of religious authority because of a comment made by the great Catholic theologian Hans Küng writing of Feuerbach:

Was Feuerbach not right to see his philosophy as the end phase of a Protestant *theology* that – as he thought – *long before his time had become an anthropology*, so that he needed only to understand and appropriate its real intentions? Does not the danger become apparent at this point of a theology in Schleiermacher's style, which makes the reality of God dependent on the religious experiences and emotional needs of the devout human subject? But is not the danger also evident of a

contemporary “political theology,” which reduces theology to a “critical theory of history” or of “society”? Is it not clear at this point how close we are to atheism if we do not distinguish between theological and anthropological propositions, if we identify man’s interest with God’s, if we one-sidedly stress God’s nonobjectivity, almost see God as absorbed in our neighbor and the mystery of being simply as the mystery of love? (*Does God Exist?* P. 214)

The towering figure of Karl Barth, the theological giant of the 20th century, strongly critiqued Schleiermacher for beginning the movement that transformed theology into anthropology – the movement from the study of God to the study of the human. Barth burst on the 20th century scene, stressing the Word of God, the Word of revelation – God the Wholy Other who addresses us vertically from above.

Barth shifted the whole direction of continental theology and greatly impacted Protestant theology in this country as well. The times were right for such a shift to be sure. Europe was in chaos following the First World War and many were seeking “some word from the Lord.”

I hear Küng’s warning. I am in awe of the accomplishment of Karl Barth. Yet I find myself going back to Schleiermacher in his attempt to give foundation to religious experience without relying on external authority of ancient book or ancient church and its tradition. I’m not certain how relevant my questions are to the other great religious traditions but they are very real for Christianity, Judaism and Islam – religions of the Book.

The contemporary neurological research demonstrates that it is in the right brain that our religious experience is located. The right brain is formed and nurtured by emotional experiences, including religious experience such as liturgy, ritual, ceremony, celebrations – experiences of a worshipping community in which one is “moved”. Our right brains are shaped by symbols, music, movement and sensory data.

And here is the problem for especially the Protestant tradition in which I was nurtured – the tradition of Schleiermacher/Feuerbach and in reaction, Karl Barth and the neo-orthodox movement. This has been a left brain enterprise. Finally, the reality of spiritual, religious experience is not a matter of rational deliberation but precisely of letting go of intellectual delineation and allowing oneself to enter the flow of the Spirit. As we are learning from recent brain research, it is the right brain that “lights up” in intense religious experience. I wonder whether, before the knowledge of the human brain was available, the distinction of right brain and left brain, Schleiermacher was not reaching for just such a move – from rational, left brain religious rationality to a right brain centered experience of God.

For this reason I am encouraged by the contemporary effort to ground religious experience in the anatomy of the human. That does not solve the question of the existence of God – the ontological reality of a Being as the counterpoint to our neurological capacity to receive “intimations of the Infinite” or whether those intimations stem from the Sacred Mystery that is contained within the one reality of the natural world. But these, it seems to me, are the critical contemporary points for further enquiry.

As for me, I feel most at home with Huston Smith who sees the commonly shared truth of all the great traditions, yet remains in his native spiritual home. That is the beauty of this inter-faith community where one honors all but can be true to one’s own formation, one’s own story, symbols and rituals that trigger the intimations of the Infinite.

I do believe the hunger for God is a human universal. That hunger can be stunted, left dormant and for all appearances seem to be absent. But then perhaps some deep experience whether of joy or grief, of illness or good health causes one to wonder about life’s ultimate questions, the whence, the whither of life and the meaning of it all in the meantime. Then one might identify with the Hebrew poet who exclaimed –

As the deer longs for flowing streams,
So longs my soul for you, O God.

Then one might awaken to a hitherto unawakened hunger, and realize,
My soul thirsts for God,
For the living God.

And that longing will be satisfied in the quietude of the soul’s longing.

References:

Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili. *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

Harry Rosemont, Jr. and Huston Smith. *Is There a Universal Grammar for Religion?*