

When god Dies...

From the series: Religion: Significant Critique and Fresh Expression

Text: Psalm 42:2; Romans 1:20

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We have been considering the significant criticism of religion that came to expression in the nineteenth century in order to understand it and to find fresh expression for the reality of the experience of God. It seems to me it is really not possible to find a fresh expression that will be adequate for the twenty-first century unless we have some understanding of the philosophical and theological discussions of the modern period, particularly those of the nineteenth century. What came to expression at that time was the realization that religion is a human construct.

Of course, the faith communities fought that idea. They claimed that religion was a divine revelation, a largely ready-made religion that came from heaven. But the insight of the nineteenth century certainly is true—religion is a human construct. From all we know today about the origin, function, and nature of religion, all we know about historical development, it is quite foolish to deny that religion is a human construct.

On the basis of this insight, the nineteenth-century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach said that God was nothing but an illusion, a projection of human fears and hopes and aspirations. God, so to speak, was created in our own image. That assumption or declaration became the foundation for nineteenth-century thought. Religion—a human construct, yes. And based on that, God became a human projection. Now there was no one home in the universe; nobody out there, so to speak, no counterpart to that human projection and aspiration.

While it would be very foolish for us to try to deny that religion is a human construct, once one has assented to that, it does not follow that no one is home. For understanding that religions are human constructs is understanding that religions are human responses to the Mystery that encounters us, that upholds us, that permeates reality and encounters us in our human existence. So although we won't deny that our religion is a human construct, if we will continue to be religious, we will do it on the basis of our conviction that for better or worse, religion is an agency, a medium by which we come into communion with that

Ultimate Mystery of things, that infinite and inexhaustible ground of all being, that source, guide and goal of all that is. This, of course, is the issue as we look for fresh expression: to hear the significant criticism and then to find a way to say “God,” nonetheless.

The nineteenth century came to its climax in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose name conjures up nihilism—nothing means anything. Nihilism, or nothingness. There is no foundation, no meaning, no purpose. Just capricious, purposeless reality as it exists. Nietzsche died one hundred years ago this month, August 15, 1900. He is famously known for his claim, “God is dead,” to which he added, “We have killed him.”

The last decade of Nietzsche’s life was one of misery and terror. He moved into insanity and died a pathetic and broken person. But Nietzsche had come out of the rich soil of Protestant Christian faith and experience. He was buried next to his Lutheran pastor father, and his mother’s father and grandfather likewise were Lutheran pastors. Yet in his work and study Nietzsche had come to the conclusion that the God of his tradition—the God of Western civilization—was dead, and this sensitive and brilliant thinker had the courage to draw the implications of the death of God. At this point it would be typical of pulpit rhetoric to say, “You see what happens when you deny God?”

But that would be to miss the point altogether. For Nietzsche to conclude that God was dead was an anguishing understanding. Nietzsche wrote, “How much collapse [will follow], now that this faith has been undermined, because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it, for example, the whole of European morality.” Nietzsche looked at it all, opened his mind to every bit of knowledge and understanding available. Then he drew the conclusion that God, as God had been conceived, was dead, and he was horrified by the thought.

Thomas Altizer, one of the leading death of God theologians in the 1960s, wrote about the contemporary situation, calling it “a new chaos, a new meaninglessness brought on by the disappearance of an absolute or transcendent ground, the very nihilism foreseen by Nietzsche as the next stage of history.” Altizer also wrote, “No honest contemporary seeker can ever lose sight of the very real possibility that the willing of the death of God is the way to madness and dehumanization.”

A Jewish thinker, Richard Rubenstein, in his book *After Auschwitz*, said no one could believe in the traditional God of Judaism and Christianity after Auschwitz. He wrote of “the ambiguity, the irony, the hopelessness, and the inevitable meaninglessness of the time of the death of God. ... If I am a death of God theologian, it is with a cry of agony.” (p. 263)

So what we have in these particular thinkers and in this particular development is a conclusion reached in the light of the critical rationality of the modern period, the kind of knowledge that all of us take for granted in the world in which we live,

a world of scientific breakthrough, of technological advance, of historical understanding of human development, of the behavioral sciences, of sociology and anthropology—all of the knowledge available to us. These particular thinkers said God is dead. That is, the traditional God as conceived of in Western civilization and in Western Christendom does not exist.

If you think about it for a moment, we have noted how, in the early dawn of humankind, religion was a part of that dawning human emergence. In paganism or in primitive forms, whatever you want to call it, humans became conscious of their vulnerability before the forces of the universe and created religious systems. In these systems they personified and deified the forces of nature, and then worshiped them, offering sacrifices and prayers in order to find security in this very insecure universe. So in large measure the origin of early religious expression had a great deal to do with securing human beings as they came to consciousness and realized the vulnerability of being human.

With the development of the great monotheisms, one God as creator of all, governor of all, provident ruler of all—the omnipotent omniscient God—that particular God became the ground of morality. That God was Moses' vision of God issuing the Ten Commandments. But all religion began in a founding experience with a certain understanding or teaching or dogma, developing ways of ritual and worship and a way of life or culture. If the God of any one of these religions dies, then on what authority does one base one's morality?

Nietzsche said, "God is dead, and now everything is permissible." Not that he was advocating that, but he was saying the whole foundation is gone. Without that absolute transcendent ground, the whole European morality is gone. The human is free-floating, and that was a terrifying thought for Nietzsche. Indeed, it drove him mad. But he was one of those who, understanding what he saw, had the courage to draw the implication. There are not many in the human family who, seeing deeply and profoundly, have the courage to draw the implication when it leads to the abyss. Better that the people go blindfolded or in their naiveté than to tell the truth which could lead to chaos.

The nineteenth century was a watershed, and those who would think deeply and clearly and ruthlessly must come to terms with the claims of modern knowledge. Perhaps one will not find God at the end of the scientific quest. But the religious experience must at least be conceived of in terms of our broadest understanding of reality.

Otherwise, our head is in the sand, or we go through life blindfolded, or we go through life fearfully denying what is there on the horizon. Nietzsche said God is dead, and in the 1960s scholars said, "That's where we are." But nothing really came of it because there was such strong reaction; because it is such scary business.

There have been responses on the part of the Christian community. For example, if you have experience with the Roman Catholic tradition, you know that it still tries to operate in an authoritarian manner, by fiat, by the teaching the Office of the Congregation for the Faith to convince the faithful of what is true and what is not true. But authoritarianism has been thrown off in the modern period and I cannot conceive of it finally ever gaining its foothold again.

Then there is the global phenomenon of Pentecostalism that Harvey Cox has documented in his book *Fire from Heaven*. Everywhere on the globe there are people who are having the experience of God in an ecstatic experience. They are experiencing God apart from their rational faculties. They are experiencing God at the gut level, if you will, highly emotional and very satisfying temporarily. The thing about emotional fixes is that you have to have a fix again and again and again.

This is not a criticism of those who find their mode of operation through that means. But certainly for us who want to engage our reasoning faculty as well, it is not enough. Pentecostalism is working, working its way in a world that became arid through the intellectualism and the skepticism of the nineteenth century. I suppose it arose in reaction to the claim that God is dead. But Pentecostalism will not work for some of us. Bless those for whom it works.

There is also the reaction of Fundamentalism. Fundamentalism would like to claim to be the old, old faith, but actually it is a relatively new faith. It is a reaction to modernity. It is a reaction to Feuerbach and Marx and Freud and Nietzsche. It is a reaction to the liberal Christian Church that tried to accommodate the insights of the nineteenth century into an understanding of the Christian faith. But Fundamentalism cannot long persist because it lives by assertion of that faith; it lives by saying it over and over and more loudly. But simply to affirm does not make it true.

The Evangelism 2000 Conference recently ended in Amsterdam with some 10,000 evangelists from around the world gathered by Billy Graham as his last great effort. What came out of that conference again establishes Fundamentalism: Jesus Christ alone is the only savior of the world and all that goes with that exclusive claim. I do not believe it is where Billy Graham is personally, but there were ten percent of those ten thousand people who signed a document even more rigid than the conference statement itself. Well, if you were an evangelist, wouldn't you like to have the only key to the truth, the only key to the salvation of the world? If there were other "keys," suddenly yours could lose its power. I suppose such a conference, such a rally, would be the last place in the world where the implications of the interfaith dialogue would be expressed.

Then we have the whole area of "Christian Science." Isn't it amazing that in the twenty-first century there is still controversy about evolution and Creationism? Isn't it amazing that there are very intelligent people in our country who are

giving all of their energy and all of their minds to the establishment and the buttressing of a literalistic view of an ancient book that was a marvelous mythological presentation of the creation of the world?

It is very difficult for me to understand Creationism, and I do not believe that it can possibly prevail. But in our society today it is a living issue. I cannot comprehend that this whole effort can succeed in the long run, in the light of day before those who would be open to pursue the truth through the use of critical judgment.

In the title I used a small “g” for God because it is not God who has died, but god who has died. The respective images of God that come to expression in the various religious understandings of the world no longer connect with our knowledge. Western Christian, Protestant faith in the God who is still the governor, creator, omnipotent, omniscient ruler of all—that God is the God about whom the death of God theologians speak. That is the God Nietzsche said was dead. But to say that a particular image or conception of God is dead is not to say that God is dead. It is to say nothing about that ultimate ground of being that emerges or surrounds or embraces us and comes to expression in the creativity of the Spirit in the midst of the cosmic flow of things. The God of traditional Protestant expression—that god is dead.

I experienced the death of that god yesterday at the funeral of my sister. In my old home environment, the place from which I emerged, I was very much a stranger, very alien. The expression of piety in that funeral was far, far more emotional and sentimental than anything I had grown up with. Mine was a much sterner expression of Dutch mystical pietism. But there I was in my old home territory where my family still worships and I heard emotion in the musical expression, emotion in the “open mike” testimony and in the statements of the pastor, and I noted the frequent use of “we know, we know, we know.” I wanted to say, “You tell me so often how much we know because I suspect you are trying to convince yourself that it is true.”

I had to admit that the god of my childhood is dead. That god will not serve for me. I do not begrudge anyone an expression of faith that is satisfying and comforting, but I know that the god they addressed is dead for me and that god will not bring fresh expression to the twenty-first century, to a world that is breaking open in the wonder and the mystery of it all. That god of my childhood died, but God has not died.

I read Psalm 42 and I identify with that, don’t you?

My soul longs for God, for the living God. When will I come and appear before God? O God, my soul is cast down. Why have You forgotten me?

I long, I yearn for the experience of God. Hope Thou in God. I shall yet praise him, my God and my Lord.

That expression touches me as deeply as it did the Psalmist. But it is a God conceived quite other than the Psalmist's image I'm sure, which is as one would expect. It should be because of the tremendous explosion of knowledge, of reality, of the world of the human being, of social reality. Of course, the image is different. And when I use the old phrases or sing the old hymns, I can do it understanding it as poetry, as the imagery of a generation of faith that preceded me, that handed faith to me.

But if I want to give fresh expression, I have to find new language and that is not easy to do. If I am not honest about that, if I cannot say that god is dead in the emotionalism, in the grieving and all of that which came to expression in a service that was a marvelous testimony to my sister, my own spiritual life will wither. It was a language I can no longer use and I must say, then, that god is dead. But only a small "g" god is dead. God continues to be the mystery toward which my soul longs, longing still for living waters.

When god dies, if it is the god of the small "g," there is no need to panic. Trust. Wait. Nietzsche said, "I live between two ages, one that is dead and one powerless to be born." We haven't moved very far. We're still between. Most of us are not ready to give up the old. For some of us who have had to do that, the new is not at all clear. Yet if I trust God, I can wait in hope, in the darkness, with the longing of my life reaching toward the mystery that is beyond us and beneath us and permeating the one reality into which our lives are woven. That is our quest.

References:

Rubenstein, Richard L. *After Auschwitz*. Indianapolis: Bobbs- Merrill, 1966.

See a discussion of Nietzsche in Richard Elliott Friedman's *The Hidden Face of God*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995.