

Human Being in Freedom
Marguerite Holcomb Lecture
Muskegon Council for Arts and Humanities 2004 Festival
On the Theme Freedom and Privacy

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I want to express my appreciation to the Muskegon Council for Arts and Humanities for being invited to be a part of the 2004 Festival and to the Marguerite Holcomb Lecture Committee for the opportunity to be the tenth lecturer in this series. I am honored to be a part of this Muskegon community event.

The theme for 2004 is Freedom and Privacy and I'm certain that theme is coming to expression in various ways through the multiple events and media of the Festival. Recognizing that the selection of the theme may well have been influenced or determined by our present societal and global situation with the threat to our freedom and privacy through government measures to counter the terrorist threat, as well as the whole new set of complex issues arising from the worldwide Internet that has created the Information Highway, turning our global home into a neighborhood, I have chosen to think about the theme philosophically, theologically, reflecting on the nature of Human Being and thus the ground of freedom and privacy in the Creative Source of the cosmic drama of which we are a part.

In the last lecture entitled "The Emergence of the Sacred in Human Being," I sought to establish the claim that the freedom and privacy, the dignity and worth of the human being lie in the Creative Source and Ground of Being which I refer to as the Ultimate Mystery of Being, however that Ultimate Mystery may be experienced and named in the respective religions of the human family.

This was clearly expressed in the American Declaration of Independence, as well as other writings of those Enlightenment thinkers who were the shapers of a new experiment in human government. These authors of our founding documents were shaped by the biblical story of Creation found in the early chapters of Genesis. The explosion of knowledge of the natural world and the rise of historical consciousness called in question the biblical paradigm and, in leading intellectual circles, unhinged the human from its grounding in the sacred.

Those who divide the human drama into periods claim the Modern period is over and we are in the post-modern period - a period so named because its contours are not yet definite enough to define. Clearly, the term post-modern indicates movement beyond those centuries which witnessed the unfortunate and unnecessary conflict between Science and Religion and the emergence of modern atheism.

If, indeed, we have moved philosophically and culturally into a new period in the human story, it is time for the religions and, in my case, the Christian tradition, to let go of those pre-scientific religious sagas and myths which conveyed profound religious/spiritual insight and wisdom, finding new language with which to speak of the spiritual dimension of Reality, language that is reflective of the best knowledge we have of the nature of cosmic reality.

Thus, my major thesis in the previous lecture was: *The freedom and dignity of the human will be best affirmed and protected if the biblical worldview is replaced by a worldview that is conceived and imagined in light of our present knowledge of the cosmic reality into which our lives are woven.*

Specifically, the biblical paradigm of a Creator God “out there,” calling into being a created order separate from the Being of God and over against God should be replaced by a model that sees Reality as one, the emergence of its Sacred Source and creative center.

Secondly, and following on that conception, the Human must be conceived as the emergence of the Sacred in the one cosmic totality. The sacredness, the worth, dignity and the freedom of the human being is not something conferred on the creature by a God “wholly other,” in the language of Karl Barth, but rather intrinsic to the creature, the creature being the emergence of the Sacred in the evolving cosmic reality.

The human then is not a creation in perfection in an initial state of innocence from which the creature “fell,” marking the human race as fallen. Rather, the human is the product of a process of billions of years of cosmic unfolding, the emergence of consciousness, of awareness, the emergence of spirit.

I concluded the previous lecture with the contention that we are not robots marked by an inevitable fate, cogs in a cosmic machine grinding on its way. We are sacred, for we are the emergence of the Sacred Ground and the Source of Being in the concrete drama of cosmic unfolding, the drama of history whose future lies in our hands. We possess the terrifying gift of freedom to create paradise or destroy the human experience as the emergence of the Sacred in the cosmic story.

Our world is at a crisis point because we have not only emerged to this stage of consciousness with the gift of freedom, but we have the technology that can either transform the Earth into a Garden of Eden or into an uninhabitable wasteland

cutting short the human story. I closed the last lecture with a question as well as a beautiful image. I asked:

Will we be able to break free from old paradigms and patterns of behavior that have written a history of violence, war and destruction? Is human transformation possible, given the entrenched ideologies that continue to find expression?

Barbara Marx Hubbard in *Conscious Evolution* (p. 10) provides the image. She writes,

Let's compare our situation with the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. When the caterpillar weaves its cocoon, imaginal disks begin to appear. These disks embody the blueprint of the butterfly yet to come. Although the disks are a natural part of the caterpillar's evolution, its immune system recognizes them as foreign and tries to destroy them. As the disks arrive faster and begin to link up, the caterpillar's immune system breaks down and its body begins to disintegrate. When the disks mature and become imaginal cells, they form themselves into a new pattern, thus transforming the disintegrating body of the caterpillar into the butterfly. The breakdown of the caterpillar's old system is essential for the breakthrough of the new butterfly. Yet, in reality the caterpillar neither dies nor disintegrates, for from the beginning its hidden purpose was to transform and be reborn as the butterfly.

I have been working in this area of the human as the emergence of the Sacred, Creative Center of being, what I speak of as the Ultimate Mystery of being, for some time now because I see this complex of ideas as providing an understanding of God, the human, and contemporary cosmology. The Ultimate Mystery of being is the Creative Source of the one cosmic reality, immanent within it and coming to extrinsic manifestation as consciousness and spirit, as awareness and creativity in the Human.

I was pleased to come on a book just a short time ago written from the perspective of a scientist who was probing the same ideas. Harold Morowitz has written *The Emergence of Everything*, published by Oxford University Press in 2002. A reviewer, Philip Clayton, gives a concise summary and affirmation of the work:

This is a brilliant book. Biophysicist Harold Morowitz has provided the first state-of-the-art overview of the theory of emergence across the scientific disciplines. Neither too detailed nor too abstract, his 28 stages of emergence trace the history of the universe from the Big Bang through the appearance of culture, philosophy and spirituality. No other work has laid out the core case for emergence - and hence against the ultimacy of reductionism - across the whole spectrum of science. This introduction to emergence theory should guide philosophers of science and

anthropologists, theologians and metaphysicians, as they reflect on the nature of *Homo sapiens* and our place in the cosmos.

It is always exciting to discover that one is not alone in wrestling with questions of profound significance for the understanding and destiny of Human Being. Much of the scientific data is beyond my capacity to comprehend, but Morowitz not only chronicles the emergents that mark the history of the universe, but goes on to reflect philosophically and theologically on the data and comes to a view very similar to what I have been setting forth. For example, in a chapter entitled "Science and Religion," he writes,

Thus far we have been dealing with 15 billion years of emergence. Sometime over the last 5 million years, something radically different occurred: the emergence of a species capable of attempting to understand cosmic history and purpose and capable of altering some small portion of the universe in ways far more radical than anything in the past....

Twelve billion years of emergence finally led to a creature who had the ability and chose to ask, "What does it mean?" Eating at the tree of knowledge seems like an inevitable consequence of the development of the universe. There is little doubt from current understanding that there must be a large number of planets upon which intelligent beings may be asking for the meaning of the universe. (P. 194)

Morowitz points to the emergence of consciousness as I have above, although my concern has been to create the context for the Freedom of the Human Being. But he acknowledges the same possibility for good or evil that inheres in the magnificent emergence of the Human. He writes,

But the kind of transcendence that comes with the human mind is a two-edged sword. The same kind of activity that leads to antibiotics can lead to germ warfare. With transcendence comes the awesome power to choose good or evil.

Choice emerges with consciousness. We have argued that the fitness of consciousness is that, given the huge variety of environments, one can distinguish far more states than can be encoded for. Making the fit choice then becomes advantageous. This is the beginning of free will. When it is finally combined with the ability to understand the consequences of interactions, our collective behavior becomes transcendence.

I am aware that this is a startling, frightening, and thoroughly heretical conclusion. If our evolving minds are the transcendence of the immanent God, then the responsibility of making a better world is ours, as is the responsibility of figuring out what we mean by a better world. Our exemplars, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and many more are those who have struggled the most in the search for the path of life. We have no

one to turn to except ourselves and our exemplars. We are the third branch of the trinity. We dare not turn away from the task. There are no limits. Computers and genetic engineering give us whole new pathways in our transcendence. Emergence is not through with us or our universe. We must celebrate our divinity and go on with the nitty-gritty of the world.

We can change the world for the benefit of mankind. We, *Homo sapiens*, are the transcendence of the immanent God.

“We are God,” the best and worst of us. The statement embodies such hubris that it is hard even to announce, but I believe it contains a profound truth. The immanent God is knowable to us through our science, and the transcendent God is knowable to us through our actions. It is not the God of our ancient and revered faiths, but the world has changed, and we too must change our thinking. The intermediate emergent, God, must be understood next. (Pp. 194-95)

Morowitz’s final chapter is entitled “The Task Ahead,” which concludes:

To those who believe that we are the mind, the volition, and the transcendence of the immanent God, our task is huge. We must create and live an ethics that optimizes human life and moves to the spiritual. To do this, we must use our science, our knowledge of the mind of the immanent God. I am reminded of the words of the Talmudist: “It is not up to you to finish the task: neither are you free to cease from trying.” (P. 200)

Perhaps by now you are thinking that all of this is a long way from the assigned theme, “Freedom and Privacy,” and I acknowledge that. However, I began with the intention of reflecting on that theme philosophically and theologically. I have attempted to establish that the Human is the emergence of the Sacred and that, although operating with what for us is an untenable worldview, a worldview dissolved by the discoveries of modern Science, the American Creed of “certain inalienable rights,” among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, rooted as it was in the Biblical Story, was grounded in the conviction that the Sacred Ground of Being is the Guarantor of Human Freedom and Dignity.

We have rooted those inalienable rights, the freedom and dignity of the Human in the Ultimate Mystery of Being as well, but I have argued, in contrast to traditional theism, that the Human is the Emergence of that Sacred Source of Being - indeed, that the Human Being in Freedom is the incarnation of that Ultimate Mystery, now become the agent of ongoing Creation responsible for the future unfolding of the Cosmic Story. The awesome truth is that the gift of creativity and the freedom that we possess by the very nature of being human, place the future in our hands.

One might respond that such a responsibility and such a task to create the Human Future in the unfolding Cosmic Drama is more than the Human can bear.

No wonder the religions that claim an omnipotent God who creates, grounds, and guarantees the universe and cares for the human creature has had such an attraction. But, knowing what we know, fleeing to such a refuge is irresponsible wishful thinking. There will be no dramatic intervention from some imagined Beyond to save us from our destructive, warring ways.

What will we do with our freedom and privacy? As I have wondered about this question, I have come to the realization, in light of what rests in our hands, that I must re-think Freedom and Privacy.

We have experienced the precious heritage of freedom and privacy in this nation. Not only is the Human free as emergent of Ultimate Being and not only does the human possess privacy because finally the inner sanctum of the mind and spirit cannot be penetrated, but in the American experience, in contrast to so many of Earth's children, we have lived the human experience in a nation whose constitutional structures were expressly shaped to protect our freedom from the encroachment of government and to guard our Privacy from invasion by the agencies of the State.

We have shared a precious heritage in a grand tradition of constitutional liberalism - understanding liberalism in the classic nineteenth-century sense, meaning concerned with individual, economic, political, and religious liberty.

In light of our discussion, placing the Future in our hands, I suggest that we must think again about Freedom and Privacy as they relate to what we might envision as a more humane human future in the emerging cosmic drama. I am nudged in this direction by the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann in an essay entitled "God Means Freedom," appearing in a volume, *Humanity in God*. Moltmann does not develop cosmology and emergence as I have done here; he operates out of a traditional theistic conception of God. His discussion of Freedom, however, is most helpful as I think about the task before us. Moltmann distinguishes between Freedom as Lordship and Freedom as Fellowship, an important distinction, I must say, of which I had never thought. In his words:

Politicians and revolutionaries, pietists and atheists - many people talk about freedom, but they do not mean the same thing. Obviously, it is not easy to define freedom. There are so many freedoms: freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of trade, free economic exchange, free enterprise, free love, and even alcohol-free drinks. There are many things we call free. What then do we mean by freedom? And what is true freedom?

The first definition we know from political history defines freedom as lordship. Since all previous history can be interpreted as a continuing battle for power, the so-called free, the victors in battle, are those who rule. Those who lost, who are subjected and exploited, are called unfree ...

When we say today that people who can do or have what they want are free, then we understand freedom as lordship, a lordship of people over themselves. When we say today that someone who is not pressured by inner or outer forces is free, then we understand freedom as lordship...

Modern liberalism involves possessive individualism. It replaced royal absolutism and feudalism in Western Europe and remained cast in the mold of the feudal lord. The liberals say that everyone who carries the human face has the same right of freedom. The limit of the freedom of each individual is only the freedom and property of the other. Those who claim their own freedom must respect the same freedom for others. But that means also that for modern liberalism, freedom is defined as lordship. Each one sees the other as a competitor in the battle for power and ownership. Each one exists for the other only as the limitation of freedom. Each one is for himself or herself free, but no one takes interest in the other. This results in a society of freer, but lonelier, people. No one cares for the other; everyone cares for himself or herself. Freedom has then really become public. Every person has a right to freedom. But is this really true freedom? Is this not the narcissism of the modern Western world?

The other definition we know from social history defines freedom not as lordship but as community. In my earlier comments on the glory and misery of modern liberalism, I said that the truth of freedom is love. Only in love does human freedom come to its truth. I am free and feel myself to be free when I am recognized and accepted by others and when I, for my part, recognize and accept others. I become truly free when I open my life for others and share it with them, and when others open their lives for me and share their lives with me. Then the other person is no longer a limitation of my freedom but the completion of it. A communal and mutual freedom - that is, our freedom - evolves out of your freedom and my own freedom. In this mutual participation in life, individuals are freed from the limitations of their own individuality. They can transcend themselves in the open community. This is the social side of freedom. We call it love or solidarity...

Divide et impera - divide and conquer - this is and was the well-known method of lordship. As long as freedom means lordship, people must separate, isolate, segregate, and differentiate everything in order to control it. But if freedom means community, then one experiences the wholeness of all separated things.

The history of German and Anglo-Saxon languages confirms that community is the root of the word freedom: Whoever is free is friendly, well disposed, open, delightful, and loving. This understanding is found in the concept of hospitality - in the German *gastfrei*, which means, literally, "free for guests." Those who are hospitable never rule over their guests and

they are never without them. They are capable of community with strangers. They let strangers participate in their life; they are interested in the lives of others.

Freedom as lordship destroys community. Freedom as lordship is freedom in its untruth. The truth of human freedom lies in love. It leads to unrestricted, solid, and open communities of mutual help. Only this freedom as community can heal the wounds, which freedom as lordship has caused and continues to cause. (Pp. 62-65)

I am struck by Moltmann's distinction between Freedom as Lordship and Freedom as Community. Having taken for granted the Freedom defined by classic nineteenth-century Liberalism as the highest human possibility, I must face Moltmann's claim that it does have the element of Lordship at its core and thus I am wondering if we do not need to think again about our present human situation which has become a Global Village. Is it not time to give up Freedom as Lordship and begin to work for Freedom as Community which, at its heart, is love that creates unity rather than Lordship that divides?

Let me speak personally; I am a Christian and a religious pluralist. I reject all Christian exclusivism and triumphalism. But, I find my human vision in the Way of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Rabbi whose life and death became the inspiration of the Christian Religion.

I have been working in another area besides the imagining of the Human as the emergence of the Sacred, as the incarnation of the Ultimate Mystery of Being. That other area of concern has been the possibility of Peace in a dangerous world teetering on the brink of disaster. I see our only hope in pursuing a path such as that that came to expression in the Way of Jesus, that is in a concrete human existence that was so remarkable that those who encountered him saw in him the embodiment of God.

And here I connect my two claims:

that the Divine has emerged in the human;

that the Way of Jesus is an instance of emergence that holds hope for our world.

What do we see in Jesus? Obviously, I cannot begin here to spell that out, except to say, here was a teacher and leader who in that historical context of Roman Imperial power dominating and exploiting the life of the Jewish people, ordering the everyday life of the people through the collaboration of the Sadducean Priestly elite, dared to speak truth to power. In the finest tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus made a prophetic protest against the domination system that held the Jewish people hostage. I need not flesh that out more than to say, as I have so often said,

He died the way he died because he lived the way he lived.

Death through crucifixion was the imperial response to Jesus' prophetic challenge, even though that challenge was non-violent, an instrument of prophetic protest used by Gandhi in India's freedom drive and Martin Luther King's civil rights movement.

That Jesus captured my imagination and the passion of my heart. No longer was my mission the salvation of souls for an eternal reward in heaven. No longer was the main event in another place and another time, but rather the creation of a new humanity for global community marked by justice and compassion and issuing in Shalom where no one would hurt or destroy and all would dwell without fear in Freedom.

It was at this point that I began to feel compelled more and more to follow the Way of Jesus in concrete human existence. Where once I avoided the Sermon on the Mount because I did not know what to do with the impossible ethic there advocated, I now came to see Jesus' teaching not as hopelessly idealistic and wholly unrealistic, but as truly the only hope of the world. My Lenten preaching pointed more and more to the Way of Jesus that led to his death with the painful recognition that in our present situation we are the Imperial Power which once was Rome.

I was troubled when our President began to speak of the "Axis of Evil" and in a sermon I suggested it was our place as the concentration of power - the only superpower - to attempt to sit down with these so-called "rogue nations" and ask about their hopes and dreams, to learn of their humiliation and their frustration that were driving them to dangerous desperation.

And then the group of Neo-Conservatives presently dominant in the Administration released their working document on that New American Century advocating the Pax Americana and American Empire, advocating the build-up of military might in order to create and dominate a "unipolar world."

The horror of 9/11 was the opening these ideologues needed to actualize their vision. The tragic debacle of Iraq is the consequence which now hangs as an albatross around our neck - and the world is more dangerous than ever.

Being absorbed with the Iraqi misadventure, we turned our focus and our resources from the real issue - dealing with terrorism - its perpetrators and its roots and we have provided the greatest motivation possible for further terrorist recruitment, while alienating most of the international community.

So, I come in this consideration of Freedom and Privacy to a place I could not have predicted - recognizing the Freedom conceived in our founding documents - the Freedom of classic Liberalism which, for all the benefits it has provided and all the amelioration of the human situation it has effected, is finally a freedom of

Lordship in a world that has progressed to a point where that is a dangerous enterprise that must be replaced with a movement toward the Freedom of Community whose heart is Love.

The Human is the emergence of the Sacred, the coming to expression of the Divine, the Ultimate Mystery of Being. The Human is thus sacred marked in essence by creativity, freedom, worth and dignity. But, the freedom and privacy of the Human must begin to be understood and actualized not in narrow individualism, but in community - global community bonded in love.

Hopelessly idealistic?

No, rather, utterly realistic and the most urgent imperative of our time:

The only hope for a Human future!

References:

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