

The Old Story Ever New: Formation and Freedom

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Transcription of the written talk

I created this title, “The Old Story Ever New: Formation and Freedom,” from what Max wrote in the “advertisement” about my “talk:”

Rev. Richard A. Rhem will facilitate a discussion on faith, life, heaven, and the human experience. We will talk about classical interpretations of scripture, the progressive perspective, and whatever else comes to mind. Please join us!

I was greatly relieved to read that he promised that I would “facilitate a discussion” rather than promise that I would lay bare all the mysteries of our faith and human experience. I was further relieved when our facilitator this morning, Camille, who has long known me from our Spring Lake days, wrote me, “I don’t expect you to formally speechify.” You see, she knows me well; I’ve been known to “speechify” although I had not heard that term before. So I promise I won’t speechify!

Camille gave me a brief account of the first two discussions in this series and I’m sure you have had a meaningful time together. From my assignment I sense, when the series was conceived, your leaders were thinking that after two discussions on near death experiences, you might be ready to step back and reflect on human experience in the larger picture –

Is this all there is?
Is there more beyond death’s pale?
What do our classic creeds affirm?
How do we interpret the biblical message?
How do we reconcile ancient creeds and ever-emerging human knowledge?

If I have sensed correctly that these are questions your leaders anticipated in the wake of the first two sessions, then it will not be so much answers we seek today but clarifying the questions with which we live, even as we rest in a fundamental trust.

As I invite you to reflect with me on these questions and the meaning of our human journey, let me say a word about how I approach these ultimate concerns. I see such questions as calling one to serious engagement with the meaning of life – not questions that have answers.

That was not always the case for me for I was nurtured and formed within a strong orthodox Reformed dogmatic system.

Dogma is such a familiar term in religious parlance that I can probably take for granted that everyone knows the meaning of the term. Yet precisely such familiarity sometimes misses a term's nuance and depth. I went to the dictionary. *Dogma* comes from the Greek – “that which one thinks true, an opinion, decree, from *dokein*, to think, seem.” Meanings listed:

1. a doctrine; tenet; belief (also collectively);
2. a positive, arrogant assertion of opinion; dogmatic utterance;
3. in theology, a doctrine or body of doctrines formally and authoritatively affirmed.

Under “dogmatic” – “asserted a priori or without proof; asserting opinion in a positive or arrogant manner.”

Checking the synonyms sheds light on the danger of dogma: “imperious, dictatorial, authoritative, arrogant, magisterial, self-opinionated, positive.”

While I hope I was not authoritative, magisterial, arrogant, etc., I did believe there were clear answers to ultimate questions and they were to be found in the inerrant, infallible Word of God.

Although that may sound like I was confident, assured and certain of the Christian faith I professed and preached, as a matter of fact I was afraid, unsure and defensive. Every new emerging insight, from growing knowledge of historical development, from exploding data about biblical formation, from breakthroughs in the sciences, threatened my neatly formed faith structure.

It has been a long and painful journey for me – so deeply formed, so seriously threatened. When the carefully crafted structure of orthodox Reformed faith collapsed in the pursuit of a faith I could rest in, I found there was something deeper than I had ever known – *a fundamental trust that God is Love and Love is the grain of the universe*. I found it to be true for me what the early 20th century German scholar Rudolph Otto wrote in his book *The Holy*, where he attempts to analyze “the feeling that remains when the concept fails.”

I sense that is what you are about in this discussion group – plumbing the deep questions of meaning in our human pilgrimage. There was a time I would have felt compelled to have answers. Thank God I now know I can only help clarify the questions as together we wonder about this amazing human journey.

On further reflection, that early deep formation I experienced was not in vain. The rational system, the dogma – that, I have learned, was a futile effort to define the Mystery of Reality – the Sacred, the Holy. But the community, the symbols, the rituals, the liturgy – the whole religious drama – in my case, the Christian story – moves me still and points me to the Sacred Mystery of the ongoing cosmic journey. In her beautiful book *Physics and Faith: The Luminous Web*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

When I am dreaming quantum dreams, the picture I see is more like that web of relationships – an infinite web, flung across the vastness of space like a luminous net. It is made of energy, not thread. As I look, I can see light moving through it like a pulse moving through veins. I know the light is an illusion, since what I am seeing moves faster than light, but what I see out there is no different from what I feel inside. There is a living hum that might be coming from my neurons but might just as well be coming from the furnace of the stars. When I look up at them there is a small commotion in my bones, as the ashes of dead stars that house my marrow rise up like metal filings toward the magnet of their living kin.

Where is God in this picture? All over the place. Up there. Inside my skin and out. God is the web, the energy, the space, the light – not captured in them, as if any of those concepts were more real than what unites them, but revealed in that singular, vast net of relationship that animates everything that is.

Marvelous imagery! The whole of reality saturated with the Spirit, the Breath, that is the energy of the Sacred Mystery we call God, a Sacred Mystery we describe as Love because, at one moment in the luminous web that enlivens all that is, a face appeared – the Logos (Word) became flesh, and God, the X factor, that abstract Ground, Source and Goal of all there is, became concrete. Now there was a clue as to the nature of the originating, everything-permeating, infinite Mystery that takes our breath away and gives us breathing room.

Resting there, I readily recognize I have not “proven” anything rationally. But, of course, that is what I have come to understand – the ultimate mystery of the cosmic web into which our lives are woven is not available to rational analysis but rather only to supra-rational or trans-rational, deeply intuitive fundamental trust before the presence of Mystery.

Brilliant scholars in various fields deny this and conclude quite differently. For example, the Nobel Prize winning biologist Jacques Monod writes in his work *Chance and Necessity*:

If he accepts this (negative) message in its full significance, man must at last wake out of his millenary dreams and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that like a gypsy, he lives on the

boundary of an alien world; a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering and his crimes.

Similarly, Erich Fromm, one of the world's leading psychoanalysts, wrote in *Man for Himself*,

There is only one solution to his problem: to face the truth, to acknowledge his fundamental aloneness in a universe indifferent to his fate, to recognize that there is no power transcending him which can solve his problems for him.

If we humans are defined by our reason alone and have to do only with rational argument – Monod and Fromm define our human situation with clarity – we are alone and this is all there is.

But there are other thoughtful persons who deny our humanity can be delineated by reason alone. In his major early work, the Catholic scholar Hans Küng describes the advent and development of modern atheism in the thinking of Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, ending with Nietzsche's nihilism. A section on nihilism concludes: "Nihilism – possible, irrefutable, but unproved." From that point, Küng's next major heading is "Yes to Reality – Alternative to Nihilism." Within this heading is a subsection he entitles "*Fundamental Mistrust or Fundamental Trust?*"

Küng obviously will build a case for religious faith building on fundamental trust. In another work he affirms,

To believe in an eternal life means, in reasonable trust, in enlightened faith, in tried and tested hope – to rely on the fact that I shall one day be fully understood, freed from guilt and definitively accepted and can be myself without fear; that my impenetrable and ambivalent existence, like the profoundly discordant history of humanity as a whole, will one day become finally transparent and the question of the meaning of history one day be finally answered. (*Eternal Life*, p. 231)

The late Dag Hammarskjöld, a General Secretary of the United Nations, wrote in his spiritual diary, *Markings*,

I don't know who or what put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering, but at that moment I did answer "Yes" to someone or something and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful, and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender has had a goal.

I love that expression – far beyond the limits of rational control – a deeply felt intuition of the Presence of the Sacred Mystery we call God.

In his Opinion column in The New York Times, David Brooks cites the poet Christian Wiman who, in his *My Bright Abyss*, points to the contemporary sense of cosmic connectedness in reference to the movie “Interstellar”:

But in the era of quantum entanglement and relativity, everything looks emergent and interconnected. Life looks less like a machine and more like endlessly complex patterns of waves and particles. Vast social engineering projects look less promising, because of the complexity, but webs of loving and meaningful relationships can do amazing good.

As the poet Christian Wiman wrote in his masterpiece, *My Bright Abyss*, “If quantum entanglement is true, if related particles react in similar or opposite ways even when separated by tremendous distances, then it is obvious that the whole world is alive and communicating in ways we do not fully understand. And we are part of that life, part of that communication....”

I suspect “Interstellar” will leave many people with a radical openness to strange truth just below and above the realm of the everyday. That makes it something of a cultural event. (David Brooks, NYT, 11/21/14)

As one who began in a serious orthodox understanding of Christian faith which was defensively reacting to the overpowering movement of Enlightenment Rationality – thus entering an arena in which it could never prevail, I’ve come to rest deeply in the fundamental trust in which I was nurtured. With the contemporary sense of an interconnected cosmic dance of Being, I find great peace and rest in a conviction that

Heaven is here,
heaven is now
and the best is yet to be!

References:

David Brooks, “Love and Gravity,” New York Times, Nov. 20, 2014

Hans Küng. *Eternal Life: Life After Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*, p. 231. Wipf & Stock Pub., 2003

Barbara Brown Taylor. *Physics and Faith: The Luminous Web*. Cowley Publications, 2000.