

The God We Cannot Flee

Heartfelt Poems

Psalm 139

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Prepared text of the sermon

This is the fourth of the four scheduled presentations for 2008. As I begin each time, I want to express my appreciation to Tapas and the Interfaith Center for the invitation and the opportunity to reflect on biblical themes from my own Christian tradition. Here all are honored, celebrated, and respected and one experiences that all too rare spirit of warm welcome, affirmation and openness. There is something about the atmosphere here that invites one to relax, to share openly and candidly and sense one is valued.

This is a place of rich spiritual life where religious practice and spiritual quest are joined in a wonderfully positive community that is unapologetically a community of religious faith in its wide variety of manifestations.

I had to smile to myself a week ago yesterday as I read the *Grand Rapids Press* section on Religion. I was reminded of my pre-retirement preaching ministry, when on Saturday morning, I regularly took the Press Religion section up to my loft where I would hibernate until I left for Christ Community Church on Sunday morning. More often than not, there would be something in the paper that would get my adrenaline flowing and even, if I were fortunate, provide an entrée to the subject of the sermon I had announced. I smiled because it happened again; what I was ruminating on for today was dealt with, in a sense, in two pieces that referred to the same current phenomenon – the film by humorist Bill Maher entitled *Religulous*.

You have probably heard about the recent release of the film; it has a strong PR campaign working to promote the film. The L.A. Times printed a piece entitled “Bill Maher’s *Religulous*; Oscar Bait?” (August 21, 2008):

When I attended a press screening for Bill Maher’s “*Religulous*” in New York on Tuesday, it struck me like a lightning bolt on the road to the Kodak Theatre via Damascus: yeah, “*Religulous*” will probably be nominated for best docu at the Oscars – and God help us all after that.

We know that “Religulous” is seriously in the derby for several reasons. First, Lionsgate hired veteran Oscars PR reps to handle its ballyhoo (Michele Robertson in L.A., Jeff Hill in New York). Secondly, the studio is giving the documentary its theatrical runs in L.A. and New York to qualify it for academy consideration, as Jeff Sneider notes at Anne Thompson’s blog at Variety.com. Thirdly the hallelujahs that film critics gave it today at the screening. More disciples are sure to follow.

In order to catch on widely like religion itself, what atheism has needed for a long time is a popular preacher to rally ‘round. Maher just volunteered for the job that’s been vacant since Madalyn Murray O’Hair vanished in the 1990’s (eventually found murdered in 2001). Richard Dawkins has been a fine temporary stand-in, but not flashy like O’Hair. Bill Maher kicks things up a notch. He’s a pop culture hipster who already has a large, anti-establishment flock, and he has a bully pulpit that O’Hair didn’t: his own HBO show plus vast presence across all media.

The Huffington Post notes:

In a statement about the film, Maher explained his rationale for making it:

It has been my pleasure over the last decade and a half to make organized religion one of my favorite targets. I often explained to people, “I don’t need to make fun of religion, it makes fun of itself.” And, then I go ahead and make fun of it too, just for laughs.

With religious fanatics like George Bush and Osama bin Laden now taking over the world, it seemed to me in recent years that this issue – this cause of debunking the man behind the curtain – needed to have a larger, more insistent and focused forum than late night television. I wanted to make a documentary, and I wanted it to be funny. In fact, since there is nothing more ridiculous than the ancient mythological stories that live on as today’s religions, this movie would try to be a real knee slapper. Unless, of course, you’re religious, then you might not like it.

As part of the film, Maher has also created a website, *Disbeliefnet*, as a parody of *Beliefnet*, the popular spiritual website.

In response to the local showing of the film that occurred on Friday, October 3, Charles Honey used his column to suggest “It’s time to move beyond belief wars.” He writes we should divide into teams – religious believers on one side, atheists and agnostics on the other with each side getting ten minutes to present its case for or against God and religion. Then each side would get a five-minute rebuttal.

Well, Honey is spoofing, of course, but his serious point is believers would do well to listen to the critics of religion and so would the sceptics. And, he concludes, both sides would do well to know when to give it a rest.

A more important piece in the Religion Section, also by Charles Honey, was entitled “Nonbelievers Make A Move”, in which he reports on a gathering of religious sceptics who gathered after seeing the movie. He writes, “For many of them, Maher’s mockery of religious faith was a kind of coming out for their besieged minority of atheists and agnostics.” One complained, “They don’t respect us in our nonbelief....Why can’t we have a conversation about this?”

To which a Hope College Professor of Psychology responds, “Great; let’s talk.” David Meyers is a fine scholar, widely published, and a serious Christian. His latest book is entitled *A Friendly Letter to Sceptics and Atheists*. He thinks scepticism is essential to healthy faith. He writes,

Let’s, with a spirit of humility, put testable ideas to the test and then let’s throw out religion’s dirty bathwater.

But then he adds,

Is there amid the bathwater a respect-worthy baby – a reasonable and beneficial faith?

Well, it is not my intention to get into this discussion. My comments flow from my expression of appreciation for this inter-faith community which strikes me as serene in its diverse religious observance. Perhaps it is simply that I am of an age that religious wars and conflict hold no interest for me. I’ve had enough of trying to persuade or convert or argue.

But that doesn’t imply that I no longer find the spiritual/religious quest fascinating; I do. And I cherish a good book, a good conversation, arriving at a new insight. I never tire of wondering, wondering about the amazing cosmic story, the emergence of life, of consciousness and awareness, the evolution of human thought and the history of religion in all its varied facets.

It is a great gift to be free of religious institutional concerns, budgets and building programs and memberships. I’ve paid my dues in that dimension of religious practice. And now, if anyone is interested, I can reflect on the mystery that is at the heart of reality, the Sacred and the Holy to which there has been universal witness of experience. And I can, if I desire, even view *Religulous* and read the hostile denials of God in Dawkin’s *The God Delusion* or the petulance of Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great*. But that is not where I will feed my spirit. It is rather in the great classics of religious experience as well as the sacred texts themselves, for me, the biblical text.

That is what these four reflections have been – hearing again the heartfelt poems that came to expression in the Hebrew Scripture. Last month my theme was “The Human Hunger for God” taking the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 42:

As the deer longs for flowing streams,
So my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
For the Living God.

Much of my presentation focused on a work by Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away*. In sum, the authors claim on the basis of brain research that we are hard-wired for spiritual experience; it is a given of human nature. Supplementing that claim, I referred to a recent book by Huston Smith and Henry Rosemont, Jr., whose title raises the question, *Is There a Universal Grammar of Religion?* The authors agree there is. Huston Smith, the dean of scholars who has studied world religions, comes from a life-long Christian perspective. Rosemont, however, declares, "I am not a Christian, do not believe in God or gods...." Yet these two from opposite positions on the God question and religious practice both affirm that there is written in the human DNA a religious dimension.

(My presentation was, some have told me, heavy and I must admit, when I was finished it did feel a bit like a term paper.)

We will look more closely at Psalm 139 in a moment but first I want to return to the discussion between Huston Smith and Henry Rosemont, Jr. in the recent work to which I referred last time – *Is There a Universal Grammar of Religion?* In his response to Huston Smith's lecture claiming there is an innate human capacity for religious experience – a conclusion with which Rosemont agrees with Smith as well as the authors of *Why God Won't Go Away* – he set himself apart from Huston in that Huston has remained in his childhood faith – Christian faith in the Methodist tradition – while Rosemont says, "I am not a Christian and I don't believe in God..."

You may find it strange that one who writes with Huston Smith and agrees that there is a universal human religious dimension would say he doesn't believe in God. Obviously, for him religious experience must be of another sort than that of traditional religion focused on some conception of Divinity, of a Supreme Being though variously described. And indeed that is the case. I did not reference this last month but on my first reading of Rosemont's response to Huston Smith's lecture I was struck by his own statement of how he understood religious experience. As he was the designated responder to Huston Smith's recent lecture, so a few years earlier Huston was the responder to a Rosemont lecture. Rosemont refers to that lecture as he tries to portray where he is in relation to Huston's Christian understanding. He explains:

Much of my lecture was devoted to claiming that the sacred texts of the world's religions all provided spiritual disciplines for the achievement of religious experiences which I described as a strong feeling of belonging, or

of attunement, or, in Wittgenstein's Christian-flavored account, "the experience of being *absolutely safe*."

Let me underline Rosemont's description of religious experience –

A strong feeling of belonging, or of attunement, or, in Wittgenstein's Christian-flavored account, "*the experience of being absolutely safe*."

I found, and I find that a powerfully descriptive phrase that immediately resonated with me. Wittgenstein was one of the towering figures of early 20th century philosophical discussion, especially in the meaning of language in our discourse. I was frankly surprised to find such a description of religious experience in Wittgenstein.

Rosemont went on to say that in his response to the lecture, Huston Smith pointed to that religious sense –

I really liked what you moved up to in the notion of the mystical absolute safety, and the notion of belonging. But again, are these simply psychological states that these traditions give us as directives for how we can come to these feelings? Or, do they dig deeper into the nature of things to describe a reality, the ultimate reality which gives grounds for us to think that we are not just making it up when we have these sentiments of safety and belonging? (p. 40)

Rosemont responded to Huston's comment at the time of that discussion –

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...

Now in this recent book he explains himself further.

...although I restrict myself to the human realm, I take that realm, and religious experience, very seriously, and do not believe we are somehow "just making it up." But as his remarks both then and now suggest, Smith does seem to want to say more, as he does at the outset of his lecture: The world (that my fourteen points) describe is objective, in the sense that it was here before we were and it is our business to understand it.

He reiterates this claim in his ninth point:

Nature does the same thing by building this Universal Grammar of language into our heads. We did not create that. It came from outside.

Now if by “outside” Smith means that our linguistic capacity is not such that we can modify it at will – that it does not depend on our whim, or even on any particular psychological state – then I would heartily agree, and believe Chomsky would as well. Language is simply an important feature of the species *homo sapiens*, and I would say the same for the religious capacity. But if by “outside” Smith wants to go beyond human biology, I fear I may not be able to join him.

Do you catch what is going on here?

Is religion an inner-psychological experience or does the experience point beyond itself to a Ground “outside” our personal experience?

To feel “absolutely safe” – is that an inner psychological/spiritual experience or does that point beyond the personal experience to a transcendent, objective Ground?

As I was gathering resources on our Psalm this morning, Psalm 139, which we will come to in a moment, I came on a sermon by Paul Tillich on the Psalm and was delighted because I thought maybe he could help me with the Smith/Rosemont question. Tillich, one of the seminal religious thinkers of the twentieth century, was well known for the description of God as the Ground of Being. I began to wonder if Tillich was trying to articulate an understanding somewhere between Rosemont and Smith.

Ground of Being

Is that Ground, the Creative Source, the Presence of Mystery within the one reality of our universe? Or is that a Foundation “outside” to use Huston’s words?

This is what Tillich expresses in his sermon on Psalm 139:

Christian theology and religious instruction speak of the Divine Omnipresence, which is the doctrine that God is everywhere, and of the Divine Omniscience, which is the doctrine that God knows everything. It is difficult to avoid such concepts in religious thought and education. But they are at least as dangerous as they are useful. They make us picture God as a thing with superhuman qualities, omnipresent like an electric power field, and omniscient like a superhuman brain. Such concepts as “Divine Omnipresence” and “Divine Omniscience” transform an overwhelming religious experience into an abstract, philosophical statement, which can be accepted and rejected, defined, redefined, and replaced. In making God an object besides other objects, the existence and nature of which are matters of argument, theology supports the escape to atheism....

Let us therefore forget these concepts, *as* concepts, and try to find their genuine meaning within our own experience. We all know that we cannot

separate ourselves at any time from the world to which we belong. There is no ultimate privacy or final isolation. We are always held and comprehended by something that is greater than we are, that has a claim upon us, and that demands response from us. The most intimate motions within the depths of our souls are not completely our own. For they belong also to our friends, to mankind, to the universe, and to the Ground of all being, the aim of our life.

(The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 45f)

Tillich discourages philosophical debate about the nature or attributes of God and encourages us to try to find what those concepts mean in our own experience. And he assumes that experience is real, not delusion – agreeing with the authors of *Why God Won't Go Away* and with Huston Smith. He claims “We are always held and comprehended by something that is greater than we are, that has a claim upon us...”. I assume he is saying such a realization of being “held and comprehended by something” is a dimension of human experience reflective of the reality of the human situation.

But what does his counsel to leave off philosophical debate and look to experience have to say to the question we raised about the positions of Huston Smith and Henry Rosemont? Could not the experience of being “held and comprehended” be either an experience pointing beyond itself to a “Ground Outside” as Huston would claim, or to an experience within the one reality of our existence, as Rosemont contends??

I'm not enough of a Tillich scholar to give an answer; perhaps in his total work an answer is available. But as I reflect on this whole question I cannot help but ask:

Does it matter?

Need it be either/or?

In either case would not the experience be the same?

And that experience would be, in Wittgenstein's words, “the experience of being absolutely safe.”

I wonder. Having been born into and nurtured in a community of faith that understood God as over against Creation, both transcending creation and immanent within it, I understand Huston Smith's probing and his intention of grounding the human and human religious experience “outside” the realm of human experience, the Reality to which human religious symbols and stories point. I am inclined by everything that has shaped me to understand God as “outside”.

I suspect that is the case also with Tillich although I wonder whether he was not suggesting God as the Ground of Being as immanent in the totality of reality,

moving away from the traditional theism that understood God as “outside” of our cosmic reality even though immanent within as well.

A naïve criticism of religious experience as an inner psychological phenomenon would claim that that makes God and/or religious experience simply a figment of our imagination or, even more crassly, the result of self-delusion. We brainwash ourselves as it were. But what if our psychological experience is the fruit of the experience of the whole of reality – the means by which the Sacred Mystery, the Source and Ground of All That Is is perceived? What if the marvelous gift of imagination is precisely the locus of the intersection of divine spirit and human spirit?

What if there is not a bifurcation of reality into eternal/temporal,
spirit/matter, sacred/profane?

Let’s take such a wondering question to the Psalms, to Israel’s hymnbook or Psalter. Of course we are dealing with an ancient cosmology, a three-storied universe, a God who is Person as we are persons – only more so – the Creator, Ruler, Judge and Savior. But, acknowledging that and recognizing such conceptuality cannot work for us, nonetheless listen for the experience to which the Psalmist gives expression – read it in your favorite translation – the experience of being known, completely known:

O Lord, you have searched me
And known me, ...
Where can I go from your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from your Presence?
For it was you who formed
My inward parts;
You knit me together
In my mother’s womb

Where could I flee? But why should I flee for I am immersed in the Presence, the Presence of Grace.

The closing verses grow harsh, wishing death on the wicked or is it simply those who do not share the Psalmist’s divine vision? Whichever, thankfully, the Psalmist moves beyond his vituperative condemnation – sensing, it seems, that he is out of line. Such imprecatory expression has no place in the presence of the Presence, and he returns to his own self-awareness in the Presence of the God before whom he is an open book:

Search me, know my heart,
test me and know my thoughts
...and lead me in the way everlasting.

A moving conclusion, resonant with openness, humility and peace in the Presence.

Some years ago I received a modern translation of Psalm 139 from Howard Moody of the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York City. I think the author was a creative artist/poet on the church staff, the Rev. Al Carmines. I find this a most moving paraphrase of the Psalm:

Yahweh, you have searched me,
Known me deeply;
Known my rest and restlessness,
My innermost desires
And where they lead
In word and deed.
Yahweh, you surround me,
Hound me with a closeness
Which will not retire –
I cannot pass your test.

Where shall I hide from your wind,
Or where find a place that is faceless?
No long road will lead away
Nor deep sea drown your sounding voice.
No height escapes your frightful reach
Nor emptiness, your speech.
The darkness leaves no time alone,
For dark and light are both your home.

There in the darkness of your secret place
You formed my frame and shaped my face;
There in the darkness of my mother's womb
You made room for me.
Accept my praise:
For I am dazed
By your creation:
Thoughtful of each instant of my time
As if I were your only child;
Yet my life, part of the ongoing rhyme
Of history, your play.

Why don't you kill these selfish actors?
Men who seek the center stage
And try to play your part!
How my heart rages at the sight of them!
Why don't you...

Search me and know my heart;
Test me and know my doubts;
And see if I am hiding in false face;
And lead my words and actions by your grace.

I am no accomplished judge of poetic expression but I find that powerful and moving, capturing in beautiful language the intimacy the Psalmist experienced in his witness to the God he could not flee.

To use the phrase from Tillich, one could say the Psalmist found himself “always held and comprehended by something that is greater than we are, that has a claim upon us....” Or, to use Huston Smith’s language when describing that which is “outside” our experience: “...the ultimate reality which gives grounds for us to think that we are not just making it up when we have these sentiments of safety and belonging.” That feeling of safety and belonging would be a fitting description of Psalm 139.

The experience of being absolutely safe. Experience – that is what the religious dimension of being human is all about. Religious experience has many facets and fruits as well as some shadow sides in human experience.

The psalmist’s imprecations against the enemies of God as he understood God; the marriage of ignorance and arrogance that marks so much religious exclusivism and militancy. The control by institutional authoritarianism manipulating the people by the imputation of guilt and the prospect of an eternal burning.

I could go on but to what avail? That is not what religious practice and observance is about in a place like this. It is not what it is about where it is a means to open the mind and warm the heart.

And I know of no finer, more concise description of the fruit of the spiritual quest and the religious life than coming to an experience of being absolutely safe.

Is that experience an inner psychological/spiritual experience or is it an experience grounded outside ourselves in the very structure of reality, in the Ground of Being, in the God beyond all the names and attributes by which the respective religions have described their vision of the Sacred Mystery of Being?

Does it matter?

Does it matter if the result of one’s religious observance and practice yields the experience of being absolutely safe? I know there would be a clamor should I suggest such an idea beyond the confines of this safe place. I can hear the objections already:

Is there not such a thing as Truth?
Are you suggesting a relativity that makes no distinctions? Etc. Etc.

I know. I know. But consider: what greater fruit can religion offer and provide than the feeling of being absolutely safe? Could one not live a fully human existence if grounded in such an experience: And could one not face one's end with serenity if such was one's experience?

With all this on my mind, I attended a funeral yesterday at St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church. A lovely woman who was a team member for many years at Christ Community Church working with children in the education program lost her husband at age 58. He was not really an observant Catholic but had been baptized and confirmed at St. Pat's and thus the funeral was there. I know the pastor, a warm, inviting person and was greeted warmly as I entered the sanctuary. "Ave Maria" was being sung. Then the processional, candles and cross and vestments. I was feeling very much at home.

The manner of the priest was gracious, warm and embracing – no pomp and circumstance. He even handed out suckers to the few children in attendance. The liturgy was followed, but minimally. The homily was given in a friendly non-threatening, inviting manner. The gospel passage from Matthew 25 about the Sheep and the Goats was read and referred to.

The theology was straightforward atonement-centered – Jesus died for our sins – he took our place opening access to God and eternal life. We were all invited to receive the gift of salvation.

It is a theology I once held without question but have come to understand quite differently, but it didn't really matter. The priest's manner, as I said, was non-threatening, non-judgmental and very genuine and sincere.

As I said above, with all of today on my mind, I found the whole experience quite wonderful. The dogmatic framework out of which the priest was speaking did not matter to me. What did matter was his manner, his obvious care for the grieving, his assurances, his goodness and kindness, the affirmation of the deceased and the hope expressed. I sensed that the family and friends were hearing through it all the affirmation – Your loved one is absolutely safe and you are as well.

I was quite conscious of that sense pervading the sanctuary, no doubt because I have been reflecting on that declaration as a summation of what in religious parlance we mean by salvation.

For me, as for others there, of course, there was not only the beautiful humanity of the priest but also "Ave Maria", stained glass, the twenty-third Psalm sung and the Gospel read, cross and candles and the beauty of the sanctuary. The Story – the Symbols – the Setting – All of it "speaking" good news – you are absolutely

safe! Safe because your life is held and comprehended by something greater than you, the Ground of Being, experienced through story and symbol – through posture, gesture, vesture, through liturgy and music.

I don't mean to be boastful when I say it takes a great deal of maturity to sense in all of that that one is absolutely safe. It has taken me a lifetime of study and struggle, of questioning and wondering.

I really don't need Bill Maher to tell me religious practice, observance and dogma is all too commonly religulous. Of course it is because we religious folk are not infrequently ridiculous – arrogant, ignorant, tribal, exclusive, dogmatic and judgmental.

But *religion* is not religulous; in its vast variety of expression and observance it is humanizing and elevating, inspiring and a catalyst for the best and the highest of human achievement and nobility.

And it functions thus at its best when our human experience in the Presence of that which holds us has assured us we are absolutely safe.

O Lord, you have searched me
And known me....
Where can I go from your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from your Presence?...
Search me, O God, and know my heart
...and lead me in the way everlasting.
For in your Presence, within or "outside", I am absolutely safe.

After the morning experience in the sanctuary, last evening we attended a neighborhood gathering at a home across the street from our own. On our neighbor's deck, I watched the brilliant sunset as the sun slipped into Lake Michigan, leaving a golden afterglow. Walking home an hour later, darkness had set in and the sky was inky black, but across the vast expanse of heaven's canopy sparkled myriad stars as diamonds. To the west where the last traces of gold had been erased, the Evening Star was brightly shining; to the south, massive Jupiter could be seen; to the north the Big Dipper twinkled.

My heart leapt within me; the words of my favorite mantra came to my awareness:

All will be well,
All will be well;
All manner of things will be well.
And I knew I was absolutely safe!

References:

Paul Tillich. *The Shaking of the Foundations*, a collection of sermons.

