Emerson, Cox and God

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From a sermon delivered at the First Unitarian Church in Sioux City, Iowa.

I.

MORE than a century ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that Christian faith was too closely identified with medieval supernaturalism. The old synthesis between 'god up there' and 'man down here' with the Church as the connecting link between heaven and earth was no longer an adequate model for theological discourse. In his famous address to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School in the summer of 1838 he said: "I think no man can go with his thoughts about him, into one of our churches, without feeling that what hold the public worship had on men is gone, or going. It has lost its grasp on the affection of the good, and the fear of the bad."[1]

Emerson had identified a problem which in our time has been compounded by the emergence of a secular mood which makes a supernaturalistic faith irrelevant. The question this raises is whether there is **any way at all** in which we can speak meaningfully about God. Perhaps what the philosophers call "God talk" is no longer possible. At least we know that the meaning of the word "God" has been altered. For example, in response to a survey published some time ago by the Unitarian-Universalist Association, only 2.9 percent of those answering the question on theological beliefs indicated that the word God referred to a "supernatural being who reveals himself in human experience and history," while 44.2 percent of the respondents felt that the word God refers to "some natural processes within the universe such as love or creative evolution." If among those of more liberal theological persuasion the word God refers to some kind of natural process to which none of the traditional attributes of absolute power, benevolence, and majesty may be ascribed, then is it necessary or meaningful to use the word God any longer?

II.

The question being asked today about God and the ways in which the word is used indicate that the theological foundations of the church are being severely shaken and radically altered. Many theologians are saying that we are living in a "post-Christian era," by which they mean that the social, political, cultural, and spiritual dominance of the church, characteristic of the high Middle Ages, is a thing of the past. The church lost its political and social power with the growth of the idea of religious toleration since the Reformation, together with the emergence of sectarian Protestantism. It has not yet fully dawned on us that the spiritual authority of the church is also finished.

The medieval cathedral is an appropriate cultural and religious symbol of the era of Christendom which has come to an end. Even the Puritans sensed this when they refused to reproduce the Gothic style in the villages of New England. The cathedral symbolized the faith of those who designed and built them, the certainty of Christian belief and the permanence of the church itself as the "indestructible institution of salvation." Martin Luther's famous hymn put it very well:

> A Mighty Fortress is our God,
> A Bulwark never failing!

[1] "The Divinity School Address," in Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 106.

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Luther was thoroughly medieval in his churchmanship in spite of his protest. But the process of secularization which we see in the Renaissance and Reformation, gathering support from the Enlightenment with its confidence in reason, the birth of science with its confidence in technique, and the refinement of philosophy with its radical skepticism, has culminated in a worldly mood which spreads a pall of disbelief concerning religious faith. The church braces itself against the erosion of religious certainty with tactics designed to reassert its authority in matters of faith and morals as in the promugation of the dogma of papal infallibility in the Roman Catholic Church, and the Protestant fundamentalist invention of Biblical dogmatism in which the scriptures became a kind of "paper pope."

III.

The primary question of religious certainty relates to the problem of God and exactly what it means to speak of God in a secular age. A brief look at one phase of this problem may help to focus our concern.

It was during the 13th century at the height of the Middle Ages that Thomas Aquinas formulated his arguments for the existence of God. He asserted that God's existence would be proved by reason on the basis of the observation that quantities and qualities are not self-explanatory but depend upon superior quantities or qualities. In order to explain the fact that things are in motion, one had to posit finally the existence of a First Cause which must possess the attribute of Absolute Goodness in order to account for gradations in value. Hence, God exists, Absolute in Power and Goodness. Aquinas went on to say that man's **saving** knowledge of God was a matter of faith as defined by the church. His argument did two things: it "proved" the existence of God and established the spiritual authority of the church. The Thomistic logic is still influential today in many circles, Protestant and Catholic.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (d. 1776) questioned the plausibility of the arguments and his skepticism represented a threat to that tradition in Christian theology which found it necessary to speak about the **existence** of God in the same sense in which one speaks of the existence of Mt. McKinley. Hume argued that the cause-effect sequence upon which Thomas's arguments rest, is a mental phenomenon and that there was no **necessary** relationshihp between an observed effect and its supposed cause. In a similiar way philosophers today are saying that it is meaningless (or nonsense) to speak of the existence of God because the statement "God exists" is not subject to any kind of verification. Many contemporary theologians have accepted the logic of the skeptics and do not speak of the "existence of God."

But there is renewed interest in theology today in what may be called the "reality" of God. We are seeing a new development in theology which is the result of an intersection of the concerns of Biblical and natural theology. Harvey Cox's secular theology has emerged from the Barthian tradition with its radical emphasis on Biblical faith, insisting that the Christian speaks not of the "existence" but of the "will" of God disclosed in the context of personal and historical life. From a different perspective, Paul Tillich spoke of God as "Ground of Being" and suggested that faith is direction toward this Ground expressed in terms of "ultimate concern" in personal and historical life. Others of more naturalistic persuasion like Henry Nelson Wieman, Harvey H. Potthoff, and John B. Cobb have argued that "God" refers to certain events or processes in the context of nature and human life. These men all agree that it is not possible to speak of God as independent First Cause or Supernatural Being: they affirm that the "reality of God" is discernible in personal, social, historical, and natural dimensions.

IV.

It is here that we find a new emphasis which echoes in some measure the Emersonian concern for the "Moral" depth of Christian faith. Emerson was reflecting the Kantian argument when he wrote: "The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul . . . If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice."[2]

We notice that Emerson is not talking about the **existence** of God as "a being" who occupies time and space; he is suggesting that there is a commerce between God and man at that level of human consciousness wherein the sense of moral obligation emerges and becomes determinative in human affairs. It is at this point, for example, that a new manner of speaking about God may be discerned. Emerson saw that the moral life of man is the **vital nerve of religious** faith. In this he was speaking directly out of the tradition of the Hebrew prophets—a tradition which culminates in Jesus Christ. This is certainly one point to which Christian faith turns and returns in its efforts to deal with the problems of God and language about God. The ancient church had a similar instinct when it invented the doctrine of Incarnation to insist, against the Gnostics, that Jesus could not be divine without being human. It is this same conviction which the author of I John states when he says bluntly: "If anyone says 'I love God' and hates his brother he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" I John 4.20). No argument here about the "existence" of God; just a terse observation about the meaning of faith in God in a personal and historical context.

To speak of God in our time is to speak of a worldly and also a natural God—a God who is at the center rather than the periphery of life, a God who discloses himself in the midst of the activity and challenge of metropolis, a God who is with us in daily encounters in personal and historical events, a "more inclusive reality" which constitutes the matrix of human life and history. Christian theology has always been shaped in dialogue with the worlds of history and nature which are aspects of the same world-process.

In a sense, it is easier to see God in nature than in history. This was true of Emerson who could wax eloquent about the "refulgent summer" and "the fire and gold in the tint of flowers," "the crimson dawn" and the transparent darkness through which the stars "pour their almost spiritual rays." But Emerson had another instinct which puts him in touch with the secular city and with the theology of a more thoroughly secular age than his. I do not think it out of keeping with Emerson's mind to say that we need not mourn the death of God, but perhaps the atrophy of human perception of the divine and response to it.

We speak of God not simply when we use religious language, the language of piety and devotion, the language of prayer and sacrament; we speak of God also when we use the language of science and history, of art and literature, of politics, economics, and social concern. Harvey Cox says that to speak of God in a secular fashion "requires first of all that we place ourselves at those points where the restoring, reconciling activity of God is occurring, where the proper relationship between man and man is appearing . . . it must engage people at particular points, not just 'in general.'"[3] The secular style of theology today represents a hopeful synthesis of the Biblical and natural concerns of our theological tradition. Emerson's theological instincts were not at all unlike those of today, although he spoke in somewhat softer tones in a

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[3] Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), p. 256.

somewhat quieter time: "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets . . . Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world."[4]

[4] Conrad Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 97.