

REFLECTIONS ON UNMASKING GOD

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The title for my subsequent remarks is taken from an article in *The Iliff Review* (Winter 1982) by Diane L. MacDonald, "Unmasking God: Wonder Woman or Housewife." Her first sentences give meaning to what follows: "Prometheus knowingly and unabashedly stole fire from God and gave it to humans. By doing so, he not only defied Zeus but unmasked him." Her thesis should be well considered in our traditions of male dominance and is somewhat amusing as she appropriates God for femininity. Her bottom line is timely. "The measure of our success will be the measure to which God's power (if any) is indeed distributed to the marginal on earth."

I have read *The Iliff Review* through many long years and I want my colleagues to know that I regard this publication as helpful in diagnosing areas of theological interpretations, sometimes illuminating and then again difficult to understand and confusing.

I am reminded that as a student in Iliff I received an overdose of Personalism under the kindly professorship of Dr. Borden P. Bowne Kessler who was seemingly enamored with Professor Borden P. Bowne of Boston Seminary. One of my mentors was Bishop Francis J. McConnell who avowed Personalism but not with great conviction when he debated Clarence Darrow about things metaphysical. I was drawn to Spinoza and Pantheism by reason of courses in European Philosophers while a student in the University of Colorado. I graduated from Iliff with no particular theological convictions. For one thing, I had no adequate definition or commitment to the idea of God.

There came into my possession, while browsing through a second hand book store, a volume by Clarence Augustine Beckwith entitled *The Idea of God* which is good reading today. Reading it I found quotes and references to Spinoza, such as:

From the point of view of the active elements of which the universe is compounded there is abstract possibility of an immeasurable number of universes, included in which is naturally the present order (p. 140).

Since Spinoza identified reality and perfection and held that from the essential nature of God everything arises by an eternal necessity, he had no place for evil except in our mistaken notion of perfection and imperfections: every thing is good, only from the

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finite point of view may we speak of evil (p. 166).

For the term God signifies more than is embodied in Jesus (p. 257).

For Spinoza God is the only life (p. 261).

Beckwith included a chapter on The Personality of God which somewhat clarified my concerns about Bowne's Personalism.

I later took a course on God with the scholarly Dr. William Henry Bernhardt. He defined God as "The Great Unknown." I didn't know what to make of this. What came through to me was that if man was capable of knowing everything there would be no need for God. It was an exciting thought and led to many explorations and evaluations. Dr. Bernhardt, in one of his lectures, used the beautiful tree outside our classroom window to illustrate a point. Dr. Kessler had used the same tree to underwrite another view. I smiled and Dr. Bernhardt inquired as to what brought it on. I revealed my thoughts and said, "I am glad the tree is still there."

There was the responsibility for preparation classes for new members—mostly young people. The literature, provided by Church, included such mighty words as Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent. This required a knowledge and hierarchy of power, knowing and space for which I was unprepared.

I moved to Michigan and kept up with Iliff by reading the *Review* and talking with students. It would seem that Iliff has experienced a number of theological affirmations—not to mention the parade of authors and lecturers—and the insight of the great theologians and philosophers of the past and present—some psychologists and psychiatrists—not many sociologists. The Neo-orthodox and God as a Process would seem to have been rather special. *The Iliff Review* reported hopefully about a process theology that could be the wave of the future. I am reminded of a neighborhood grocery man who just about said the same thing. I ordered a quart of milk, but it didn't have the cream on top which I expected to use for my coffee. "Looks like skim," I said. "No," he replied, "it's homogenized. It's a new process. Better get used to it. It's going to be around for a long time."

My life's concern has been for the social implications and demands of religious faith and social action. I began saying in the thirties: "We do not need to know less about God whom we cannot see or comprehend, but much more about human beings with whom we must live and who can be jostled aside by other ideologies." I also said: "God is not worried about how much you know of Him. He is concerned about what you are doing for people."

I have two articles before me: "God and the Astronomers" by Ed L. Miller in *The Iliff Review* (Winter 1982) and "A Jewish Sociologist Looks at God" by Hanan C. Selvin, State University of New York (Stony Brook) November 1973.

Professor Miller brings to our attention that “Jastrow’s purpose is to explain how cosmology has slowly but steadily ground down to the view that the universe did indeed have a beginning at a definite point of time, now calculated to be approximately fifteen or twenty billion years ago. At that time all the matter of the universe was concentrated in a super dense mass at a temperature of many trillions of degrees. This mass exploded in a colossal nuclear reaction, the ‘Big Bang’ resulting eventually in the present configuration of the universe.” Einstein’s response to this was: “This circumstance irritates me.” It would seem that Einstein did not believe in God as a Creator or Prime Mover. He did claim to believe in “Spinoza’s God.”

Miller might have emphasized the infinities of universes unknown to human exploration and comprehension. He refers to creation out of nothing. He writes about all this: “Theistically, it is hardly exciting.” I have to disagree. Nothing begets nothing. Something does not emerge from nothing. There was something in the Big, Big, Bang, Bangs—not Being or God—just an irritant that caused the explosion. It might have been a clash of high and low pressure which often happens in and over our small earth. It was not an act of God or Gods. (Nor is this a chore for anyone to turn a switch that will set up an irritant that will let loose a nuclear holocaust to turn our world and universe back into a gaseous nothing. Let us have a theological explanation *now*. There won’t be one *then*.)

Our Universe has settled down to a shaky orderliness, not altogether dependable as finite minds might desire. Nature can be destructive and people make mistakes, a constant threat to human comfort. Nevertheless, human beings have evolved and in various cultures have been creative. Their civilizations have declined and have been destroyed from within and without. Humankind has emerged out of the Big Bangs and the evolutions through billions of years. Is it conceivable that the idea of God, as a parallel creature also emerged and evolved as an essential quality of perfection? I can imagine that some such Being if taken realistically might have done us much good. Such a Being would have to bear the cross of being too much a part of humanity. Such an existence could not entirely escape the charge of humanism. This would not be necessarily bad. There is something to be said for an essential quality of perfection. Humans have never arrived in a satisfactory state of civilization, and yet there are manifestations of and a hunger for a highest possible degree of excellence. Such a creation might possibly be logically conceived and for a very good purpose capable of existence. Are we too closely jammed in with our various rituals and creation concepts of time and space (as described to us in a literature called the Bible)? The universe has its own behavior and applications for the good of mankind.

This leads me to the second article by Professor Selvin. He explains: “I claim no special competence for writing about God.” Who has? I am not sufficiently rash to think that I have such competence. I can say that I have

learned something of the intimacies of life that have inspired me through a perilous and sometimes lonely career. I could always come to terms with God some way or another. What bothered me was disadvantaged people. This sounds a bit like a line from Sholom Aleichem so I add another line of his.

Why should people be so cruel when they could be so kind? Why should humans bring suffering to others and to themselves when they could live together in peace and goodwill?

Selvin refers to his experience with the liturgy of his synagogue (*Union Prayer Book*, Reformed Synagogues in America). "The ideas of God that appear in this book are trivial, outdated, insulting to the intelligence and banal." He is not protesting "the idea that there is Something or Somebody worth worshipping, only the form in which the Something or Somebody is described." He emphasizes that "It would be foolish to deny the universal experience of something wonderful going on here." Dr. Selvin says that Thomas Jefferson put it right in the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson referred to the laws of nature and of Nature's God. He emphasized "that Nature comes first and God was created afterwards—by Man?"

He cannot "offer any explanation for where the ball of neutrons came from." He analyzes God in conventional society who "provides standards of right and wrong," (which are sometimes confusing). Dr. Selvin is provoked with the idea of "God as a computer, recording every detail, every momentary thought." He writes: "God is the image of an indulgent grandparent." (May I add, Except when angry or jealous.)

He goes on to say: "The notion that God is on our side in any kind of struggle, whether a baseball game, the alleged struggle of the Judeo-Christian tradition against godless Communism, or any kind of wars that beset mankind is morally bankrupt, and the spectacle of clergymen of all persuasions speaking authoritively and beseeching to God for such intervention is bizarre."

Selvin feels that God should be left to deal primarily with the social world—A God of Right and Wrong. Moreover, God is created in the human image and thus susceptible to being studied in human science. He offers one line of evidence in a mental experiment that he performs every time he attends a religious service, which is simply to substitute the word Society for the words of God, Father and their synonyms. He raises the question of how this substitution makes better sense. He finds in his experimentation that he enjoys "pure sociability" and a feeling "that all men are brothers." He claims: "What is needed is a re-affirmation of the family, of friendship, of neighborliness, of love." This, he says "is the essential order of *behavior conditioning* or *desensitization therapy* as it is called in recent years."

WHAT IS GOD?

I am not too certain. God could be an essence, an intimacy, a perfection, a process—an existence inherent in the timelessness of an unlimited universe in an immeasurable space—totally inside—infinitely outward. God is everything that has been, that exists, and what will be—limited by Nature and human intelligence, unfortunately we use only a small part of it. There seems to be a vastness and magnificence we may call God in little things as well—beauty of all kinds, flowers, love, peace, justice, happiness, mountains, streams, oceans. There are experiences in which we may feel the presence of God, such as: loving, affection, birth, children, joy of living, working with people and understanding them, healing, enjoying the silence. We do not need to know less about God, but much more about people and humankind. God will continue to be a gaseous nothing until we honestly and earnestly deal with our human confrontations and accept the implications and disciplines of our conduct. To be truly human is to be divine.

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