

7. The Death of M_1 and the Birth of M_2 a Big Shift in Religious Talk

Something has died. Some very well established way of talking about Divinity has ceased to be meaningful in our currently emerging and future culture. For many decades people have been dropping out of any religion that promotes a second deck on the bus of Reality. We see ourselves living in a single universe of experience. If religion is going to mean something to us, we have to experience it from where we are embedded in the temporal flow of time. We, most of us, have come to mistrust any religious viewpoint that seems to hang out in nowhere-land and envision two decks to “what is” – a spirit deck and an ordinary deck. However useful the two-story metaphor may have been to people long ago, it is no longer useful to us. And the two-story world picture was always a metaphor even though the ancients did not always bother to notice the difference between metaphor and literal reality. But we who have been schooled for generations in the scientific mode of truth do notice the difference between literal and metaphorical. We know that if the Divine is said to be a King, that we are using a down-to-Earth experience of “king” to say something “metaphorical” about the “supposed” power and kingly care of the Divine. If the Divine is personified as a “Person” of any sort, having will and intelligence, heart and feelings, we know that this is metaphorical talk, not literal description of something a video camera or a tape recorder might catch. For any of us who dare to be aware, every god or goddess, angel or devil dwelling in heaven has died. The God in heaven is dead. God is dead, whether we are aware of this yet or not.

But when we talk about “the Death of God” we need to be clear about what has died. The Final Mysterious Reality we have discussed in the first six of these discourses has not died. We have pointed to our experience of the Eternal. The Eternal does not die. The Infinite does not die. Only that which is finite can die. Only temporal things can die. So what has died? It is a cultural metaphor that has died. It is a human way of talking about Divine matters that has died.

The Infinite Silence before the Big Bang of creation has not died; it is a current experience. The Infinite Silence persists as the ongoing background for every bang, big and little. The Infinite Silence persists between each chirp of bird or tick of clock. Similarly, the Void out of which all things have come and to which all things will return has not died. The Void appears at birth and death and walks with us every day of our lives. We have also characterized the Infinite as the Every-Thing-Ness in which all things cohere or hold together. This Every-Thing-Ness has not died, will not die, does not die.

Every image of our minds can be viewed as finite and therefore vulnerable to die. But the Infinite is not a mere image in our minds; it is an experience that no mental image can comprehend. If it were up to our minds alone, there would be no awareness of the Infinite. It is our raw pre-mental consciousness that experiences the Infinite.

What most atheists and critics of Western religion reject is the literalized Big Person in the upper deck. Indeed, they reject the whole deck, and they reject it as a cowardly cop-out of leaning on some Invisible Grandparent to help with our lives or to direct us with some moralistic, supernatural advice. This same “talk about God” is rejected by me and by millions of other practitioners of a Western religion who now use the word “God” as a devotional word of relationship with the Final Mysteriousness that every human being can experience.

Some Christian-leaning philosophers of religion have attempted to identify the Death of the second-story God with the death of Jesus on the cross. But such mental gymnastics are confusing. First of all, Jesus was a finite human person whose death was no different from our own. It is a weird subterfuge to assume the abstract doctrine

that Jesus was God in some supernatural sense and then assume that his death means that we have gotten rid of the first “face” of the traditional Christian Trinity. The Death of God is a cultural event that happened at least nineteen centuries after the death of Jesus. The Death of God, if this phrase is to have any meaning whatsoever, is the death of the two-story metaphor. And if this death is what we mean by “the Death of God” then it is certainly true that we now live after the Death of God has occurred in our cultural commonality. We cannot go back. We can only pretend that the literalized second-story Big Person is still a meaningful way to talk. Even the more subtle forms of second-story going-on-nesses have died. There is no Spirit realm. There never has been such a realm; there has only been a two-story metaphorical language for talking about the “profound” aspects of our lives.

The two-story metaphor is a very old metaphor; it has been an important cultural metaphor, created by the human mind. It predates civilization, agriculture, even bows and arrows. The extremely ancient culture of the Aborigine of Australia used this metaphor. They spoke of a Dreamtime that was occurring alongside ordinary time. They found meaning for their lives by making a “trip” to this other world of experience. A form of this two-story metaphor was used by Moses, Amos, Jesus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Wesley. In all these centuries humans spoke quite normally of angels and devils, gods and goddesses or of One God with angels, the creator of heaven and Earth. In our scientific age with its strong emphasis on literal truth, it can seem odd to many people that this metaphor was alive and well in all those earlier centuries. And the most aware persons of these earlier times did not take this metaphor literally. Thomas Aquinas, it seems to me, knew that this divine space was a metaphor. He knew that the Divine King whose Eternal Law ran the observable universe was metaphorical talk, a type of “supposing” that enabled one to use common experiences to talk about the deeper more overarching topics of human experience.

Truly, it is a big event that this long-used and once useful metaphor is no longer useful. It is dead. We killed it. We killed it with our literalism. And we killed it with our rejection of both its literal nonsense and its use as a metaphor.

Let us look at this dead metaphor more carefully. Let us examine the corpse. Let us try to image what it was like when this metaphor was alive and well. Draw in your mind's eye two boxes one on top of the other like a double decker bus. Label the top box “the supernatural” and label the bottom box “the natural.” Now imagine where you would have to be standing to see or experience such a picture. You would have to be standing in no-where-land in order to view both the land of the natural and the land of the supernatural. There is no such place to stand. So obviously this is just a picture created by the human mind and viewed by the human mind. But to have lasted so long, this metaphor must have been invented to communicate something that was actually experienced. What was the experience that called forth this metaphor?

We have been providing answers to this question in each of the first six discourses of this collection. We have poetized experiences of the Infinite, the Eternal, without using the double-deck metaphor. It is these same experiences that humanity has been speaking about for tens of thousands of years with their upper-deck stories and concepts. They were aware that there was “ordinary” experience and “extraordinary” experience, and they charted this distinction with the double-deck picture. When they spoke of God and his angels they pictured in their minds a humanoid-appearing King and his hosts of winged messengers who could carry messages from heaven-above to a down-here-on-Earth humanity. But the experience that illuminated this picture was the sort of experience we can point to with our spins on the Infinite Silence before the Big Bang, The Void, the No-Thing-Ness, the Every-Thing-Ness, the Eternal Now, the Eternal Presence, and so forth. We no longer need the double-deck picture to talk about these experiences. We can talk about these experiences in our new way, and this

enables us to decipher what the ancients were talking about in their way. We can speak of “angels” only if we know that we are talking about the multiplicity of ways that Awe happens to us. We can speak of “devils” only if we know that we are talking about the multiplicity of ways that temptation to illusion happens to us. We can speak about “hell” only if we know that we are talking about those hopeless states of despair concerning the sternness of a Reality that we hate but cannot escape. We can talk about “heaven” only if we know the joy of having opted for the realistic living that the Infinite Reality supports. All the seemingly cryptic sentences of the Bible can be decoded when we understand how to translate them from the double-deck mode of talking into a new mode of talking about “Divine” matters that is has been emerging in the last fifteen or so decades.

Many philosophers and theologians are still attempting to speak *about* God as if God were a visible character that can be spoken *about*. These thinkers seem not to notice that we have to have a two-story metaphor to speak *about* God. God has to be a character in that two-story metaphorical play in order for us to talk about the character or quality of God. But we no longer accept the metaphorical usefulness of that grand play in which God is a character. That metaphor is dead. It has no life to it any more. To speak *about* God is sheer nonsense. To say, for example, that “God suffers” or “God comes to know himself” is meaningless drivel. Such talk is dead. So what is our new talk like? What “M₂” mode of talking has been born that allows us to talk about the profound matters that humans used to express with the old double-deck or “M₁” mode of talking? Let us see if we can solve for “M₂” among our many insights on this crucial topic.

If we want to translate for our times the profound breakthroughs witnessed to in the texts of the Old and New Testaments of Christian heritage, we need to translate the two-story talk in those texts into what is often called “existential description.” For example, if we are speaking about Jacob’s dream about angels coming and going on a ramp to heaven, we have to describe what it means to experience an angel in our own life experience. Here is a clue: if we have experienced some awesome awareness about the deeps of life intruding into our consciousness we might say that we have had an angelic visitation from the Mysterious Wholeness. In other words an “angelic visitation” can mean any state of dread and fascination combined with the courage to take in that “visitation of intensity.” If we do not have such experiences, we have no way of understanding a Biblical scripture that speaks of angels. Angelic visitations happen throughout both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible. If we take these events literally, we do not understand how the upper-deck mode of talk was functioning for the people of ancient times.

In the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, Abraham is visited by three angelic figures. The text goes back and forth between three angels and One God speaking to Abraham. Then the three angels walk on down the road. From this passage we get the sense that ordinary visitors become angels when their visit transforms into a visit from the Master Divinity. In other passages, like those in Matthew's gospel where angelic appearances happen to Joseph and Mary, angels are more like luminous physical beings who appear out of the Nowhere of God and then disappear back into that Nowhere. In all cases the angel is some sort of messenger that communicates to humans a crucial bit of amazing information. In our common experience today, we may have experiences in which a bit of amazing information appears in a dream or wakes us from sleep or catches us up in broad daylight. We may not call this “an angelic visitation,” but we can imagine that people of ancient times might have done so. Also, we can imagine that the consciousness of those ancient people was capable of projecting the delivery of such information in pictorial language: shining humanoid figures with wings. Why wings? Because they had to fly down from the roof of the taken-for-granted double-deck

setup. The two-story metaphor was simply there in their minds as an interpretive force. They did not question it: they just used it. Waking and sleeping they used it. They thought, they dreamed, they shared with two-story talk.

Here is a story from Mark's gospel that does not speak of angels but has an angelic feel to it. The following is the New English translation of Mark 9:2-8:

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain where they were alone; and in their presence he was transfigured; his clothes became dazzling white, with a whiteness no bleacher on earth could equal. They saw Elijah appear, and Moses with him, and there they were, conversing with Jesus. Then Peter spoke: "Rabbi," he said, "how good it is that we are here! Shall we make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah?" (For he did not know what to say; they were so terrified.) Then a cloud appeared, casting its shadow over them, and out of the cloud came a voice: "This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him." And now suddenly, when they looked around, there was nobody to be seen but Jesus alone with themselves.

What is historical fact here, and what is religious fiction? Probably this entire story was written after the death of Jesus to describe how the person of Jesus had been transfigured in the view of the early church. Quite probably, there never was an historical event in which Jesus' clothes became ethereally white and in which a voice was acoustically heard speaking from a cloud. On the other hand, it is quite probable that there actually was a man named Jesus who did have disciples with names like Peter, James, and John. It is also probable that these disciples had "Spirit experiences" (if not before, certainly after the death of Jesus) that had to do with the relationship of Jesus to Moses and Elijah, and the relationship of Jesus to the God that Moses and Elijah worshiped. Moses is symbolic of the Exodus and the Law. Elijah is the symbolic grandfather of the great prophets.

Further, it is quite probable that these disciples and the community which they founded became clear (as this passage expresses) that their "religious experience" of Jesus contained a huge paradox. On the one hand, Jesus was dazzling – dazzling with the same dazzle that made Moses and Elijah dazzle. The Awesome Wholeness of Being was filling the eyes and ears of these disciples' inner beings with Awe, and this Awe expressed an overwhelming affirmation of the person Jesus.

Nevertheless, Jesus was just a human being who climbed mountains with friends. It took an inward transformation in the disciples to see the dazzle. This line is significant: "when they looked around, there was nobody to be seen but Jesus alone with themselves." There was just Jesus! Since there was just Jesus, what was all the dazzle about? We can relate to the experience behind this story only if we have also discovered our Spirit eyes that can see the dazzle of Awe in the Awed Ones who stand before the Awesome and are filled with the Awe that is their true nature.

This story is fiction, but this piece of fiction expresses well an experience that did actually take place in history – if not in the lives of Peter, James, and John, certainly in the life of whoever it was who wrote this story. And such a religious experience might take place in your life and mine. We might with our own Spirit eyes see the dazzle.

Finally, let us examine these two verses that come directly after the above passage.

On their way down the mountain, he (Jesus) enjoined them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. They seized upon these words, and discussed among themselves what this "rising from the dead" could mean. (Mark 9:9,10)

Mark is using his secrecy theme to move toward the meaning of the BIG SECRET toward which his gospel story leads: the meaning of the resurrection. Why is the transfiguration of Jesus a secret? It is a secret because one has to experience the

resurrection before one can see the transfiguration. Or we might say that the transfiguration and the resurrection are the same experience. Both are about seeing Jesus anew. And both visions presuppose a see-er who has been transformed into the continuation of Jesus in history. The experience of the resurrection means becoming the Body of Christ, the body of Jesus that is continuing in history. Indeed, this communion of the awakened disciples is the only resurrected body of Jesus there is. The actually first body of Jesus, according to New Testament story, disappeared into the upper deck and is coming again and again because this body is the son of Adam that did not eat from the deadly tree, but kept alive the essence of being human. All this is myth, but it is myth expressing an experience so deep that telling about it takes some wild and creative imagination.

When Christian interpreters insist upon mere historical factuality as the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus, they miss entirely the Spirit revolution being shared with these stories. What did actually, historically, physically happen to the body of Jesus? John Dominic Crossan, a Roman Catholic Biblical scholar, suggests that the probability is that Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and fed to the birds along with all the other men crucified that weekend. Perhaps the crucifixion was not even on a Friday, for every detail of the passion stories of the New Testament have meanings of a Spirit nature to the extent that almost no attention was paid to what we would call a scientific-style historicity in the construction of these narratives.

The Biblical story of the cross is a well-elaborated myth. It is told as a story of what happened to the disciples as they went through an inner death to their false expectations. Death on a cross probably happened to a man named Jesus. It happened to thousands of men who were believed to have threatened the Roman rule. But the New Testament is reflecting on Jesus only in terms of what his followers imagined to be going on with him. Basically, the New Testament is reflecting on what happened to the disciples of Jesus and what happened to those to whom they told their passion story. The "Holy of Holys" was torn open for these people by an outcome that was not expected. All their vision of a Final Reality that treated good folk gently was ripped to shreds. And among these shreds they came to see something, a secret both grim and wondrous. They saw that when our human-centered values vanish, the Life that is most worth living appears, and no happening can separate us from this Life. The disciples labeled this treatment by Final Reality, the Love of God. They noted that humanity, in spite of the worst that humanity can do, is forgiven by Final Reality and welcomed home to the Life that was meant for them in the first place.

As you may notice, I don't need the double-deck metaphor to tell about any of this. The Absolute Final Reality and the essence of living in the Presence of this Awesomeness streams through every finite process of life. We do not need a supernatural realm to describe it. We don't need the "transcendence metaphor." We have new metaphors that translate the old talk into talk we can easily grasp. I characterize this new mode of talk as using the "transparency" metaphor. The Eternal is no longer pictured as up above coming down to us. The Eternal is inescapably streaming through every tree, squirrel, storm, person, and historical event. Every item of our experience is turning transparent to this illuminating Awesomeness.

On the next page is a poem that I constructed to tell about the death of the M_1 mode of religious talk and its replacement with the M_2 mode of religious talk. I have named M_1 "the transcendence metaphor" and M_2 "the transparency metaphor," but such naming is not what matters most. What matters most is noticing how these two modes of talk manifest in our own lives and how our being religious has been enriched and set loose by this cultural shift from M_1 to M_2 .

The Reappearance

Sometime last century, or was it the century before,
all Supreme Beings died.
The whole realm of super-ordinary goings-on died.
Only the ordinary lived on.

But human beings,
uncomfortable with changes of this magnitude,
reinvented Supreme Beings,
knowing that they did so,
knowing that Supreme Beings were a human invention.

Unconsciously, as unconsciously as possible,
human beings knew they were worshiping their own inventions,
but they did not care.

Human beings wanted to worship themselves anyhow.

Meanwhile, GOD, who is not a Supreme Being,
who is not a human invention,
who is not human in any way whatsoever,
who is not even known or knowable by human beings,
became known again by human beings,
known as the unknown,
the real unknown,
the UNKNOWN, UNKNOWN.

GOD, not standing above, but shining through
every natural being,
every space-time event,
every cosmological transformation,
every personal transformation,
every social transformation,
GOD became visible once again.

Visible but not known.
Seen but not understood.
Present but not controlled.
Unavoidable but not named.

Humanity, those who faced this fully,
found themselves affirmed by this,
ennobled by this,
healed by this,
refreshed by this,
enabled to be themselves by this.

Humanity was
Oh Yes,
brought down,
but brought down from an
uncomfortable
high horse,
brought down
to be a completely ordinary organism –
vulnerable, dependent, passing –
and yet,
nevertheless,

being conscious of the
SHINING THROUGH
of **GOD**.