

The “Death of God” Conversation

“The Resurrection of the Death of God” is the name of a 2014 book edited by Daniel J. Peterson and containing essays by two of my friends, Jeff Robbins and Chis Rodkey. The topics of this book are also called “radical theology.” I like the word “radical.” If “radical” means “dealing with the root issues,” I count my own theologizing as radical attempts to get to the roots of basic questions and essential life dynamics.

The title of the above book raises at least these three sets of theological questions:

- (1) What understanding of “God” are we saying has died? It is an understatement to say that the word “God” has been an important word in Christian theologizing. For example, Jesus used the word “God” or “Kingdom of God” in almost every one of his sayings. What was he pointing to in his own experience and in the experience of his listeners with the word “God.” The same question could be asked of Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. What are these New Testament texts pointing to with the word “God”? Is what they were pointing to also what we can say has died. Or is it something else that has died? And if so what?
- (2) What meaning can we give to the word “Death” when it is applied to whatever it is that the New Testament means by the word “God”?
- (3) What does the New Testament point to with the term “resurrection”? And what does the New Testament usage of “resurrection” have to do with the recovery of interest in the “Death of God” discussion?

These questions, asked of the New Testament, can be seen as radical theologizing, for they deal with the core “revelation,” “enlightenment,” or “message” witnessed to in the New Testament texts. The very word “theology” means God-knowledge or God-talk, so are we also talking about the death of theology as well as the Death of God? And if we are not, why do we call the theoretics of a Death-of-God practice of religion a “theology”?

I will start with reflections upon the word “God,” as I understand this word to be used in the New Testament.

God?

The “God” or “ultimate devotion” of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John meant something objective to anything going on in a human mind. Of course the word “God” is a word in human minds, but this word can point beyond the mind to something other than another concept of the mind, just as the word “cat” can point beyond the mind to a furry, playful, small animal bird, lizard, and rodent hunter.

The task of decoding a human-experience meaning of the word “God” in the biblical texts is made difficult by the fact that the Bible texts talk mostly in stories in which “God” is a character—a Creator of the world, a speaker in a burning bush, a commander of basic ethical guidelines, a sender of a son from some sort of transcendent space to the ordinary space and time where human living goes on. All this is story telling. It is language adapted to a childhood imagination. We so-called adults of the spirit life need to make sense of how this old form of God-talk was saying something about our actual lives in every era of human history.

Paul Tillich dealt with this problem by clarifying that not only do we need to avoid taking the story-time characterization of God literally, but we also need to avoid viewing God as a being alongside other beings. Tillich speaks of “The Ground of Being,” “the God beyond God.” I admire the death-of-God theoreticians who have noticed that Tillich’s “God beyond God” amounts to another instance of story-time talk that also needs to be avoided, or else decoded in terms of experiences in our own lives.

Rudolf Bultmann, whom I consider to be the most capable biblical scholar and theologian that we have seen in several centuries, has created a way of talking about the biblical symbol “God” as having objective reference in our ordinary life experiences. Bultmann says over and over and over that “God” in the biblical texts is not a metaphysical idea, and that Christian faith in God is not a human worldview of any sort. Rather, faith in God is a deed of obedience (devotion) to an actual objective Otherness. So what is this Otherness in our everyday human experience?

According to Bultmann, an experience of the biblical God is the same experience as the experience of our finitude. In our actual temporal lives everything about us and in our universe of companions comes into being, has its stay, and then returns to unbeing. That is what it means to be a temporal or finite being. And this finitude is not experienced only at our birth from nothingness and our death into nothingness, this finitude reveals itself in the quality of every aspect of our ongoing lives. Our drive for security never produces absolute security. Our passion to have our best moments last is

continually disappointed. Our hope for a love that will end all aloneness never comes about. Our seeking to know everything is never satisfied, and what we do know is upended continually, our quest to build something that lasts, does not last forever. Our drive to at least have a good view of ourselves free from all guilt meets frequent disappointments and even experiences of grueling wretchedness. All these experiences of finitude and many more are direct objective encounters with the God of the biblical texts, says Bultmann.

Bultmann also sees the gift of our finite lives and all our quests for more life as another part of our experience of this OTHERNESS pointed to in biblical texts by the word "God." In the same sense that we never escape our finitude, we never escape this ENIGMATIC POWER that is rendering us finite. In the depth of our own consciousness, we know that an experience of our finitude is also an experience of some UNCONTROLLABLE POWER. For example, we experience that we cannot stop time or speed time up. Time simply marches on at its own pace. This POWER experienced in the unstoppable march of time is an experience of the POWER that biblical God-talk is referencing.

Bultmann's exposition of faith in God means trusting this POWER, joyfully making this POWER our ultimate devotion. The word "God" in biblical usage is a devotional word like "sweetheart" or "friend." We might relate to this POWER as "fate," or "nature," or even "devil," but if we relate to this POWER through the devotional word "God," we have entered the biblical language world. We can then illuminate the Bible's story-time talk with human meaning for this century.

In taking on the full power of the scientific method we have killed taking story-time talk, literally. We have also killed this story-time talk as a metaphor that is useful for existential meaning in our contemporary setting. This story-time talk, taken literally or made into some sort of dualistic worldview is dead of any life-changing, powerful meaning.

The story-time or "transcendent" mode of doing our theologizing has passed away forever, and there will be no resurrection of this death. This very old cultural metaphor has finished its lifetime of usefulness. It is a corpse that is in the way of religious renewal, and it needs to be buried and a funeral conducted. The difficulty with thinking through this death is that this metaphor is so thoroughly interwoven into our culture that it will require many thousands of more funerals and burials.

Consider more fully what this means. Each of the following phrases is an instance of story-time talk using this old transcendence metaphor: the will of God, the mind of

God, the wrath of God, the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, the action of God, the goodness of God, and more. All this is story-time-transcendence-metaphor talk that needs to be decoded, or as Bultmann called it, “demythologized” into existentially meaningful personal talk.

Even “the death of God” phrase is story-time talk about a character in a story coming to a final end. The death-of-God story also needs to be probed for its existential meaning. In my attempt to demythologize the death-of-God story, I notice that every model of God, every image of God, every characteristic of God, and every action of God is using the now dead transcendence metaphor. It is the death of this long-standing cultural / religious metaphor that is the finite thing that has died..

The death of the transcendent metaphor means something more than the need for a simple rejection of literal interpretation of story-time talk. When we interpret these old stories about God in metaphysical ways, we are still trapped in the two-realm metaphor. I mean talk having to do with: natural and supernatural, matter and spirit, body and soul, ordinary and miraculous—all such talk is transcendence-metaphor talk. Such talk is out of step with the lives of people in this emerging culture.

So, when we speak of “the Death of God” as a cultural happening, we are talking about the death of an old religious metaphor used by Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and many other religions, for many thousands of years, perhaps 50 thousand years. I am calling this metaphor “the transcendence metaphor” because its main structure is the transcendence of a divine space over our ordinary space and time. This metaphor for religious talk assumes a point of view of an audience looking at two stages of the grand play of total Reality. These two stages are stacked on top of one another: (1) the upper stage populated by God, Goddess, gods and goddesses angels and devils, and more; and (2) the lower stage of everyday life that we can view with our senses or experience inwardly with our consciousness. What does it mean for us to count this entire way of thinking dead and gone, never to rise again?

Perhaps the more important question is: what does it mean to have a life, a religious life beyond the death of the transcendence metaphor? What does it mean to do our religious thinking in a different way?

My answer to this questions is that a new metaphor is already in use. I did not make up this metaphor. I learned about it from many sources. The advent of this new basic religious metaphor is something that is happening in our culture in many ways among many religions.

Here is my outline of this new metaphor: Reality is a Oneness that is experienced by humans to have these two primary dimensions.. Temporality is one of these dimensions. Every experience is happening in the flow of time. I am talking of an inward experience of the flow of time, in which I am in some mysterious NOW remembering what I remember and anticipating what I anticipate.

This second dimension or pole of Reality is the appearance of the Eternal in the temporal flow of time—seeing the Eternal shining through many events, or perhaps each event. The experience of this Eternal event is as if a time-bound finite event turns glassy to the Infinite depth of time.

This new basic religious metaphor includes or allows a thoroughgoing affirmation of both the Eternal and the temporal, fleshly, earthy, historical flow of events.

Impermanence is a characteristic of all temporal events, items, or processes, yet this past-to-future flowing from births to deaths can be the site of some particular bush burning with Eternity or some particular person glowing with the presence of the Eternal. This experiential polarity of temporal-Eternal is not pictured as two spaces that have to be related. The relation between these two poles of the ONE Reality is given with the presence of each pole. There is no Eternal except in the midst of the temporal. And the temporal does not exist except as glass for the shining through of the Eternal.

This new metaphor, like the old metaphor is also a humanly created temporal construction. It may be superseded some day by a next basic metaphor. But for now this post-transcendence metaphor is taking the place of the transcendence metaphor that has been killed by the ongoing flow of our scientific and existential modes of truth that characterize our modern and post-modern culture.

Again, we must emphasize that with this new metaphor we have only one realm. Every specific reality that we see outwardly or inwardly is a reality characterized by impermanence: it comes into being, continues a while, and passes away. There is no escape from this characteristic of all temporal experiences. This impermanence applies to all the objects of our observation, all the thoughts in our head, all the systems of thoughts that keep us oriented, all the feelings we have toward all these items and toward all these thoughts and toward all these feelings. Every possible thing is finite. We only meet this Eternal POWER in our experiences of finitude. This POWER that makes us finite is the only Eternal verity that does not die, that is not born, that does not change, that does not grow or lesson, that does not become or evolve, that just IS.

Calling this Eternal POWER our devotional ultimate or “our God,” is a challenge to us, because we have already given our ultimate devotion elsewhere. We may discover,,

however, that all these other devotions are devotions to the temporal, and temporal devotions betray us in the end—that is, they cannot be counted on to be everlasting. So we can actually learn to prefer to be dedicated to this POWER that does not die as our ultimate devotion. This dedication, this obedience to realism, can be our joy, our trust, our hope in the trustworthiness of a POWER that lasts forever. To side with this POWER is to side with the winning side in every moment of our lives, even in our experience of our own death. As a finite being we will die; but we can choose to be the dying being that we are, and when we do, we find that the sting of death has been removed, and that we live quite alive beyond the fear of and slavery to death. In the moment of our biological death, we can yield up our precious consciousness with a prayer like the one attributed to Jesus with his last breath, “Into thy hands OH ETERNAL POWER, I commend my consciousness.”

If the biblical word “God” points to this POWER, then this God does not die, for dying has to do with being temporal and this POWER is not temporal. Rather this POWER is what makes every temporal thing temporal. This POWER is the one and only meaning of the word “Eternal.”

Even when humans talk about our deep essential spirit as being Eternal what we are actually referencing in our personal experience is that we, this temporal being of limited consciousness, is consciously related to this POWER that is Eternal. Whether we call this relation “the Spirit of God,” or “the Holy Spirit,” or simply “our profound humanness,” we are pointing to the experience of affirming this POWER as our God-devotion.

Søren Kierkegaard speaks of this profound self or spirit as being a relationship between time and Eternity, which relation can relate to its own self, yet does not constitute itself, but is constituted by ANOTHER, by the POWER that constitutes this whole relation and with it the entire cosmos within which this enigmatic human relation between time and Eternity exists.

Like Bultmann, Kierkegaard sees this word “God” in the biblical texts to be pointing to an Absolute OTHERNESS, (1) to the POWER that is rendering us finite, and (2) at the same time to the inward conscious experience of being a relation with this POWER. These theologians of living in this ultimate devotion to this Eternal POWER, point out that there are two and only two possible qualities of relation to this POWER: (1) willing to be this relation, or (2) not willing to be this relation. The first of these relations is called in Bible talk “faith” or “trust in God.” The second relation is called “sin” or “despair.” Why is the word despair descriptive? Because not willing to be what we are

constituted to be is a hopeless dedication. It is a losing cause that is always vulnerable to become a state of conscious despair.

Death?

Death or dying is a characteristic of everything temporal. And anything that does die is temporal or finite. So the death of the Infinite is a nonsense expression. If we are going to talk about the Death of God, we are surely talking about something other than the Infinite POWER met in the experiences of our finitude or temporality. This simple truth means that “the Death of God” can never be a symbol in a viable next Christian religious practice. Why? Because the word “God” in the phase “Death of God” means in a Christian liturgy the Eternal POWER that does no die.

Resurrection?

The New Testament meaning of “resurrection” cannot be a word that applies to the POWER called “God,” for this POWER does not die and therefore cannot be resurrected. So when the above book title proclaims “The Resurrection of the Death of God,” this can only mean the return of a finite human discussion (“The Death of God” discussion) that had to some extent died down for a time, but is now back in fashion. This use of the word “resurrection” is not what the symbol “resurrection” means in the New Testament texts..

The New Testament does not use the term “resurrection” as a synonym with words like “reappearance” or “return” or “resurgence.” In New Testament lore, “resurrection” points to is a state of human living that is the back side of the state of human living called “crucifixion.” To understand these two words, we have to see that they are about the same experience. Resurrection is what is left when all our temporal relations have been crucified.

We see this oneness demonstrated in the narratives of the New Testament gospels. Jesus’ followers experience the event of their mentor’s crucifixion as a state of death to all their devotion to temporal outcomes. The other side of this demolition is called “resurrection.”

In this crucifixion/resurrection experience our relation to the Eternal has shifted from fight with the Eternal and flight from the Eternal toward reconciliation with the Eternal.

So when the editor of the above book chose to use the word “resurrection” in the title, nothing like this New Testament meaning of “resurrection” was employed.

"Reappearance" or "resurgence" or "return" could have been used in place of "resurrection" without any change in the meaning of the title.

"Crucifixion/resurrection" is a human happening that can describe minor events as well as momentous events. Crucifixion/resurrection is an odd type of happening, because it adds no content to one's life, and it subtracts no content from one's life. It simply transforms the entire relation to one's life content.

For example, when I was in my early forties undergoing a midlife crisis, having already changed my vocation and remarried, I was 46 pounds overweight, out of condition, my gums were bleeding, and my teeth were falling out. My new dentist challenged me to radically change my diet. This kicked off a crucifixion/resurrection happening.

After that happening I was still 46 pounds overweight, out of condition, my gums were still bleeding, and my teeth were falling out. But everything was transformed.

Something had happened to my relationship with eating, with having bad teeth, with neglecting exercise and common sense eating and other practicalities. This is the sort of experience that crucifixion/resurrection is—nothing is changed but everything is transformed.

Changes did follow as I attempted to live the new context of having died to some old attitudes. And that death had left me with a slightly deeper experience of my essential humanity. I had already had other crucifixion/resurrection experiences before this dietary event. Some of them were even more consequential, and I have had other more consequential crucifixion/resurrection experiences after that dietary transformation, but all of them had this same basic character: no change in the temporal content, but everything was transformed. Living out of the crucifixion/resurrection experience does change things, but the experience itself is just a gift of WHAT IS given to me from the IS of Eternity in the midst of my temporal ongoingness.

Do I have a right to use these profound symbols for interpreting what can seem to be trivial events? Yes, I see this being supported by the possibility of identifying with the Jesus character in Mark's "good news" narrative. Jesus, in this story, has his first crucifixion/resurrection experience when he was baptized in the waters of the river Jordan by John the Baptist. Jesus in this event apparently gives up whatever attitudes toward his own life and society he had before this occasion and took on John's radical critique of the hypocrisy, moralism and oppression of their tough period in Israelite history. Mark suggests to us that this baptism was a big time event. Mark uses a raft of old poetry about the heavens opening and an outlandish approval being shouted out about this young, bright, but fully ordinary roof-repair-man's son. "Pay attention, this is the Son of Eternity." Jesus was driven by this "new spirit" to a long fast about his

vocation. I am guessing that this vocational crisis was intensified when John's head was chopped off. Jesus, rather than using his excellent qualities to make himself safe and rich and fitting into that tragic era, chose his own form of continuing John's dangerous work. He choice to live out the crucifixion/resurrection life unto death. At this point in Mark's story "resurrection" is still a secret. Only the "demons" see Jesus for who he is.

Nevertheless, on every page of Mark's story we see Jesus as an exemplar of what living out the crucifixion/resurrection life looks like. This comes to a revelatory head in the Garden of Gethsemane story where Jesus is praying through facing the final consequences of his vocational choice. His sleepy best friends cannot endure the intensity of this experience. And indeed they are not yet ready for their own crucifixion/resurrection experience the next morning when Jesus announces, "Up, we must be going, my betrayer is at hand." Mark ends his narrative with a couple of women seeing the resurrection in the crucifixion and fleeing the tomb of their own lives in terror. Mark is telling us that this is the "good news" that interprets every moment of our living. To openly meet and trust the Eternal POWER that gives us all our living is to die and be raised up to newness of life in the essential humanity of Christ Jesus.