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God: A Matter of Truth, a Matter of Interest

Cover Page Footnote

An earlier form of this paper was presented as a lecture in the Sacred Heart University Honors Program in April 1988.

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*God: A Matter of Truth, a Matter of Interest**

I would like initially to call attention to the terror of history as we who live in the latter half of the twentieth century experience it. I would like to call attention to a number of issues which all of us living at this historical moment are aware of and to which some of us, no doubt, have given a great deal of thought. These are issues that in one way or another threaten the planet that we live on, the quality of human life, the very survival not only of the human but of the evolutionary process itself.

These issues include the population explosion, poverty, hunger, and environmental pollution. It took a million years to reach a population of one billion in 1800 AD. Today we are at five billion and by the year 2030 will be at ten billion, a figure the National Academy of Science says is the maximum an intensively managed world might hope to support with some degree of comfort and individual choice.¹ We know that 2.5 billion live with average incomes of less than \$500 per person; 800 million lack adequate housing and even shelter; between 15 and 20 million people will die of malnutrition and related causes this year; and conservative estimates predict an expansion of the world's deserts by some 20% by the year 2000.²

Erik Dammon, in his book *The Future In Our Hands*, sums up the modern predicament as follows:

The world is not threatened by catastrophe in the future. The greater part of mankind is already experiencing catastrophe today. None of us would talk in terms of future catastrophe if our present family income amounted to less than one dollar a day, if we lived with our family in a hut or shack without water or electricity, if we were starving and lost every second child which was born, if our surviving children were physically or mentally destroyed by deficiency diseases, if there were no

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doctor available. If we lived like this, it would be perfectly clear that catastrophe was already an accomplished fact. This is the way humanity lives today. Not distant small groups. Mankind is living like this. The majority of us.³

As if all of this is not overwhelming enough, we are also faced with what is potentially the greatest threat to human health in the history of the planet, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and we live under the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation. At present we seem to lack any proper response to the nuclear issue. Perhaps we are simply unable to comprehend it. In the words of Jonathan Schell:

The possibility that the living can stop the future generations from entering into life compels us to ask basic new questions about our existence, the most sweeping of which is what these unborn ones, most of whom we will never meet even if they are born, mean to us. No one has ever thought to ask this question before our time, because no generation before us has ever held the life and death of the species in its hands. But if we hardly know how to comprehend the possible deaths in a holocaust of the billions of people who are already in life how are we to comprehend the life or death of the infinite number of possible people who do not yet exist at all? How are we, who are a part of human life, to step back from life and see it whole, in order to assess the meaning of its disappearance? To kill a human being is murder. And there are those who believe that to abort a fetus is also murder, but what crime is it to cancel the numberless multitude of unconceived people? In what court is such a crime to be judged? Against whom is it committed? And what law does it violate?⁴

A modest amount of reflection on these issues confronts us with the awesome fact of human responsibility. We are responsible, we

humans are responsible, for this terrible state of affairs. If the evolutionary process comes to an end through nuclear weapons, if the universe is plunged back into primordial darkness, it will be the fault of humans, not God, as in the Bible's telling of the end of the world. If we humans are to have adequate housing, health care, just social structures that all can participate in, if we are to avoid nuclear destruction, it is we humans who must take responsibility and bring this to pass.

We are further faced, in our present moment, with the fact that our world views, our human forms of orientation, at worst have failed, and at best are in serious trouble. They do not seem capable of enabling us to deal effectively with the monumental threats that confront us. In fact, we could say that many of them seem to be leading us faster and faster toward destruction. Our world views, when confronted by what history has thrown up at us, seem to be, in most cases, inadequate. Now when I speak of world views I am speaking of frames of meaning and orientation, religious positions that present some kind of understanding of what the human is and what the world is. They provide us with an understanding of how human life is to be lived, and some kind of interpretation of the overall context in which humans live out their lives.

World views are created because humans are unfinished animals and as such we do not, indeed cannot, survive simply biologically.⁵ We cannot get on without a system of symbols giving us direction and purpose. Thus, world views perform certain essential and indispensable tasks for humans. We can say that they are working when they do in fact perform these tasks of providing order in and orientation for life. A world view is working only when it is able to interpret and organize our actual ongoing experiences as humans. When world views work in this way they are like the air we breathe and we pay little attention to them as they facilitate our lives. A world view that is not doing its job, that is not effectively interpreting and making sense of the here-and-now experience of people will not win human acceptance for very long.

Theism is a world view. It is a frame of orientation that, in addition to speaking of the human and the world, uses the category "God" to designate the ultimate point of reference in terms of which the human and the world are to be understood. To decide to live in terms of a world picture that accepts God as its fundamental category

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is to make a very definite choice about how we are going to see the world that we live in and how we are going to understand human life. It is a choice that has important consequences.

Theism developed as part of a basic way of understanding reality which Huston Smith has called the "primordial tradition."⁶ This "primordial tradition" is essentially dualistic. It is a picture of the world that differentiates between "this" world and the "other" world, between the world below and the world above, between nature and supernature. The world above, the "other" world, is seen as more real than "this" world. It is the dwelling place of all those essential realities with which we humans have to relate if we are to get along in the world. We can refer to this theistic frame as mythic in that we speak to the "other" world in terms of "this" world, the other side in terms of this side.⁷

We humans are part of "this" world and know nothing directly about the "other" world and cannot speak of it on the basis of direct experience. Our experience is the experience of "this" world and any attempts to speak of the "other" world will be in terms of the experiences that are actually ours. Thus, gods and demons that humans have from the beginning imagined have always been presented in anthropomorphic terms. The different kinds of other-worldly powers have always been imagined by some sort of analogy to the kinds of powers that we directly experience in our world.

The picture of God that has come down to us in the Bible was developed on the basis of the experience of the ancient Israelites. They developed a series of dominant images which we are quite familiar with: king, judge, shepherd, mighty warrior, and so on. Two of these mythic images appear to have become dominant in the biblical tradition: creator and lord.⁸ Regardless of what other qualifying images were used, Israel always understood that Yahweh whom she spoke of was the Creator and Lord. In the New Testament, these two "root" metaphors were qualified by the metaphor "father," which also came to assume fundamental defining importance for understanding God. These images bring into focus God's transcendence, God's absolute power, as well as the purposive and personal quality of that power. They reinforce an understanding of God as transcendent and glorious but at the same time loving and merciful. This seems to be the cluster of notions out of which all or almost all Western thinking of God has evolved and to which it

always returns for nourishment.

I would like at this point to examine a bit more carefully the notion of "creator." The image of God as creator is clearly based upon the human experience of creating artifacts.⁹ The whole development of the world, the development of the human, has been *understood as essentially the result of the activity of a self-conscious being*. That is to say, God has been conceived of as an absolutely free reality, an all-powerful will. This absolutely all-powerful will sets goals for itself and sets about to realize those goals. The world, in this traditional theistic picture, is understood as the product of this deliberate self-conscious activity on the part of God.

Clearly such a picture is modeled on the deliberate self-conscious activity of human purposive agents. God is as we are. As the potter decides that there should be a pot and sets out to make one, so God says let there be the heavens and the earth. The entire created reality then is the product of God's intentions and activities. Such a mythical picture of how the whole context of human life came to be and what it means obviously produces a religious world picture that is very powerful and that gives a very significant place to human life. If the ultimate reality underlying the world is like us in certain respects, then we are not aliens in an impersonal world. We can have a relationship to God similar to the relationships we can have with one another, one of mutual love, faithfulness, trust, and so on.

We should also note that in this picture human life is not a trivial matter. We humans, each and every one of us, were created for a distinct purpose and each of us has a specific role to play, a specific *task to carry out in the plan of the creator*. Thus *our lives take on a great significance for the creator in this theistic picture*. We are indeed told that every hair on our head is numbered and that no sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly father knowing it.

Finally, we can say that the powerful imagery of a theistic world view evokes a deep, affective response to love God, to trust God, and so on. We feel committed to such a just and loving God, and this in turn becomes the standard by which we measure ourselves. We, and the communities that we are a part of, should likewise be just and caring. There is an ideal standard here for shaping the direction in which history is going to move for the community that is committed to this God.

I think we can see, then, that traditional Western religion can be

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understood as essentially an interpretation of the context of human life, the cosmos, in terms of the model of God as the creative historical agent who self-consciously acts to bring into being the world and who continues to act to transform the world. This model, we should note, continues to have a very powerful religious significance for ordering and orienting human life.

As I pointed out earlier, this mythical picture is essentially dualistic. It distinguishes sharply between what is ultimately real and what is produced and dependent. As such, it is a picture that has become tremendously problematic for many modern people. This is not to say that the theistic model is an unattractive picture of the world. However it is one that in modern times, with the development of modern science, seems to be without any evidential support. Indeed, the best evidence that we have about this picture is that it is a kind of magnificent wish-fulfillment on our part as we project the image of a caring parent, drawn from childhood, to help us with an adult life that is often filled with experiences that are unintelligible in their harshness and cruelty.

However consoling this picture of the world as a place in which every hair on our head is numbered may be, many find it simply impossible to believe in it any longer. As a matter of fact, the experience of massive evil in the twentieth century has made this picture even more incredible than it had been in the past. We live at a moment in history that has witnessed two terribly destructive world wars, protracted fighting in Vietnam, and various forms of horrible suffering and death, including the suffering and death of millions of innocent people. We live under the threat of nuclear annihilation, and must come to terms with the fact that human history may be just about at an end, an end which we are going to bring about, the end of all civilizations, the end of all human life. In all of this there seems to be very little evidence — in fact no evidence at all — of a caring, loving God working for the good of all those being destroyed.

Above all, the fate of the Jews under the Nazis, six million having perished though they were supposedly God's chosen people, has driven a great many people to say that the old comforting dream of a loving father up in heaven who protects his children against evil and suffering and death is simply not credible any more.¹⁰ If there is a God, God must be understood in some way other than this.

The knowledge of the world that we have acquired as moderns

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suggests to us a quite different picture of the world than the one that we have inherited from the "primordial tradition." Indeed we can go so far as to say that what we know or think we know today makes this picture literally unthinkable to us, for it is a picture that seems to require a place, heaven above, where the divine king lives and from which he rules the world. To try to imagine some super divine self of some sort who is outside the universe which is hundreds of millions of light years across boggles the mind. To think, on the other hand, of a sort of spirit or self that is moving immanently within the universe is really no easier. And even if we were to think in these terms, it would seem to be a very drastic modification of the mythic picture in which God is seen as a unified being ruling from on high.

Now we, of course, must recognize that a person can certainly affirm this whole mythic, dualistic picture. One can certainly affirm that God the creator, the maker of artifacts, created and manages the world and is bringing it ever closer to the realization of his purposes and to the salvation of humankind. One can affirm the words of Jesus that God carefully provides for every aspect of human life. The question is: Can we make clear to ourselves any more what we are saying in this kind of language? Can this model, can this mythical dualistic understanding, adequately interpret for us the picture of the world and the human drawn for us by human science and historical research and which we all live out daily? I think the answer to this question is no, and thus we who think of ourselves as theists must begin to rethink the issues involved here. Faced with the incompatibility between the mythic conception of God and the experience of modern people, and faced with the terrible threats that history is confronting us with, what are we who belong to the theistic tradition to do?

Confronted with a world view that many humans say is not functioning well for them any more, some theists find it tempting to adopt what we might call a fideistic position. This represents an attempt to withstand all the pressures and strains that the theistic world view is under. We have certainly seen in this century dramatic and daring efforts to maintain the theistic frame of meaning by the sheer force of its resources of meaning despite all the problems it faces. Of course the most powerful resource for such a defense is "God," the "Ultimate Reality," the final point of reference in terms of which everything else is to be understood. In spite of the problems,

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the category "God" has functioned as an absolutely infallible authority. For a fideist, God's truth must be perfect truth. And what God has revealed must be unquestionably valid and true. It would be impossible to conceive of God revealing something that would be false. So God's truth must be believed. If God has spoken, why would we question?

Those who subscribe to this way of thinking are inclined to accept the claims of the theistic perspective on the world and the human even though they cannot understand it all very well, even though its claims don't fit their own personal experience very well, and even though this world view may be leading them down a destructive path. In the words of Job, "tho he slay me, yet I will trust in him." What we have here then is the maintenance of a commitment to a world view, a symbol, on the basis of sheer belief, sheer acceptance of the overwhelming authority of what is given regardless of its seeming inapplicability, regardless of its questionableness.

We find this position coming to expression today in the literalism that surrounds us, which exhausts the meaning of our metaphors and models at the level of "fact" or "copy." But such literalism is itself a sure sign that the world view being defended is not working. It in fact represents a last ditch effort to preserve the various elements of that world view by turning them into objective realities with no connection and no need for a connection to the human struggle for meaning and purpose. This offers an escape from history, an escape that we cannot afford today, faced as we are with ultimate destruction if we do not accept our freedom and responsibility.

So it seems that an unqualified fideism of this sort is simply a covert admission that the world view has become humanly unintelligible. That is, the traditional theistic world view is no longer doing its work, no longer making sense of our experiences and therefore no longer carrying its authority from within; its truth, its claim upon us, must be imposed from outside on the basis of a heteronomous appeal to revelation or authority.

All such authoritarian moves seem to be rather desperate and one cannot help but wonder how long they can succeed. No conceptual frame that fails to make sense of our lives and our experience can be long accepted or long used. It may seem, however, to those who adopt a fideistic position that they are acting in a correct and even courageous way. They may see themselves as the faithful

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few, the last defenders of the truth in a world corrupted and gone quite mad. They may see those who question the traditional mythic picture to be deserters, to have given up at the moment of greatest crisis. But this I would emphatically stress is not the case.

I want to emphasize that just because a world view is not working well does not mean that we simply throw it out. Yet we *cannot, faced with our present historical situation, with the impending disasters that were spoken of above, proceed simply on the basis of authority, simply on the basis of the sheer acceptance of another generation's interpretation of its historical moment and its own experience.* To do so would be to stick our heads in the sand. Rather we must take responsibility for what is ours and see whether the world view in question can be restructured, reconstructed so that it might work for us once again, so that it might once again become the focus through which we can understand our experiences, interpret them, and gain a fullness of life. To do less it to fail in our human responsibility.

What I am suggesting is that all the stresses and strains that the theistic frame is experiencing today are not to be seen as a cause for despair. Rather these pressures represent a summons to accept our human responsibility. We must not abandon the frame nor simply reaffirm it blindly. Rather we must consider how the categories of the frame functioned in the past, how they can be reformulated so they can work again. We must try imaginatively to put the theistic frame together again, imaginatively put together a picture of the world and of human life based on our experience and try to see what sense it can make to speak of God. In our present historical crisis, one can only hope that theists will set about this task quickly.

Notes

¹National Academy of Science, *Resources and Man* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1969), p. 5.

²See Roger Walsh, *Staying Alive* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1984).

³Erik Dammon, *The Future In Our Hands* (New York: Pergamon, 1979), p. 9

104.

⁴Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Avon, 1982), p. 116.

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⁵See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

⁶Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

⁷I am adopting here Rudolf Bultmann's definition of myth. See his "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 10, n. 3.

⁸I am in debt to Gordon Kaufman for his reflections on images in the biblical tradition. See his *Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

⁹Kaufman, p. 251.

¹⁰See Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).