

In the Image of God?
A Sermon by Carole Westphal
Sunday, June 28, 2009

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-27, 2:4a-7

My father was an avowed, and very vocal atheist. Although baptized Lutheran and raised in the Lutheran church, he could never reconcile the Christian notions of God and the idea of God as creator of anything, much less humankind, with his scientific training and lifelong profession as a geologist. And frankly, it never bothered him that the two disciplines seemed inconsistent with one another; he simply dismissed the religious sphere as useless myths and legends.

He never understood my church-going nature, how I could profess to be both a Christian and an educated human being with at least a modicum of intelligence. And of course, over the years, I have asked myself the same question – questions, actually: Who or what is God? Does God actually exist? Where did human beings come from? Were we created by God? Is that even possible? Where do we go when we die? What is the purpose of our existence? Is this all there is?

I can't say that these questions have been burning in my soul or generating a high level of angst, just that they have been rattling around in my head for a few years. It is just that recently I have felt a sense of conclusion, a feeling that I've arrived at answers that both work from an intellectual perspective and fit with my continued definition of myself as a Christian. And so it is time to come out of the closet. Not the closet that most of us think of when we hear that phrase, but a closet which is perhaps even more tightly closed in Christian circles. And so here it is: I am an atheist. A Christian atheist, but nevertheless an atheist. I believe that humans create gods and not the other way around, that we are ourselves a cosmic accident, that this life is all there is, and that the purpose of our existence is to make the world a little bit better place for our having passed through.

Now, having said all that in one breath, let's "unpack" those statements, as one of my favorite professors at Iliff always used to say. Let's start with atheism. What does it mean to say "I am an atheist?" Structurally, the word simply means "not a theist." So we have to begin by asking what a theist is in the first place. Theism is a belief in a personal god who created the universe and is continually involved in the affairs of the humans created to inhabit it. A theistic God is active in the governance and organization of the world and the universe, a God who watches over us all, who is often conceived of in anthropomorphic terms as loving, compassionate, and forgiving, but also stern, demanding, vengeful, and judgmental.

I simply cannot believe in that sort of God, a being who is at once omniscient, omnipotent, and unfailingly benevolent. For one thing, theists have never been able to fully explain the existence of evil if such a God created and is managing the universe. If God knows everything and is both all-powerful and all-loving, how can there be any evil at all? Either God doesn't know that the evil is occurring, which belies God's omniscience, God cannot prevent the evil from happening, which means that God is not all-powerful, or God allows the evil to occur and therefore does not love all creation. This is the classic problem called "theodicy" in theological circles and much ink has been spilled trying to deal with it in theistic terms. For an atheist, the problem of theodicy doesn't even arise.

I also cannot bring myself to believe in the sort of bloodthirsty, vengeful God portrayed in our Christian scriptures. What benevolent, forgiving deity would demand that a man sacrifice his son in order to demonstrate his faith? Sure, God substituted a ram at the last minute and saved Abraham from having to actually kill Isaac, but the fact remains that God asked him to do so in the first place. The same vengeful God appears to have required the sacrifice of Jesus in order to atone for the fundamental sinfulness of humankind. Not only was some sort of sacrifice required, which troubles me to being with, but it could not be just any ordinary sacrifice. It had to be someone of equal value to God himself, or God's son Jesus, deified to make the sacrifice acceptable. Only a theistic God could behave in that fashion, another reason I now call myself an atheist.

Let's shift gears for a moment and talk about why humans create gods in the first place. A neuroscientist named David Comings has done some interesting research in the human brain and has found that human beings are hard-wired for spirituality. When certain parts of the temporal lobes are stimulated, what he calls a "transcendent sense of spirituality" is produced. Spiritual thoughts are thus intensely rewarding, which leads to a craving for a belief in something greater than ourselves. This helps to explain why all human societies from the very beginning have created religions and, yes, gods.

Karen Armstrong, a former nun noted for her religious scholarship, wrote a book called "A History of God." From a different perspective, her study of the history of religion, she has reached the same conclusion as Dr. Comings, that human beings are spiritual animals. In fact, she says, *homo sapiens* is also *homo religiosus*. Men and women started to worship gods as soon as we became recognizably human, not only to propitiate powerful forces and explain the terrifying unknowns faces by early humans, but also as an attempt to find meaning and value in life. Religion is natural to humanity, something we have always done.

But religion has not always taken the same shape. The variety of gods and religious structures throughout human history is astounding. There is no consensus on which gods are real or how these gods want us to worship them. Nobody can even agree on what the gods want us to eat or how they want us to dress. Nearly every believer believes in the god or gods that his or her parents taught them to believe in. If you were born in a Christian culture, the odds are very high that you are a Christian, if you have any definitively religious beliefs at all. Had you or I been born in India, we would probably be Hindus, or we would be Muslims if our homeland was Egypt, Buddhists if we were from Tibet.

Karen Armstrong says that the statement “I believe in God” has no objective meaning as such, but only means something in the context of a particular community, that the word “God” contains a whole spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive. She argues that this flexibility is crucial to the concept of God because it allows humans to quietly discard those conceptions that cease to have meaning or relevance and replace them with a new theology. Each generation has to create the image of God that works for it, and it is far more important for a particular idea of God to work than for it to be logically or scientifically sound.

What I have discovered as the various concepts of God contained in traditional Christianity have rattled around in my brain and come up against my scientific and intellectual training, is that those traditional notions no longer work for me. Although I’ve suspected that for some time, it was only after reading John Shelby Spong’s recent book, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, that I realized I am an atheist, defined as no longer believing in a theistic concept of god, if indeed I ever did. Spong says that many of us in the Christian world are functionally atheist, recognizing that the traditional ideas of God no longer work very well and yet clinging to them out of habit or fear that if we dismiss them, only a bottomless pit remains. We can move beyond theism, he says, and I agree with him, and still call ourselves Christian. A God defined as a transcendent being or a God seen as the synergy of nature and the grand, even scientifically-based, mysteries of the universe, rather than a personal God who answers prayers and directs the most minute courses of our lives, nevertheless works with the things that Jesus taught us about living together in love and compassion. That is what constitutes a Christian atheist.

Now you can probably begin to see why, after completing all of my divinity studies at Iliff, I chose not to be ordained as a Christian minister. The ordination process, even in as liberal a denomination as the United Church of Christ, still demands a theistic approach to God, accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and believing at some level in the resurrection and salvation. I suppose that I could have managed some euphemistic

responses that would have satisfied a Committee on Ministry and an ecclesiastical council, but I did not feel that I could do so in good conscience. And so I remain in Christian community as a lay rather than an ordained member, as a believer in the teachings of Jesus rather than in the deified person of the Christ, as a committed member of the human race dedicated to living the best life possible in the sense of making the world a little bit better place for my having lived in it.

So who or what is God for me? For me, God is not a supreme being in the sense of a king on a throne; God is not a man nor a woman, nor even a person somewhere in the heavens looking down on creation and managing every moment of every day for every human being on earth. I do believe, however, that there is something greater than the sum of the human individuals making up our world, that taken collectively, we manifest a powerful synergy greater than the sum of our individual parts.

And so my God is the spirit of love and compassion that moves in every human heart. My God is the voice inside of me that tells me when I am doing the right thing and when I should stop and think about it before continuing. My God is everywhere and nowhere, the network of humanity that binds us all together and makes us all, as Jesus taught, neighbors, neighbors that we are to love as we love ourselves. My God is in random acts of kindness which strangers do for one another, in the unremitting commitment of people loving and caring for others through the years. My God is what Albert Einstein called the “spirit manifest in the laws of the universe” who is revealed “in the harmony of all that exists,” the beautiful and the sublime that we sense hidden behind anything that can be experienced.

When I pray, I am not so much asking an external being for something as calling on that great spirit that moves and breathes among us all, and reaching deep inside myself for an understanding of how I can live my life in a way that reflects the beauty and love that spirit represents. I am tapping into the mystery and the harmony of the universe, seeking my place in the cosmos in any particular moment.

In some ways, this theory of god solves many of the problems presented by theism. It allows for the presence of evil in both human action and natural forces, removes the contradictions inherent in a comparative assessment of science and religion, supports the basic teachings of Jesus, and acknowledges our fundamentally spiritual nature. In other ways, of course, it makes things more problematic.

If we have created God instead of the other way around, that means there is no heaven or hell, no resurrection of the body, and no afterlife, as traditional Christianity has taught.

When we die, that is the end of our consciousness as well as our body. That's pretty hard to take sometimes, to think that this life is all there is.

And I do think that this is all there is from a physical standpoint. But I do believe in a form of immortality, in the memories and legacies we leave behind when we depart this world. I think that we are meant to leave the world a little bit better place for having passed through, to make at least one other person's life richer or fuller or better in some way, to help those we can, and to become the best we can be in the time allotted to us. That's what I think life is all about and how we live on past the time of our death. When our lives contribute to the great synergy of spirituality created by the sum total of human endeavor, we have achieved whatever immortality may be possible for any person.

In seminary we are taught two basic ways to approach scripture in a sermon: preach to it or preach against it. I think it's pretty obvious which tack I have taken here this morning. While I do indeed believe that God did not create humankind in God's image and that humans create the gods they need, I do not think that is necessarily a bad thing. It does not mean that god does not exist, only that we must allow our ideas of who and what that god might be to grow and evolve with our greater understanding of the natural world. It does not remove from us the responsibility of living a moral and compassionate life – following the teachings of Jesus obviously gives us a good start there – and it does not absolve us of a commitment to the worth of each individual and the world we inhabit.

As John Robinson said when he saw the Pilgrims off to the new world, "There is yet more truth and light to come forth from God's holy scripture." He was affirming the belief that the Bible needs to be continually reinterpreted in the light of humanity's changing context. I believe that holds true for the very concept of God as well and that the future of Christianity may very well be determined by our willingness to do so. Amen.