

How Shall We View God?

This morning's question is, "How Shall We View God?" In her introduction to *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Karen Armstrong observes that:

...human beings are spiritual animals. ... Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art. This was not simply because they wanted to propitiate powerful forces; these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seemed always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world. Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, despite the suffering that flesh is heir to.

... Throughout history, men and women have experienced a dimension of the spirit that seems to transcend the mundane world. ... However we choose to interpret it, this human experience of transcendence has been a fact of life. Not everybody would regard it as divine: Buddhists, as we shall see, would deny that their visions and insights are derived from a supernatural source; they see them as natural to humanity. All major religions, however, would agree that it is impossible to describe this transcendence in normal conceptual language. Monotheists have called this transcendence "God,"

In Christian theology, God is the eternal Creator, the source of love, life, and truth. All things exist and have their being in God. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

We believe that God chooses to reveal Himself to humankind – and by the way, we refer to God as "Him" rather than as "Her" for a variety of reasons, not least of which are because Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all patriarchal societies, and because Jesus spoke of God as our loving Father.

Throughout the ages, humankind has sought to understand this God who reveals Himself to us, and has drawn up lists of His attributes. The *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1959) gives them as follows: "The prophetic-Christian conception of God ...represents God as a unitary, personal Being, as immutable [i.e., unchangeable], as omnipotent, as omnipresent, as omniscient, as eternal, as the Creator and Preserver of the world, as a morally perfect Being, as a righteous and loving Father."

Some people have experienced God as a person, some in visions and some, such as Moses, more-or-less face-to-face. In the 12th chapter of Numbers, for example,

we read: "If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face."

Some, in withdrawing from the world, claimed to have found God within their inmost souls. As the Muslim mystic, Rumi, put it: "A seeker knocked at the door of the beloved – God – and a voice from inside asked: 'Who is it?' The seeker answered 'It is I'; and the voice said: 'In this house there is no I and You.' The door remained locked. Then the seeker went into solitude, fasted and prayed. A year later he returned and knocked at the door. Again the voice asked: 'Who is it?' Now the believer answered: 'It is You.' Then the door opened."

Others have found God in nature (as illustrated by the poem, *Vestigia*, by Bliss Carman):

I took a day to search for God
And found Him not. But as I trod
By rocky ledge, through woods untamed,
Just where one scarlet lily flamed,
I saw His footprint in the sod.

Then suddenly, all unaware,
Far off in the deep shadows, where
A solitary hermit thrush
Sang through the holy twilight hush –
I heard His voice upon the air.

And even as I marvelled how
God gives us Heaven here and now,
In a stir of wind that hardly shook
The poplar tree beside the brook,
His hand was light upon my brow.

At last with evening as I turned
Homeward, and thought what I had learned
And all that there was still to probe –
I caught the glory of His robe
Where the last fires of sunset burned.

Back to the world with quickening start
I looked and longed for any part
In making saving beauty be....
And from that kindling ecstasy,

I knew God dwelt within my heart.

Buddhists, while they tend not to teach of a personal God, teach that there is a love that permeates the universe – and you remember, of course, that it has been said that God is love.

Pennington, the author of *Centering Prayer*, knowing that God is everywhere, writes, "We simply seek to be wholly present in love to God present to us...." (p.74). He might as easily have written, "We simply seek to be wholly present to the God of love present in us."

Then there is Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (a 16th Century monk who was responsible for the little tract "The Practice of the Presence of God") who tried to live his life as if he were actually in the presence of God, except that "as if he were" doesn't entirely capture it because, if we believe that God is omnipresent, he was in fact in the presence of God, as we all are every minute of our existence.

It is probably safe to say that we don't entirely know what it means when we say that God is omnipresent. As the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the saints at Corinth, we "see through a glass darkly." God is not revealed to us in His entirety but is at least partly a mystery (to me anyway and, I suspect, to others as well).

In any event, the question is "How shall we relate to this omnipresent God?" In the Hindu scriptures, God is portrayed as having said that He actually prefers that we relate to Him as a person rather than as a disembodied spirit, since it is more compatible with our nature to do so. But that was written a long time ago and, personally, I find it easier to think of God as spirit than as the old man with the long beard that we were told about as children. Furthermore, it seems to me that relating to God as disembodied spirit is more in keeping with the Bible's claim that "God is a Spirit...." [John 4:24]