

The Nature of God

Steve Angell April 1, 2007

Where does the concept of God come from? We humans, as a sentient, introspective, inquisitive species, seek out answers to this question. God is a title we have given to an entity that we cannot fully visualize, understand, or physically touch. We view God as creator of the universe. Christians have developed their conception of God largely from Hebrew Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus. Other religions seeking to understand the entity of creation have credited other sources. The scriptural passage that most speaks to me about the nature of God, with the exception of the use of a personal pronoun (I do not perceive God as having a gender), reads: "God is a spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

As for human existence, we are merely a small piece of all creation—and creation undoubtedly will continue for a period of time far beyond our human capacity to conceive. In our squandering of the gifts that make human life possible (i.e. nonrenewable natural resources and protection of the environmental envelope) we are moving toward our end faster than we may realize. I believe this to be a sign of our unwillingness to be sensitive and/or responsive to God. We ascribe to God events that occur naturally because the human race understands the universe in physical terms. For example, Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia is quoted as saying about the recent tsunami in Southeast Asia, "I know there is some reason God in his wisdom permitted this to happen, but do not know all of the elements of his message." According to Reuters, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar, one of Israel's top religious leaders, said: "The world is being punished for wrongdoing—be it people's needless hatred of each other, lack of charity, or moral turpitude." Similar sentiments have been expressed by other religious leaders of various faiths throughout history about such "acts of God."

The current environmental and political situation in which our planet finds itself raises the question: What is God's nature? President George W. Bush feels keenly that he was following God's will in his preemptive invasion of Iraq. Bob Woodward, author of Plan of Attack, when asking Bush if he had consulted his father, former President Bush, regarding the launch of the war with Iraq, responded

that he was consulting “a higher father.” In contrast, some Islamic leaders believe that God is on their side and that Americans are infidels. Both parties cannot be right. This dichotomy raises further questions: namely, does God take sides in human affairs? And are we as human beings just using God’s name to justify our actions?

Throughout human history horrendous things have been done “with God’s blessing.” Generally, people in the United States have been led to believe that we have fought wars with “God on our side.” This depiction of God is not the divine entity that I have experienced or feel that I know. For me, the Divine Spirit is not to be envisioned as a remote entity supporting destructive human behaviors, but rather as a compassionate Spirit all around us, “the one in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

There have been two experiences in my lifetime that have connected me with this conception of God. The first instance occurred in June 1970. At that time I was active with Friends Committee on National Legislation and served as clerk of the General Committee. It was a time of great national unrest because of the Vietnam War. President Nixon was in office. On the particular weekend involved—which was the weekend of the largest antiwar demonstration, following the killing by the Ohio National Guard of four Kent State University students during an antiwar rally—I was traveling to Washington, D.C., to attend a meeting of the FCNL Executive Committee and had some business appointments in town that required rather precise planning of my travel time.

Before leaving, I received a call from a Friend inviting me to a gathering of Quakers and others in Lafayette Park, opposite the White House, to hold Richard Nixon “in the Light” (praying for God’s guidance for him). I told him I would be there if I could.

I had made the journey to Washington many times before. I would usually choose the most convenient route to take me to my initial location. This time, for unknown reasons, the route I found myself taking was not the route I would ordinarily have chosen.

While traveling, I was listening to my car radio. Much of the news was about national unrest: the aftermath of the Kent State killings, the upcoming demonstration in Washington, and a report that the President was at Camp David. I was very much focused on my travel progress and getting to Washington for my first appointment. All seemed to be going well.

It was at this time that I received a message. The leading was that I should go to Camp David and give a message to the President. This

took me completely by surprise. First of all, I had no notion of how to get to Camp David, and secondly, I did not know what the message was that I needed to give to the President. “This has to be a whole lot of nonsense,” I thought, and I was right on time to make my appointments. I kept trying to put the idea out of my mind, but it would not let me go.

I kept driving and found myself in the Catoctin Mountains in rural Maryland. I came to a side road to my right where an army jeep was approaching and received the instruction that I should turn right. It was not a road I had ever driven before and I had no idea where it led. Besides which, I was right on schedule and did not know if Camp David was 15, 25, or even 50 miles away. It didn’t make sense to turn there and I refused to do it. I kept driving for about two miles until I literally could not drive any further. I had to pull the car over to the side of the road.

What made me pull over requires the telling of another story. A few months earlier, I had heard over the radio that Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, the well-known preacher and author and a spiritual advisor to Richard Nixon, was going to have open office hours at his church in New York City. Anyone who wanted to come in and talk to him could do so. I received a message then that I should go see him to talk to him about his support of President Nixon and the war in Vietnam. I tried to put this out of mind; it was something I did not want to do. However, on the day these office hours were to occur, I was on the subway in New York City, had no conflicting appointments, and could easily have continued on to the subway stop to see Norman Peale, but I refused to do so. This left me extremely uncomfortable, so much so that I finally said to the Divine Spirit, “Please let me go this time, I promise if you ever again ask me to do something like this, I will do it.” My leading to deliver a message to the President was this next time!

I turned my car around and went back to the road where I had been instructed to turn. A short way down the road was a sign advertising an orchard and I thought, “Good. I will end up in someone’s orchard and then I can turn around, forget this nonsense and go on my way.” The road, however, went right through the orchard and came to a T intersection.

I said to my Guide, “Okay, you’re in charge. Which way do I turn?” The instruction was to turn left. I began to think that maybe I should stop and ask for directions. But then I thought, “No, if I am supposed to get there, I will get there without asking anyone.” I continued to travel down the road and came to a national park. The instruction was to turn into the park. There was a park office where I could ask

my way but I thought again, “No, if I am supposed to get there, I will get there.” I traveled into the park a short distance, rounded a curve, and saw a sign that read: “Camp David.” This was such an overpowering experience that I had to pull over to the side of the road and regain my composure.

Now that I was at Camp David I had to do it. I thought, “They will think I’m crazy if I tell them I have a message for the President but that I don’t know what it is!” I pulled up to the gatehouse. There were two officers inside. One asked me what my business was, and I said that I had come with a message for the President. He told me if I gave it to him he would see that the President received it. I said I could not give him the message and could only tell him how I got there. While telling my story to one officer, the other officer was on the telephone. This officer soon came over and spoke to the officer listening to me. I was then instructed that if I would pull my car off to the side, one of the President’s staff would come out and speak to me. I did this and very shortly a man came from inside the compound and sat in the passenger seat of my car.

I retold the story of how I got to Camp David and then reached the point of relating the message for the President which I did not know until that moment—I had faith that when the time came the words would be there. My feelings and opinions about Richard Nixon were very negative. I have no clear recollection of what my exact words were to the staff member. What I do remember clearly is that suddenly I had great compassion for the man. My words conveyed this by acknowledging the great weight and concern he must be under for the state of the country and the difficult decisions he must make. I went on to say that on Sunday Quakers and others would be holding a meeting for worship in Lafayette Park. I said that we would welcome him among us, however, we would understand if he could not be there but hoped that he might worship with us from inside the White House.

The presidential staff person wanted information about who I was. It just so happened that the most recent issue of the FCNL Newsletter had profiled some of its leadership. In this issue were both my picture and an accompanying article. I had a copy with me that I gave to him and he left. I was then able to resume my trip to Washington D.C. The President did not attend the Meeting in Lafayette Park. I did, however, write him a letter expressing our regret that he could not be with us—the compassionate feelings that came over me while at Camp David were still with me. In response, a week or so later I received a short letter of appreciation signed by Richard Nixon.

A second experience that has had a major impact on my life happened in the mid-1980s. I was alone, driving in my car. Suddenly there was a voice that said, "Barbara (my wife) will be dead in three years." She was not ill at the time and was functioning normally. She had had two mastectomies (one 16 years previously) but seemed well recovered. I did not feel I could talk with anyone about this message, however, I continued asking God, "Why did you tell me this? What am I supposed to do with this information?"

I received no direct answer. Finally I became aware that there must be something the Divine Spirit wanted me to do. The task that became clear was for me to devote my life to sharing the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) to bring about a more peaceful nonviolent world. When this became clear I told God, "If indeed what you said would happen happens, I will devote the remainder of my life to sharing AVP as broadly as possible." Barbara died just four or five weeks short of three years after my original message. I have been committed to AVP ever since and to helping it spread across the United States and other continents. I expect to continue in this ministry as long as I am able, and indeed the way has opened for me to do more than I ever expected. Many individuals who have been in workshops that I helped to facilitate have gone on to take the training to become facilitators. (It is the practice of AVP to always work in teams.) These individuals, in turn, have inspired others to become involved and to take the message to many places around the globe in a trail far beyond my expectations. A group is currently active under Friends Peace Teams in Central Africa (Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya), where genocide took place in the 1990s. Similar groups are active in other places around the planet.

Since early childhood, I have had leadings that I felt come from a Source beyond myself and have given direction to my life. None were as intense as the two I have just described. I see these leadings as derived from the same energy source as come the teachings of Buddha, Mohammad, Gandhi, Lao-tzu, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., and many others. I believe that we all have the capacity of being touched and directed in our lives by this Universal Source, although not necessarily with the same level of intensity and mystical manner of those just named.

I believe the Divine Spirit leads us only to restorative and caring actions. Unless we can incorporate into our lives the seminal teachings as shared with us through the life of Jesus and these other inspired leaders, I believe our chances of survival as a species on planet Earth are indeed greatly reduced.

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