

## **Whether (a Personal) God Exists**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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### *Meditation:*

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,/So is my beloved.../I delight to sit in his shade/and his fruit is sweet in my mouth/....Hark! My beloved!/There he comes,/Leaping over the mountains/Bounding over hills./....My beloved spoke thus to me,/"Arise, my darling;/My fair one, come away!/For now the winter is past,/The rains are over and gone....Let me see your face,/Let me hear your voice;/For your voice is sweet/and your face is beautiful." (from *Song of Songs* 2:1-14)

I want to begin with something of a full disclosure statement: first, this sermon comes as a request from Peter Henderson who succeeded in bidding for this sermon—including the topic and meeting with me to discuss it—in last year’s Services Auction. So good people! Heads up! This is a pitch to remind you that this year’s Services Auction is coming up right around the corner on March 9<sup>th</sup>. Please help us to make it as successful and as fun as it was last year. Or in the words of our dear, departed Arthur Hughes, what he would have said is: “Be there or be square!” Second point about full disclosure, if you’re expecting a philosophical treatise on the subject, pro and con for the existence of god, and prepared dispassionately to consider it one way or the other by carefully marshaled rational arguments, what follows may not be for you. Peter asked me, in particular, to talk about whether or not there is a *personal* God who knows and cares for the human family. Wrangling with *that* aspect of the question has only served to underline, for me, that we’re talking about something deeply personal, figurative, and emotional.

So here goes: excerpts from two stories. On the occasion of accepting his vocation as a prophet in 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Isaiah relates the following encounter:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple....The foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called...And I said, ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; I am a man of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen...the Lord of Hosts’....And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go before me?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me!’” (from Isaiah 6:1-9)

Second story: this one narrated by Black Elk of the Oglala Lakota tribe about an experience during a vision-quest he undertook as a young boy on the Plains in the 1870s:

“My grandfather made me a bow and some arrows. The grass was young and I was on horseback. A thunder storm [approached], and just I was riding into the woods along a creek, there was a kingbird sitting on a limb. This is not a dream, it happened. I was going to shoot the kingbird...when the bird spoke and said... ‘Listen! A voice is calling you!’ Then I looked up at the clouds, and two men were coming there, headfirst like arrows slanting down; and as they came, they sang a sacred song and the thunder was like drumming...like this, saying: ‘Behold, a sacred voice is calling you; All over the sky a sacred voice is calling.’” And then the “oldest spoke [to me:] ‘Your grandfathers all over the world are having a council, and they have called you here to teach you.’ His voice was very kind, but I shook all over with fear now, for I knew that these were not old men, but the Powers of the World.” (from John F Haight, *What is Religion...* 1990, p161)

Now what can we say about these accounts separated as they are by time, place and culture? First, in each case, the person relates an encounter with a divine being or beings as something that really took place. Black Elk really wants to emphasize this: “This is not a dream,” he said, “it happened.” In the religious environment in which these visions occurred, such events were not altogether exceptional nor, certainly, were they considered pathological. Rather, they were taken for granted by Isaiah’s and Black Elk’s people as events that occur and that are revelatory of something deep and true about reality.

Second, when we think about it, and this important, it’s clear that for those of us who do not share in these traditions, and the stories that carry them down through the centuries, the idea of a personal God or gods may just not be that meaningful, intelligible or speak to us. Normally, in order to appreciate, feel and accept the belief in personal, transactional divine beings, we have to have been steeped in it; we have to have grown up with the symbols, rituals and stories that tell of the love and the deeds of a personal god or gods and their relationship with us. (see John F

Haught, *What is Religion...*1990, p153) Data is never raw; it's always structured according to our predispositions and values....There are value choices [and beliefs at work] all the way through, from construction to interpretation. (David Brooks, *NYTimes*, Feb 19, 2013)

This isn't a new idea. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Greek philosopher Xenophanes said that "if horses had hands, or were able to do the work that humans can do, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves."

Does that mean then that all we are talking about here is mere projection of our human attributes onto a celestial screen? Does a personal god or gods exist, and does it, she, he, they care about us in any meaningful way? I can't speak for horses; I can only speak for myself.

Here I want to say a couple of things about what we mean by a person, by the personal. The language and experiences conveyed by Isaiah and Black Elk attest that, at least for them, they didn't encounter a philosophical abstraction, nor the ground of being, the laws, powers and structure of nature; it was no abyss, cloud of unknowing, or that transcending mystery and wonder. In culturally specific ways influenced by their respective religious environments, each spoke of a being, or of persons sitting on thrones, riding horses, speaking directly to them; transacting with them, conveying knowledge and callings about life-transforming tasks they were being called on to carry out. In each case, the humans were in situations and places—Isaiah in the Temple, Black Elk on a vision quest—where some kind of personal, relational event between the human and divine were expected and anticipated to occur, and accepted. The humans had made themselves available to be addressed and to respond.

The original Greek word for person means literally "the face;" in ancient Greece it also referred to the mask that actors used to represent the character they were playing in the theatre—in this sense, what mattered about an individual was the face, the role they played in society. But

then something happened in ancient Greece, the Middle East, in India and China—what historians like Karen Armstrong called the “Great Transformation” in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Ancient sages insightfully perceived that what really mattered about us was not merely the public face we presented to the world; rather, and far more important was the subjective, personal, and emotional reality about us that lies under the mask—a reality that disclosed both our individual uniqueness and emphasized that we are made for relationship with one another.

Personhood is not something we can have in isolation—it is relational. Each of us is embedded in a web of relations—fathers, mothers, siblings, sons and daughters and those we voluntarily commit ourselves to—our partners, our friends, communities, and the world around us. Descartes may have said, “I think therefore I am”; but from sages right all the way out to the most unassuming members of the great religions of the world, by contrast, what is said and experienced is: “You love me, you know and care for me, you relate to me and I to you; we can abide in trust with one another, therefore I am, we are.” My core being comes not from my mask, my role, my vaunted rational abilities and renown; it does not arise from my ability to consume, nor from some rugged, autonomy, my naked individuality, but from the fact that I am known and loved. I don’t know about horses or how they’d describe it; but for Isaiah, for Black Elk, for me, that’s personhood....

Now, I have an office with hundreds of books that I’ve picked up in my life of being a student and a worker. Several dozen of them are full of arguments for and against the existence of god. I even have one book that lists and compellingly describes thirty-six different proofs. (see the appendix in Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, 2010, pp 445-503)

Over the years, I’ve wrestled with a number of them; and am impressed by only a few. They include the Ontological Argument, Arguments from Design, from the Beauty of Physical Laws, the Hard Problem of Consciousness, Free Will, the Fine Tuning of Physical Constants, the

Human Knowledge of Infinity, the Intolerability of Insignificance, etc. etc. The ones that are meaningful with regard to our question today are the arguments from holy books, the consensus of humanity and of mystics. However, each of these relies on an assumption of trust; and I don't think there's any way around that: can we trust human reports of encounters with a personal divine being or beings? During most of our history, across many cultures and times, sacred scriptures and human reports present a near consensus about this. They present impressive pictures, stories and arguments in favour of the existence of a personal god or other divine beings.

(from the *Bhagavad Gita* to the *Bible*, the *Quran*, the *Book of Mormon*, Black Elk's written testimony, right down to the present with fascinating accounts coming out about the spiritual roots and inspiration of our First Nations "Idle No More" movement based in prophecies of "The Seven Grandfathers Teachings." Organizers are not for a moment shy talking about visions, prophecies, and 'the plan of the Creator.'" (see "The spiritual side of Idle No More," *Globe and Mail*, February 18, 2013) Here's a question: Is there anything actually more reliable and trustworthy in the "Eight Fires Prophecy," that enacts a divine plan laid out by a being that possesses foresight, purpose, and power, and that relates to First Nations people—do we give this more credence than the revealing of an embodied and very wordy Krishna to the warrior Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, or Joseph Smith's "First Vision"? If so, why?)

The major problem, however, is this, and again it has to do with trust. To the degree that our nature is shared or universal, we may very well come up with shared, *false* beliefs: we've been prone to illusions and shortcomings in perception, memory, communication, and objectivity in the past and present haven't we? Do we have any guarantee that things are different now or will be in the future?

As well, a lot of our beliefs arise not from well-evaluated reasoning, but from the needs, terrors and dependencies of the human condition. We know we're going to die, and would rather not. We know we're only one of countless *homo sapiens* who've lived on the planet in the past 150,000 years and that ours is only one of 7500 generations. We know—but can hardly grasp it—that we live in a *very* old and *very* big universe; but in spite of *all of that*, we desperately want to *matter, to be known, loved, and in relation with others* including that power, that being that assures us of enduring life, love, and meaning. **I know; I get it.** And here comes wishful thinking, self-deception, self-aggrandizement, gullibility, and false memories...of heartbreak

dead ahead. That's just to list of a few of the ways false beliefs and emotional needs can make appeals to scripture and the consensus of humanity—weak vessels, indeed, for carrying our beliefs, our so-called proofs, over the seas of doubt and skepticism. (There's also, I would add, patience, fortitude, courage, justice and faith, hope and love...)

Recently, when I was asked what I was going to be talking about today, whether or not there's a personal god who cares for us, I was told: "That will be easy, because there isn't one"

Well, looking back over the past week, waking up daily with a knot in my stomach, and surveying the wreckage of books and papers strewn about in my office preparing for this, I have to tell you, it's not been that easy. You may have noticed that I've not mentioned the argument for god from the consensus of mystics; I'll grant that it, too, has its share of flaws. Now I don't consider myself a mystic; far from it. However, there have been times in my life—precious few—in which what occurred was a special emotional/mental state that was not *anything* like everyday experience; it was not even like the kind of heightened states I've felt occasionally in extraordinary places in nature, or listening to music or relating to other dear people in my life. It felt as though what took place was a transaction between me and a mindful, caring power from beyond the circumscribed limits of my embodied being and the physical setting in which the experience occurred. Put simply: I felt related to as a person by an overwhelming, overpowering, and mysteriously transcendent "person"—and it changed my life as a consequence.

Here some observations are in order: reading the accounts of Isaiah and Black Elk and others, I can relate, and so, perhaps, can many of us; mystical experiences, so called, are not the possession of a privileged few. Also, it is clear to me that when these personal events took place, I was steeped in an environment which itself was steeped in the stories of scripture and in the living testimony of people I knew who stood and testified to the reality of their own religious

experiences with a personal, relational divine being. “This is not a dream, it happened,” said Black Elk. *After the fact*, the only language I had to interpret what had occurred to me was the language of belief in relationships that could obtain between actual persons human and divine. And I was born and raised in a culture of belief where these kinds of experiences were treasured as real, and not delusional or hallucinatory. These are some of the necessary conditions for experiencing whether or not there is a personal god who cares for us. These events need to be seen as available; they occur in settings of anticipation—like a vision quest—where an essential question about the meaning of life and of one’s core identity is presented as though it can and will be answered; and the culture in which one lives must promote, treasure and affirm the reality of these kinds of experiences, even if they happen to the youthful person I once was. Without those conditions, the experience won’t happen and the question is meaningless.

Time passes; we change. Beliefs, knowledge, and interpretations of experiences are not static things once and forever given; *life* will do that to you. What I have learned about the nature of the cosmos and its laws have rendered unbelievable what was once my belief in a transcendent, supernatural god. The horrors of the Holocaust and other human catastrophes beggared and made impossible my once hopeful belief in a personal god of power and love who hears and answers prayers; if prayers desperately uttered in the midst of unimaginable catastrophes were not answered, how could I possibly raise mine in supplication? It was obscene. And then the chronic arrogance and systemic abuse of power by religious leaders of the faith community in which I was raised broke the ties of trust which once bound me fast to it.

As well, I have come to appreciate the extraordinary depth, and the mysterious natural powers of the embodied human mind—of its emotional/intellectual craving for structure, trust and meaning—and of the mind’s boundless creative ability to respond. Just think of its power

down through the ages to conjure forth from the deepest wells of consciousness and sub-consciousness those compelling symbols of culture which radiantly clothe our desperate, inarticulate needs in the very raiment of personhood—of a god, gods, and spirits by whom we are known, loved and cared for, and to whom we give ourselves in loving, relational trust!

Time passes; we change. One after another, the plaits of the braided rope that tethered me to a known harbour of one kind of belief frayed and broke; learning more about the world—the cosmos, its natural laws, experiences of heartbreak and glory and groping for words to interpret them, marveling at our profound, abiding needs and the mind's creative power to endow them with metaphors of personality and relation—all these loosed the vessel of my life from its moorings to embark out onto the ocean and its farthest, unknown shore. Ah, but did you notice? There is a vessel—a human life, and an ocean of experience that bears it up and carries it on. That is what we have: the whole, wide world, our lives, experience, and words.

Words... they are as strong and flawed, shallow and profound as we are. We use nouns like God, sacred and beauty knowing they are abstractions with no real life in themselves. They become real, meaningful and of use to us when expressed in some concrete form. In relation to something real in our world, they become god-like, holy, and beautiful—a beautiful horse, a sacred space, a saintly person, a venerated icon, an uncanny experience in which a tremulous sensation overtakes us, and somehow we know that there is something *else* that exists, perhaps fully natural, or perhaps natural in a very strange and overturning way. That, too, can happen to a particular person in a human moment of time and space: Isaiah in the Temple in Jerusalem; Black Elk on a vision quest on the American Plains, a seventeen year old kid standing vigil overnight in a hospital room at the bedside of an ailing uncle; and through the night he was

thinking and praying over the meaning of his young life and what he should do with it; and he received an answer, an immediate, religious experience that transformed his life.

It is fairly clear to me that when we say God, we're not talking about a person; our images and concepts of the divine are personifications of reality; it is Reality personified. We live inescapably in relationship with a Reality which we cannot fully predict or control. And thus, given the nature of our minds, and our social nature, through time and cultures, we have instinctually used metaphors and analogies of personhood to try to understand and relate to that which is unavoidably Real, including its mysterious depth and the experiences we have with it; experiences that *feel as though* we are in relation—known and cared for—and because of that, we abide tentatively or profoundly in trust and hope with *it* and with one another.

Our experience with god, the divine, the Tao, that transcending mystery and wonder—whatever name we give it, emerges through us—our minds, our deeds, our relationships. He, She, It, They are manifest and made real in relationship—in each human liberating act, each profound human question about meaning and truth, each human gesture of fidelity and kindness. It is truly within our power—our hands, our minds, our artful response to life—whether the divine will be embodied or banished from our world. To say that we are in the presence of God, in the ways of hand, mind and heart, is not a metaphor; but it may be miraculous, for it requires that we believe something astonishing about ourselves.

Some suggested further reading: on personhood—Rowan Williams, “What does it mean to be a person? Human relationships and human limits,” [www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/10/08/3606227.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/10/08/3606227.htm). ; on the encounter with the unknown and insight into those experiences—Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man...* 1955, ch. 11, “An Ontological Presupposition,” pp114-24; Williams James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ch 20, “Conclusions”; on God and personality/personhood—Rev. Michael Dowd, “God is Reality Personified, Not a Person,” [www.thankgodforevolution.com/node/2010](http://www.thankgodforevolution.com/node/2010); Galen Guengerich, “A God We Can Believe In,” *Quest*, vol. LXVIII, February 2013; see also Henry Nelson Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment*, 1958, ch. 1 “The Problem of Religious Faith,” and Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God*, 1948, ch. 1 “God as Supreme, Yet Indebted to All.”