

Toward a Fresh Understanding of God

by Michael R. Miller

In the last five years quite a few scientifically-minded authors have written books very critical of religion. Here are some examples: *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, by Christopher Hitchens; *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins; *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris; and *Godless For God's Sake: Non-theism in Contemporary Quakerism*, by twenty-seven non-theist Quakers.

I must admit that I agree with much of their criticism. The list of crimes committed against humanity in the name of religion, both in the past and at present, is appalling and seems endless. The indoctrination of youth with beliefs that promote fear of the unknown and prejudice toward outsiders, should be recognized as harmful to individuals and society. Unreasonable feelings of guilt implicit in such doctrines, such as original sin, can cause a lifetime of low self-esteem. A belief in an afterlife can be an escape from facing today's challenges. We all should become more aware of the dark, debilitating, and destructive side of religion.

However, to blame God for the faults of religion is going too far. I like Voltaire's quip, "If God did not exist, He would have to be invented". Insisting that atheism is the only rational and ethical position in today's world is not only shortsighted but also mistaken. Why can't we imagine a God without insisting that God is a person, and that there must be an afterlife? God is too important an aspect of reality to be shaped only by traditional religious beliefs. By not leaving a place for God we run a huge risk of ignoring the profoundly dependent status of mankind in the grand scheme of things. Every breath we take and every thought we think is powered by a transcendent non-human energy. We need to be constantly reminded of this fact in the personal and social aspects of our lives. Otherwise we are bound to stumble from over-confidence, or what the ancients called hubris.

Three hundred and seventy years after Galileo showed us that humans were not at the centre of the universe we still have trouble realizing the full implications of his discovery, and the ramifications of objective science since then. This is because traditional religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been blind to our natural human egotism as manifested

in culture and tradition. They have concentrated only on the sin of pride at the personal and individual level. Feeling superior to those of different cultures or religions is at the very least down-played as a fault, or at worst encouraged as a virtue.

Other deeply held assumptions need to be questioned too, such as the existence of a supernatural world beyond the grave. A belief in magic, miracles, and immaterial beings is found in most human cultures. Yet science strongly suggests that it is only the natural world and its laws that exist. As we learn more about the facts of nature, the more wonderful they become, compared to our egocentric make-believe.

In my view it is very helpful to try to imagine a theology that accords better with what science has taught us about the natural world. This is an activity that should not be restricted to experts, religious or scientific. Since God can only be imagined, not proven as fact, any determined person with a good heart, an open mind, and a good imagination, should be encouraged to share their ideas regarding this question. As the old Quaker saying goes, "What canst thou say?"

And if thou say, "I am convinced of the existence of a personal God and an afterlife", so be it. Such beliefs may be as important to some people as a love for a certain kind of music is for others. The result of belief is what counts in the end. Does such a love or belief make us better persons, or transform us?

To me God is not a person, nor is the afterlife real. However, at least for our own good, we need to acknowledge Nature as an entity much greater than ourselves. We need to honour the miraculous creativity of existence itself, from the simplest subatomic particles of the Big Bang, to the complexities of the human brain billions of years later. Every part of the Universe seems to give of itself and also take something from its surroundings. I see this as a marvelous dance of life and death; the economic system of Nature.

God is the total natural world including the Universe, Planet Earth with all her creatures, animate and inanimate, and of course, we humans. God is the All, what we understand about the All, and what we do not understand. Just as there is a symbol for infinity there should be one for God - a circle or a sphere perhaps. God is a great entity whose pronoun should be IT, capitalized.

This to me is a sign of respect for God, not disrespect. When we refer to God as He or She, we are forgetting that God is as much in the Universe as