

LECTURES

For Moravian Theological College, Mbeya, Tanzania

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These lectures were presented on various subjects at the Moravian Theological College at the time of my visit, June to August 1995. In December of 1994 I received the kind invitation to lecture and to assist with the development of the projected B.D. program, an honor to which I was happy to respond. I arrived on June 17 and delivered these lectures to the students on June 19-26. I dedicate them to the Moravian Theological College in Mbeya, its students, its staff, and its future -- to the honor and glory of God.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION I — The Experience of God

Zen Buddhism has many stories which provide a medium for its teaching. One is that of Enyadatta. The story is said to have occurred at the time of the Buddha.

Enyadatta was a beautiful maiden who enjoyed nothing more than gazing at herself in the mirror each morning. One day when she looked into her mirror she found no head reflected there. Why not on this particular morning the sutra does not state. At any rate the shock was so great that she became frantic, rushing around demanding to know who had taken her head. "Who has my head? Where is my head?" I shall die if I don't find it!" she cried. Though everyone told her, "Don't be silly, your head is on your shoulders where it has always been," she refused to believe it. "No, it isn't! no it isn't! Somebody must have taken it!" she shouted, continuing her frenzied search. At length her friends, believing her mad, dragged her home and tied her to a pillar to prevent her harming herself.

Slowly her close friends persuaded her that she had always had her head, and gradually she came to half-believe it. Her subconscious mind began to accept the fact that perhaps she was deluded in thinking she had lost her head.

Suddenly one of her friends gave her a terrific clout on the head, upon which, in pain and shock, she yelled, "Ouch!" "That's your head! There it is!" her friend exclaimed, and immediately Enyadatta saw that she had deluded herself into thinking she had lost her head when in fact she had always had it.

(Elated) she rushed around exclaiming: "Oh, I've got it! I have my head after all! I'm so happy."¹

This story for the Buddhist illustrates the way that most persons are not aware that they have "Buddha nature" even though to have Buddha nature is characteristic of being human as well as of all the universe. Though "Buddha nature" is not an exact equivalent to "spiritual nature", it will suffice. The binding of Enyadatta is equated with sitting in contemplation, stilling the body until the mind has a measure of

¹. The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice and Enlightenment, compiled and edited, with translations, introductions and notes by Philip Kapleau, foreword by Huston Smith, revised and expanded, Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1980, p. 57.

tranquility. The counsel of her friends is compared to the instructions of a spiritual leader. The blow with the stick represents an actual practice of some Buddhist teachers, believing that if the contemplating person is struck at the right time it will precipitate "enlightenment." In such a moment at the same time you discover who you are and what life truly is.

For Europe and the Western world this is a very important parable. Living in the consequences of the European enlightenment with historical critical and scientific methodology we have lost our awareness of God, although there are new spiritual movements now stirring in America. We need to be reminded that we are spiritual beings and that God is a fundamental resource for life. The world and humanity are misunderstood if seen without their spiritual dimensions. The loss of the spiritual has probably not happened in Africa the way that it has happened in Europe and the West.

In the United States in the 1960s a spiritual formation movement began. It is interesting that several Dutch clergy had important roles in this: Henri Nouwen and Adrian van Kaam, as well as others. One Anglican, Tilden Edwards, speaks of a search to find what Christianity is about and receive some guidance in the spiritual life. An important step in his journey was his visit to a Buddhist monk in California who taught him the contemplative life. Centers have been established and a vast amount of literature has been published.

Spiritual formation has been a phrase long known within Catholic and Anglican circles, often connected with priestly formation. Now in most church circles in North America this would be familiar, and the Association of Theological Schools in the US and Canada has since 1981 recommended that there be courses and programs in spiritual formation in theological seminaries. Moravian Seminary has had one for now about 20 years.

Spiritual formation focuses on two primary concerns:

1. How can we find or discern God amidst the complex factors of life?

Here one needs to deal with the complexity which makes up life for all that is in life is not God (I believe this is a New Testament position). Then one needs to take the particular Christian portrayal of God, especially with the centrality of the cross and Christ's rejection of power, and see how this helps us to find God in life. This is not merely a matter for Westerners, to rediscover the God they lost in the Enlightenment, but I believe that for Easterners and Africans the application of the New Testament insights about God will help one to find a somewhat different God in life than often popularly expected.

2. How can our Christian life be formed and shaped? This makes of spiritual formation a sort of spiritual psychology, for it explores the dynamics and possibilities of human life and spiritual development, what we have often called spiritual growth and spiritual journey. Normally this concern would include the spiritual disciplines and practices which have been developed over the centuries to form and develop Christian persons.

I want to deal with the first today and the second tomorrow.

It is necessary to be able to identify God in life to sustain and have confidence in faith and, even more importantly, to understand the experiences of God which are a part of our lives. Our faith cannot be so dissonant with what we find in life that there is no place in life for us to point and say, "Yes, here is a sign of what I believe, here is a sign of God." Our faith should also help us to understand the ways in which the God, who is always with us, enters and influences our lives so that we can be sensitive and responsive to God.

The Old Testament understanding of the presence of God is that God was powerful and was manifested through the powers of nature and the events of history. He was an omnipotent king who covenanted with his subjects and ruled over them, albeit often with mercy and compassion, and destroyed their enemies. There were no other real powers. The other Gods did not matter. Even Satan in Job is only God's attorney making accusations against Job. The Deuteronomic approach moralized the events of life: whatever happens, God must have done it and you must have deserved it. Somehow the ambivalences of life are explained in terms of one God and human failure to do what the one God expects.

The situation becomes different in the Intertestamental Period. Israel, in the harsh experiences of her history, like a person who has suffered too much, becomes compulsively obedient to ward off danger. The Pharisaic amplification of the Law is like that of a person who tries to ward off catastrophe by leaving no stone of required behaviour unturned. But the problems of history are not just that humans have not sufficiently obeyed God in order that the Kingdom come. Life is viewed as being more complicated, consisting of more powers than God which, at least in this world, are quite powerful. Thus both because of experience and because of contact with Persian and Hellenistic dualism which offered a different way of seeing things, the world is seen as influenced also by evil powers. The presupposition of the Gospels' treatment of Satan is that he is the prince of this world, a world that God no longer rules but must reconquer. World and flesh become inadequate for the Kingdom, to be remade in God's final act of judgment. To this complication of evil powers Paul, in Romans 8 and elsewhere, adds neutral powers, described as those sometimes supportive and sometimes destructive powers which (when they are at their worst) may trouble us but cannot separate us from the love of God. In Galatians 4 Paul speaks of them as elemental spirits whom God gave to provide structure for the world, like the Law. These were probably understood as the powers of nature and the powers of political and cultural systems, and even the powers of the stars, for some of the terms at the end of Romans 8 are astrological.

The question of why life is this way is now open to multiple answers, and the part God plays must be identified in this complex context. This is why the centrality of the cross in I Cor. 1 and Jesus' rejection of power and affirmation of service in Mark 10 (the story of James and John) and John 13 (the footwashing) are so important. Jesus seems to be describing a different way that God is present than the way God was thought to be present. The Incarnation (e.g. John 1:14) also describes a different way. God comes to the world and is transformed in the conditions of the world's existence rather than destroying them --- and then goes back to heaven bearing his wounds (John 20). Consequently Paul could say that the cross fits neither the presuppositions of Jew or Greek, but one must let it be what it is and not try to change God back into the imperial God of the Old Testament (I Cor.1). Indeed, the God of the New Testament is the same as the God of the Old Testament, but much of what people used to say God was is negated. This same issue is behind Jesus and his disciples' struggle over the mission of the Messiah. The difference in this Christian understanding of God is well expressed in a poem Bonhoeffer wrote in prison:

Men go to God when they are sore bestead, ...
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.

Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead:
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.

God goeth to every man when sore bestead,
Feedeth body and spirit with his bread,

For Christians, heathens alike he hangeth dead:
And both alike forgiving.²

What Bonhoeffer's poem indicates is that both Christians and those who do not believe go to God seeking help, but when they discover God, God is bearing the burden of the poor, weak, and wicked. Christians are those who go beyond seeking help and are willing to stand by God in God's suffering. For this is a God who goes to everyone when they are troubled and hangs upon the cross for Christians and heathen alike. Christians then respond to God's reinterpretation of the way God is.

What then does the Christian see as the presence of God? From the meaning of the cross and the struggle over this by Paul and within the Johannine community, God is not power but personal presence. This is also the way I would like to see the Holy Spirit, not as the presence of some spiritual stuff of God which is often identified with power, but the ongoing personal presence of God and Christ within the world. The "Abba" relationship God offers is not a "God up there and we down here" relationship. God is with us in our world and in the moments of our days. Thus the Spirit is the message of the continuing Incarnation of God amidst the incongruities of human existence. I believe that this perspective will make sense of the ways we really experience God, as present and participating in life but not as changing the character of existence which God Godself endures.

Paul, with his perspective, saw the presence of God in: his conversion experience, nature and creation (Rom. 1), conscience (Rom. 2), visions and revelations of the Lord (II Cor. 12), prophecy and tongues (I Cor. 14), a resource for ethical action (Gal. 5), the dynamic of personal growth, the producing of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12), the provision of life guidance, and above all the on-going personal relationship which God provides and is best expressed in the term "Abba" (Gal. 4:6). But this presence had to be seen in the light of the cross, and so Paul joins his sufferings in II Cor. 11 to his visions in II Cor. 12 and indicates that a thorn in the flesh came with his visions. I interpret his thorn in the flesh as the "evil impulse," according to Rabbinic psychology, which he describes as troubling him in Rom. 7. Thus he found that he had the treasure of God in his earthen vessel (II Cor. 4:7), a vessel which in this life never stopped being earthen.

With this in mind every moment becomes a moment that is possible for God but everything in those moments is not God. Each moment becomes a moment when God can make a difference, but not all moments can be changed. It is not that all things work together for good, but that in every circumstance God works for good, however difficult the circumstances (two variant translations of Rom. 8:28).

For the Kingdom of God the human being is a unique vessel, albeit an earthen one. The presentation of the human as the image of God in Genesis indicates that the human is the place in which God and God's purpose may be reflected, for the human is the place where creation comes to consciousness and responsibility. Thus the place of God's kingdom, as presented in Luke-Acts, is wherever persons are who are willing to let the Spirit of God be upon them and, like our Saviour, preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, set at liberty the oppressed, and proclaim the Jubilee of God (Luke 4:18ff).

². Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, NY: Macmillan, 1967, pp. 224-225.