

God: CEO or Master of the Dance?

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MY TEXT IS A POEM AND A SCRIPTURE since as I age I find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between beauty and truth.

Pied Beauty

—by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89)

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And àll trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

And from Jeremiah 31:31-34:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the House of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.

The God of Genesis loved life in abundant and dazzling diversity.

Humanity grows in God's image through autonomy. Creation continues.

Jehovah through Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." We would no longer rely solely on teachers but with God's law within our center there discover the divine. No longer would an elite caste be intermediary between God and the people: "They shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Hopkins, with that wonderful paradox that often reveals God's finger, speaks from a conservative century in a conservative country and as a member of a then austere, rigid, and legalistic Jesuit order. But just as a vow of silence unleashed a torrent of beauty and spiritual insight in the words of Thomas Merton, so a hundred years before Hopkins saw the endless beauty in the diversity of all life. Though a member of an order militaristic in more than metaphor, Hopkins praised, "dappled things"—"skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow"—"rose moles all in stipple upon trout that swim"—"finches' wings"—"landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plow"—

And as a member of an organization then demanding obedience and uniformity and authoritarian structure above all else, Hopkins gloried in "all things counter, original, spare, strange"—

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.

All this diversity, this dazzling diversity created by and in praise of God.

In our culture and throughout the world we see this tension between those who insist upon an Augustinian authoritarian order of massive uniformity and those who glory in the individuality of conscience, a reflection of God's limitlessness in the endless diversity of creation.

Of course, there must be an intermixture of authoritarian structure—law, if you will, and unfettered individuality. The emphasis that we place on one or the other will be reflected in how we envision God: As Chief Executive Officer or as Master of the Dance.

Our tilt will depend on time and circumstance.

Paul spoke of the law as schoolmaster. Schoolmaster, perhaps, to nurture us as children until, with the law finally written upon our hearts, we are capable of enjoying that level of autonomy that marks us not as slaves or bond-servants but as heavenly heirs, children of God.

For the huge majority of us, we never reach a point of not needing the association of others. We need community. We thrive in intimate and friendly relations and we pine, decline, and become frail and fragile in isolation.

But the collective should not demand our souls as the price of membership. Any group that levies such a toll will do its best to keep its mem-

bership in supine inferiority and childish dependence. Such an organization will see obedience to the group as the highest good. Those who attempt a relationship with God that reflects the first commandment's injunction that God alone is worshipped, not the corporate self, will be seen as a grave and heretical threat. Obedience and order will overshadow conscience and individual spirituality. The first commandment is lost in corporate self-worship.

We all reflect society's demand that we conform in the persona and the super-ego, those parts of us that attempt to make us look like society wants us to look.

But the conscience is subversive. If we are untrue to that part of our center where God wrote upon us, that part of us that cries out, "Abba—Father, Mother!" then by dreams, neuroses, and behavior we will reflect this inner struggle until we express our own individuality in God's image.

At this stage in my own life I see truth now not so much in law as in nature or music or dance or poetry. I am less impressed by bureaucratic structure than by rhythm, the seasons: a time to dance, a time to mourn; a place of beauty, a sense of the sacred.

My reading may be less within theology, more attracted to prophetic power in spirituality and poetry.

My spiritual practice centers upon my dreams, meditation, contemplation. A growing appreciation of God's presence in simple things in each day's activity. In mountains and at the ocean shore, where one life-system meets another. I find spirituality along those seams. I sense a connectedness to a larger whole.

T. S. Eliot put it this way in "Ash Wednesday":

This is the time of tension between dying and birth
The place of solitude where three dreams cross
Between blue rocks
But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.

Increasingly I see my own frailty. My own inability to define or confine God or anyone else.

We deal in metaphors. We lack God's capacity to know or understand completely. We see fragments, figments, phantasy and yet we slaughter each other, or only somewhat less brutal and presumptuous, we excommunicate or eviscerate each other for seeing a different metaphor. The definition (and sexuality) of God. What constitutes scripture and what does it mean? The meaning and qualifications for priesthood.

With our finite minds and fragile bodies we grope for truth. Such profound limitations should force upon us equally profound reticence to force upon another our particular view. God objectively exists. Evil as well. Yet subjectively I perceive both. Even my rare glimpse through dream of an image of God unfiltered by all the wordiness of my mind is nevertheless affected by my own soul.

Whose metaphor is best? Who decides? At least we might acknowledge that it is metaphor and not objective truth the acceptance of which we demand of another lest we unleash ferocious violence: genocidal war pitting religious or ethnic groups; economic and political systems; nations; and individuals within church and state.

In *Tao Te Ching* Lao-Tzu said:

The Tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

And again:

When you have names and forms,
Know that they are provisional.
When you have institutions,
Know where their functions should end.
Knowing when to stop,
You can avoid anger.
All things end in the Tao
As rivers run into the sea.

We need law, structure, but primarily to transcend it. With St. Paul I sense the limits of law. Law does not save. Our wholeness, our completeness, our autonomy is in boundless love and grace. If government saw itself as means and means only to the end of our ultimate autonomy, then ends and means would be in harmony. But when the institution of the church or state sees itself as the end and people as the means to the organization's perpetuation, then ends and means are subverted. Individuals

are crushed and killed so that the monolithic power of the government may continue unthreatened by thought, change, dissent, or the spirit of God. Ultimately, this destroys the institutions of church and state just as surely as it injures the individual.

The historian of the former Soviet Union, Robert Conquest, noted that "the behavior of an organization can often be predicted by assuming it to be controlled by a cabal of its enemies."

Alternatively, if a Christian church, for example, were to mold its actions by the man Jesus, revered as God incarnate, then as Andrew Greeley observes from Jesus' parables:

The church would never abandon.

The church would forgive before confession could be spoken.

The church would spoil, not spank wayward children.

The church would condemn itself for its obscuring God by the church's behavior as if it were a dysfunctional family.

The church would be under the same injunction as the farmer who was forbidden to pull out what he perceived as weeds. As my friend, Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest, has noted: "I now see the weeds of my youth as the wheat of my life. And the wheat of my youth as the weeds of my life."

The church would spend its funds on food, drink, clothing, and parties for the poor and disreputable of this world. The church would harvest and cultivate fish of every kind, not an elite or a believing few.

Clearly, the God of the New Testament—and of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea—has fallen madly, crazily in love with people. Liars, prostitutes, thieves. This God is an indiscriminate lover who sees himself and herself variously as husband, wife, lover, father, mother; unconditional and even erotic lover.

The God I worship—and any spiritual community that might nurture me—would glory in my autonomy and cheer my steps and my frequent missteps toward wholeness. I in turn must cultivate my own limited capacity to see God's image in every human, every non-human animal, and every part of this living, breathing organism, earth and cosmos.

Thank God for pied beauty, "for dappled things—For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow; For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;" For "finches' wings; Landscape plotted and pieced—fold fallow, and plough;"—for "All things counter, original, spare, strange;—"

With our Hindu sisters and brothers, as with Francis of Assisi, we should bow before each other in honor and in awe, sensing the spirit of God in each of us and in all persons and parts of creation. Then the spirit of dogmatism and violence and authoritarian pretentiousness would evaporate.

With this sense of holiness in everyone, we would as a matter of course, honor autonomy, individuality, idiosyncrasy as what it is: the image of God.

With Francis Thompson, a Victorian English poet, we would sense every rock and fish, every person as being suffused with God's spirit: our earth's water as the environment of eternal life; and our mountain breeze as God's spirit wafting where it will:

The Kingdom of God Is within You

The angels keep their ancient places;
 Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
 'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
 That miss the many-splendored thing.

But (when so sad thou can't not sadder)
 Cry—and upon thy so sore loss
 Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
 Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.