

# **Open Your Eyes to Possibility**

I Thessalonians 5:12-24; Psalm 126

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11 December 2011

The question, “How do we as contemporary, progressive people prepare for an encounter with God?” does invite us to think about God. One of its implied follow-up questions is “What sort of God can we contemporary, progressive people believe in?”

The dominant orthodox understanding of God developed over many centuries of careful thought and powerful spiritual experiences. One of its most admired apologists was Cardinal Newman, whose writings were so popular and influential in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here is an excerpt of Cardinal Newman’s discussion of the divine attributes:

[God] must be both necessary and absolute, cannot not be, and cannot in any way be determined by anything else. This makes Him absolutely unlimited from without, and unlimited also from within; for limitation is non-being; and God is being itself. This unlimitedness makes God infinitely perfect. . . He is simple metaphysically also, that is to say, his nature and his existence cannot be distinct. . . This absence of all potentiality in God obliges Him to be immutable. He is actuality, through and through. Were there anything potential about Him, He would either lose or gain by its actualization, and either loss or gain would contradict his perfection. He cannot, therefore, change. . . . He is thus absolutely self-sufficient: his self-knowledge and self-love are both of them infinite and adequate, and need no extraneous conditions to perfect them.

It would be a mistake for us to think we believed the same things about God that our ancient, medieval, and early modern forbearers believed. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this classically orthodox notion of God began to crumble and precisely at the point of God’s supposed immutability – the notion that God did not develop or change in any way. This notion ran afoul of a number of developments. One was evolutionary theory, which made change and growth essential natural processes. Another was the fast pace of human progress, which made development an essential element of human history.

This orthodox God was too detached and not responsive to human need. This human need looked back at the Bible and suddenly realized that this classically orthodox God didn’t seem to be the God of the bible. Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews in the Old Testament, did respond to creation. Yahweh’s mind changed. Even at one point we are told that God repented of a decision God had made. What didn’t change about Yahweh was faithfulness, a covenant commitment to love and justice. These were moral attributes, not metaphysical ones.

And this classical notion of God didn’t seem to fit the stories of Jesus at all. An incarnate God who lives, hungers, thirsts, loves, cries, suffers, and dies seemed a far cry from an

immutable, impassible deity. It came to be acknowledged that classical orthodoxy relied more on the divine attributes of Greek philosophy, on thinkers like Parmenides and Aristotle, than it did on the God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

In 1901 and 2 William James, who was a professor of psychology and philosophy at Harvard, delivered the prominent Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The Gifford lectures are the pre-eminent lectures in religion and many of the published books after them have become classics. None moreso than James' book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which the Modern Library named the best non-fiction, English-language book of the twentieth century.

James did something which still seems vital more than a century later. A thoroughly educated progressive, he takes religious experience seriously and with generosity. Oh, he criticizes much about it, particularly the extremes -- those people he considers sick-minded and weak-souled. But he does not count their experiences as less than genuine or as inauthentic. He trusts that they have had a real psychological and religious experience. He believes that religious experience can be approached scientifically and that objective truths can be formulated. Though, ultimately, it is the subjective experiences that matter most.

For James the basic principle is *does religion work*, does it bear fruit. He argued that any religious experience can be judged by the fruit it bears – how it changes or improves the person and how it changes or improves the world. It is from this standpoint that he criticized the extremes and the various abuses that are done in the name of religion. And it is from this standpoint that he recommends to us a religious faith that does improve the world.

Part of what was radical in James' notion was how much it focused on the future and future possibilities. In that way, his notion worked against the conservatism of orthodoxy. The orthodox God, as presented by Cardinal Newman, did not change. In fact, Newman described God as the "absence of all potentiality." In the century after James, new understandings of God have drawn upon the biblical tradition and have revealed God to be the source of endless possibilities.

For instance, the process theologians John Cobb and David Ray Griffin have called God "the ground of novelty." For them, God's role in the world is to be the presenter of possibilities, the one who excites us with adventure into a new and open future. In fact, Cobb and Griffin argue that without God the world would be a boring place. They write,

If we could think at all of a world apart from God, it would be a world of repetition lapsing into lesser and lesser forms of order according to the principle of entropy. What happened in each occasion could only be the declining outgrowth of what had happened before. It is God who, by confronting the world with unrealized opportunities, opens up a space for freedom and self-creativity.

And now we get back to the scripture readings for today, the Psalm and the letter of I Thessalonians. In the Psalm we read, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." And in the epistle, St. Paul reminds us that God is actively calling us to transform ourselves. Together these two passages suggest promise, future, and possibility.

“What sort of God can we contemporary, progressive people believe in?”

The God we long to encounter is the one who goes before us into the wide open future. The one who challenges us with the possibility that the world can be a different and better place than it is. That we can be different and better than we are. This is the God who asks us to dream. The God who calls us to take risks, to have courage. The God who invites us to open ourselves to possibility and venture forth. The God who is still speaking.

Listen again to Cobb and Griffin as they describe the call of God on our lives:

The future is . . . radically open. That which has never been may yet be. What has been until now does not exhaust the realm of possibilities, and because of God some of these yet unrealized possibilities act as effective lures . . . God offers to us opportunities to break out of our ruts, to see all things differently, to imagine what has never yet been dreamed. . . . God makes all things new. Thus God is the ground of our hope.

This means that we should trust God. Trusting God is not assurance that whatever we do, all will work out well. It is instead confidence that God’s call is wise and good. . . . God offers possibilities that would lead us into the new life we need.

“That which has never been may yet be.” What an inspiring, hopeful message. It stirs my spirit and excites me with adventure. In our worship of God, in our congregational life, in our ministry to the wider world, in our own lives, we aren’t repeating old forms and maintaining the status quo. We are encountering a living, stillspeaking God. And if we open ourselves to God, trust God, and live with courage and zest, then “that which has never been may yet be.”