

Yahweh as Ground of Being

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January 9, 2005

Emo Jesse once told me about a comedy bit, “Facial expressions you don’t want to see from Jesus.” The comedian proceeds to frown, grimace, and manifest plain bewilderment, presumably in response to whatever it is you’re up to this time. It’s funny, because for many of us, that’s a real fear. Merton, it seems, would tell us that we’ve nothing to worry about, because the very existence of a creature is an act of praise to Yahweh (“Image and Likeness, in *The New Man*, 51ff.).

If we may borrow from the Eastern conception, Yahweh himself exists as a Trinitarian community, outside of time and space. He wills that others exist as part of that community, to be loved by it, and to love within it. It is the nature of the Trinity to exist and love in community. Therefore the creative act by which Yahweh spoke the universe into being is the inevitable consequence of his own nature. The Creation praises, for it exists out of obedience and the knowledge that it is known and loved by Yahweh. To exist, any creature must first be conceived and loved in the mind of Yahweh. Therefore anything that exists in the original created order is intrinsically and irrevocably an object of Yahweh’s love.

Only non-existent creatures can be unknown to and unloved by Yahweh. If I exist, I was created by Yahweh. Yahweh creates solely out of creative love. If I exist, it is because I was conceived as an object of Yahweh’s love. Therefore the intrinsic ground of my own being is the reality that I am loved by Yahweh. Ecstasy and forgetfulness of self are normal for the Creation, Merton says, because self knowledge rests entirely on the truth of being loved by Yahweh. On such a foundation there is not need to hide or protect oneself.

“Who can comprehend or explain the mystery of what it means to awaken to one’s own reality as an existential consequence of the fact that we are loved by Reality Itself?” (54)

This is a god who will not grimace at our failings.

Holiness as Action

Is holiness found in right action, or contemplation? Perhaps both.

Merton sees in the second creation narrative humanity’s vocation to a particular kind of action. When Elohim makes humanity in his own likeness, the god who is creator, worker and father commissions these people to be that also. They will build a society, and form order from chaos in order to safeguard and nurture the Creation that brings the first Creator so much joy. They were created to be like him and do like him, but to exist as separate persons who could love and honor him. Using those creative gifts rightly, those borne from Yahweh’s own being, is, in Bach’s phrase, “a gift back to the giver.”

Merton continues:

“And in the line of this thought, original sin would be a perversion of man’s active instincts, a turning of man’s creativity away from God so that he produces and creates not the society and the temple which God’s own creation demands as its fulfillment, but a temple of man’s own power. The world is then exploited for the glory of man, not for the glory of God. Man’s power becomes an end in itself” (60).

I find this a helpful conception. I’ll draw it out. In such a case, living redemptively would be to continue living in and working out of that vocation following the manner of Christ. Just as the Creator brought form and a life like his own from a shapeless void, so would his Anointed One. Jesus entered that chaotic maelstrom of competing powers and through his healing works, execution and subsequent vindication brought order and the rule of Yahweh into the midst of it. Christ the second Adam did what the first Adam failed to do.

How do we continue this work? As the Church, we integrate ourselves into every aspect of human existence. We take common cause with sufferers, speaking correction and hope to victims and victimizers alike. We step into the lives of one another to speak truth that will chase away the lies, and to invoke the Spirit of Yahweh into the godforsaken places through the laying on of hands. We live as prophets, speaking order and healing into the brokenness of a fallen and chaotic creation. The Word of God created, the Word of God redeemed, and we will continue as Christ-indwelt prophets, speaking the words of God to effect his work of re-creating broken and wounded men and women.

Holiness is something you do.

Holiness as Contemplation

Merton warns us against thinking of contemplation in terms of separating “bodily” life from the life of the spirit, which results in dualism. He talks for a few pages in terms of the *psyche* and *pneuma*, and finding the real self behind endless activity. I’m not certain what it is he’s talking about (I’m no mystic), but he seems to be working on an idea of contemplation as a restful activity. Even then, contemplation is not truly inactive, for the whole purpose is to engage, know and love “the other.”

Holiness as Action and Contemplation

Right action is grounded in right contemplation. When in our contemplation we can understand ourselves as being known and loved by Yahweh, we can live in the self-forgetfulness that allows to engage, know and love the other without defensiveness or fear. In searching out and loving the otherness of people around us, we will love Yahweh. This contemplation, this being with Yahweh while being with others and our own selves, is the ground of right and holy action. Mediating on truth, knowing and loving the other, will guide us in our physically active work of speaking creative truth and building a healing society in the midst of people whose lives have been wrecked by the exercise of power for its own sake.