

Genesis, God and the Good Earth



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Borrowing a copy of the Friends Journal: Quaker Thought and Life Today, my fingers fumbled upon an article by English professor John Minahan titled "Genesis: Outer Space and Inner Light." In the midst of his jaunt through the creation story in the Bible's first book, the writer offers some thought-provoking self-disclosure.

"When people ask me if I believe in God, I usually say no – not that I'm an atheist." He's got my attention. "Rather, the question usually proceeds from a conceptual model of God as a being like other beings (albeit infinitely stronger and smarter) with whom you can therefore have a personal relationship, to whom you can pray."

Sounds familiar. "So, no. Yes, however, to what Genesis articulates to me: there is a Reality so extensive, so beautiful, and so mysterious that the more we try to name it, the more its nature eludes us."

The good professor has put his finger – no, his whole hand and perhaps has sat upon – an immensely important issue for me, and maybe for you.

"God" is as we define "God."

Now, wait. Some will remind me of my Bible-bound days when we proclaimed that our God is well-defined in scripture. In other words, God has de-



"Earthrise," Christmas Eve, 1968 (NASA). CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

fin'd Godself, and that settles it.

Well, except, sorry to break it to my younger self, but that has never settled anything. Has any religion ever presented a reasonable definition of deity or divinity? Yes, I know, it's not supposed to be "reasonable" – it's faith, right? Does that settle it?

Our Quaker English professor lends us a hand to help us out of the muddy hollow of theologies. He offers a slipperly but sensible hint.

The most intriguing line for me is this: "There is a Reality so extensive, so beautiful, and so mysterious that the more we try to name it, the more its nature eludes us."

Did you catch it? There's the opening. He's given us the "genesis" of a path out of our endlessly circular religious conundrums. If we drop the word "God"

(just try it for a moment) and speak of "Reality," could that be more solid and stable footing for the slick trail?

As a nature-bound person who feels un-bound by the sense that nature is boundlessly open and interesting, it seems very "natural" to accept the professor's description of "Reality" as the same as what I would simply call "Nature" or "Universe."

Does this eliminate or erase "God" from the Great Picture? Not unless that word restricts to one image or name or human limitation. If "God" is understood (or at least contemplated) as "Reality" or "Nature" then what happens to faith, belief, religion and scriptures?

I'm not sure.

Those who believe that their view of the divine is real, that they have a personal relationship with their deity and their "real god" hears and responds to their prayerful needs aren't going to easily release that view. No one says they have to.

Yet our Quaker professor, who accepts there is an "inner light" to guide us (in my book, that's reason, good sense, human feeling), suggests there is a brighter way out of the dark valley of debate over definitions of divinity. It's to admit we don't know any reality called "God" but we do know something about a "God" named Reality, Nature or Universe.

Unless we truly need a Grand Gentleman or Gracious Goddess whom we can imagine and, strangely enough, control through our prayers and rituals and confine to holy books, we might be more lib-

erated and even "saved" from our earth-bound lives just a little to be more "real" with ourselves.

What if we could say, "No, I don't believe in God, but I'm not an atheist"? Does that sound like nonsense or some kind of joke? Of course. But aren't there a whole lot of similar statements in spiritual traditions across the centuries? And couldn't it be said that each of the "heretics" who founded our world's religions told the world they no longer believed in God – at least the God they were "supposed" to believe in?

Professor Minahan frames his "creative" interpretation of the Creation Story with the Christmas Eve broadcast 50 years ago when astronauts quoted from Genesis, ending with "God bless all of you, all of you on the good earth."

The Friends Journal article includes that incredible image taken by the astronauts on Christmas Eve a half century ago – the famous "earthrise" photograph – a fragile yet good earth hanging as a beautiful blue-green ornament spinning in the dark mystery of space.

That "otherworldly" picture, all by itself, seems an appropriate and necessary "Reality" check for a very "this-worldly" return to our genesis.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com. His new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press.