

The Disappearance of God

[Edited Transcript]

A Sermon by E.Arlen Goff

June 6,2000

I can't really be sure when it happened. It was not a sudden thing, but rather took place gradually. God sorta just faded away.

I think I first really became aware of it one weekday morning, while I was on my way to work. I was traveling down I-75 toward Warner Robins, and just as I approached the Pio Nono exit, something flashed into my mind. "I don't believe in God."

To be sure, that realization brought with it all sorts of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I felt some sadness. After all, I had given most of my life to spreading the word that God lives and loves and cares for us all, and that we could best glimpse his nature in that wandering Jewish preacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

And, of course, there was the thought of what might happen if my parents found out. (Can you imagine ... a forty-something year old white male afraid of what Mom and Dad might think.) After all, Southern Baptist pastors and their wives aren't too excited when their eldest sons become atheists, particularly after spending all that money to put them through college and seminary. I mean, they had just gotten used to the fact that I was attending a Unitarian Universalist church. (But, Arlen, aren't they a cult?).

On the other hand, there was also a sense of profound relief. It was as if a burden had been lifted off my shoulders. (Sorry for the cliché.) No longer would I have to spend a great deal of spiritual, emotional and mental energy attempting to reconcile what I felt I should believe in my heart with what I knew to be true with my mind. Intellect would no longer be the slave nor the enemy of faith. Rather, a faith of sorts was now intellect's partner ...

And so, I come to you today, to speak of the disappearance of God.

In 1966, two philosophers [Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur] were asked to deliver the Bampton Lectures at Columbia University. Their topic was "The Religious Significance of Atheism."

In his lecture, "The Fate of Theism", Alasdair MacIntyre speaks of two different types of atheists:

The self-styled, free-thinking secularist societies of the nineteenth century -- the backbone of those societies was often the self-educated working-class intellectual -- used to lament that they recruited almost entirely from the ranks of the churches, and not at all from the masses of nonbelievers who surrounded them. The self-conscious ex-Christian atheist is thus to be distinguished from the secularized unbeliever, who sees no point in denying the existence of God because he never saw any point in affirming it in the first place. The first type of atheist continues to ask systematically the questions to which traditional theism gave answers. The second type no longer asks these questions. [You might say that they carry no interest for him.]

As I read those words this past week, I sensed a ring of truth. It seems that those who most loudly and vociferously proclaim their disbelief in God speak in tones of anger and disappointment; they are decrying a belief in a particular God, the God whose absence they have felt. I am also convinced that for an ever-increasing number of persons, the question of the existence of God never really comes up, because it is outside the realm of their experience, having no real relevance to the way they live their lives. Interestingly enough, MacIntyre states that often the first [type of atheist] is the parent of the second [type of atheist].

I suspect that, as I shared that tiny bit of my own experience a few moments ago, there were some among you who were breathing a silent "Amen" in the depths of your souls. Perhaps you even felt yourself slightly nodding your head in agreement. No, I'm not necessarily saying that all of us gathered here today are atheist or non-theists. However, it may be true that many of us are "fideistic agnostics" ... unbelieving believers, or believing unbelievers ... holding onto some form of faith or belief without really knowing what we are professing to believe, or why. I sense, as well, that many of you can at least connect with the feeling, the emotion, the silent terror of facing the world plagued by some sort of cosmic aloneness. After all, wouldn't all of us like to believe that some all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God was watching over us, indeed, was on our side? Wouldn't all of us like a "precious Lord", who would take us by the hand and lead us home?

But the problem is not that you or I may not believe in God. The problem comes when we acknowledge that we have no sense of the presence of God. Or to put it another way, we feel all too clearly the absence of God.

In the dark moments of our lives, we can hear our own inner voices echoing the cry of the Psalmist:

**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
Why art thou so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning.
O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.**

Or, again:

**But I, O Lord, cry to thee:
in the morning my prayer comes before thee.
O Lord, why dost thou cast me off?
Why dost thou hide thy face from me?**

You see, it seems that it is often in the midst of our deepest pain, our greatest suffering, that we yearn for "someone to watch over" us, a power greater than our pain that will once again lift us out of darkness into the light of day. It is when we are hurting and crying and suffering that the deepest questions come, and we wait for answers much like the characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, answers that never come..

When we are confronted with the surreal scenes of terror from Littleton ... listening to the crying and weeping, hearing teens with quivering voices innocently mourning the loss of safety and security, witnessing the disbelief and shock and grief of that community ... when we finally allow into our minds the terrible realization that the killers were not terroristic ideologues or monstrous ogres, but teenagers ... when we realize that these are children killing children ... we might be prone to ask, "Where is God?"

When we view the streams of refugees fleeing Kosovo, when we see them wandering from place to place seeking only a pillow on which to lay their heads, some small morsel of food to put into their empty

stomachs, some caring healer to dress their wounds, some friendly face to give them hope, to tell them that all will be well ... when we see the father carrying his dead child in his arms, seeking only a small plot of earth in which to bury her ... when we hear of the horrors -- fathers killed, daughters raped, homes destroyed ... we might be prone to ask, "Where is God?"

When we lose a loved one ... whether a slow and agonizing death due to cancer or AIDS or through the senseless randomness of a drunk driver's swerving mayhem ... when we find ourselves helpless and hopeless in the dark hours of our beloved's pain ... when we see our parents gradually waste away ... when our children die of disease, in senseless accidents, or (worse, yet) through abuse and tomorrow's promise vanishes like a morning mist ... we might be prone to ask, "Where is God?"

When we gaze into the yawning maw of death, the crematoria ovens of Auschwitz, Birkenau, Dachau or Buchenwald ... when we are reminded of the killing fields of Cambodia with their senseless brutality ... when we think of the innocent millions who died ... we might be prone to ask, "Where is God?"

In his book *Night*, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel relates his experience of seeing a child executed. The pre-teen boy had been so hungry that he stole a crust of bread, and for that offense he was to be hanged. He was taken to the gallows with two others, and placed in the center. When the chair was kicked out from under him, he hung between heaven and earth, writhing in agony. You see, he was so emaciated by hunger, his weight was not sufficient for the hangman's noose to break his neck and bring his brief life to a merciful close. Rather, he hung there, slowly strangling to death. Wiesel and all the others were forced to stand there in silence and watch until the child breathed his last. There were no words, there were no tears ... just silence. And then, a voice spoke: "Where is our God now?" And someone answered, "He is there ... on the center gallows."

You see, for some God does not simply disappear. God dies.

For others, God just becomes irrelevant, no longer serving a useful end, no longer needed to provide a sense of meaning and purpose, no longer necessary as the answer for our questions.

With the rise of the Enlightenment and the development of rationalism, God slowly but surely faded into the background. Scientists, naturalists and philosophers were able to explain the workings of human nature and the wonders of the natural world without running back to God as the true and unique source or cause.

Now some were not able to make the move to atheism or non-theism in one great leap. They were known as Deists, and among their number were Thomas Jefferson (who may or may not really have been a Unitarian) and Benjamin Franklin. They more or less had to ease into acknowledging the absence of God. One way they did this was to affirm that ... yes, perhaps God did create the world in all its wonder ... and yes, perhaps he did set humankind above all else as the pride of creation ... and yes, perhaps we can discern in the seeming order of existence and the dazzling variety of life upon this earth the hand of a creator.

But, that Creator God (who may or may not be co-existent with the God of our fathers) is no longer around. He has retired, has wandered off to some other corner of this vast universe to direct another creative project, to set on fire another glorious sun, to mold matter out of nothingness, to create flesh and blood and fish and fowl and beauty and beast. Or maybe the Creator is taking a well-deserved vacation. Or maybe he is visiting friends. In any case, the Creator God has left the stage. He set things in motion, he wound up the clock, and now he has left ... to let the earth and its inhabitants slowly but surely wind down

...

Others did not prove so skittish to rid themselves of God, whom they saw as an anthropomorphic deity who was prone to the same weaknesses and foibles and prejudices of those who created him. As a matter of fact, that's more or less what Sigmund Freud (in his book *The Future of an Illusion*) and Ludwig Feuerbach (in his book *The Essence of Christianity*) seemed to be saying in the waning years of the nineteenth century. God was nothing more or less than our wishes writ large, the projection of our ideals and dreams and hopes, and sadly, our faults and biases and hatreds. There was no God other than the one which we had shaped in the depths of our psyches out of the formless fears that stalked our hearts. This is why our gods are more often feared and obeyed, served and appeased, rather than loved.

And this God whom we fashioned, we also killed. We are the murderers of God. Frederic Nietzsche brazenly proclaimed the death of God, and our complicity in his death. But, for Nietzsche, this was not something to mourn, or something for which we must atone, but rather a cause for celebration. For in the place of God arose the *ubermensch*, the superman.

For Freud, Feuerbach and Nietzsche the question "Where is God?" had only one answer. God never really existed in the first place.

So, how do we live in a world without God. Perhaps, we need to re-visit that moment of clarity as I drove to work that weekday morning. Perhaps, it was more a particular idea of God, a specific conception of the divine, a pervasive and practically oppressive model of God in which I could no longer believe. Perhaps, it is simply "God", big G, surrounded by quotation marks, in which I no longer believe. I'm not even sure I know.

For you see, I am not quite yet ready to join the ranks of the non-believer. Deep within me there still resides what William James called "the will to believe." There still seems to be something deep inside me which is prone to wonder and awe in the face of mystery. That still, small voice which whispers that "there is more" ... that no matter how rigorously you analyze it, how scientifically you examine it, how rationally you discuss it ... affirming that there is a transcendent quality to human life.

I may no longer believe in the God of my forebears. I may no longer believe in a Supreme Being with whom I can have a personal relationship. I may no longer believe in "God the Father Almighty, and his son Jesus Christ."

My "God" may have died, but my faith is very much alive!

Yes, I still believe. I believe in the wonder of humanity, in that unspeakable and unknowable component of human existence that cannot be measured or quantified or explained. That which is deep within us and yet far beyond us, that which can only be approached with reverence, with wonder, with awe. That persistent feeling that "there is more."

What a wonder we are. The ecstasy of lovemaking cannot be adequately described simply through anatomical charts and diagrams, or even psychological synthesis. Neither the depth of feeling inspired by a Bach cantata or a Handel oratorio. Nor the wonder instilled by gazing at the brilliant colorations of a Renoir or Manet, the etchings of Leonardo da Vinci, or the sensuality of Michelangelo's David or the sheer pathos of his Pieta. The creative genius which blesses humankind in every generation cannot be explained or analyzed ... only appreciated, only graciously received as a precious gift.

Neither can the heroism and philanthropy of humankind's saints be quantified. What leads a man or woman to give freely of themselves in service to others, often at the risk of their own comfort and maybe

their very lives? What inspires the ministrations of a Mother Teresa among the poor of Calcutta, the outcast, the dead and dying, the orphans, those seemingly without hope, without love. What moves an Albert Schweitzer to leave renown in Europe as a distinguished philosopher and theologian, as the authority on the music of the Baroque era and Bach's organ music, to take his pump organ, theological tomes, Bach preludes and medical instruments to the people of Africa ... to arrive not as a philosopher or musician, but as a healer ... not out of devotion to a deity, but out of an overwhelming reverence for human life.

You can dissect us; you can analyze us; you can take us apart, re-arrange our genes and attempt to put us back together again. But the whole is more than the sum of its parts. With humankind, one plus one does not simply equal two. There is more.

You can clone us, and though there may be an exact replica of one standing beside the other, though the DNA is exactly the same, though there is virtual identity of the two, yet the mind and heart of each will be unique, the voices will not sing with the same timbre, nor will the spirit of one mirror with precision the spirit of the other. There is more.

Can we live without God? Yes, indeed, most of us do. But we cannot live without the wonder that is humankind, the best of us which struggles against the worst in us, the hope and promise that overcomes the most horrific atrocity, the strength that shines forth most brilliantly often in those who are weakest among us.

I know not whether there is a God ... out there ... somewhere. But I do know that I touch the sacred as I touch you, I hear the divine in your voice, I feel the holy in your presence. For me, the face of God is all around ... in the faces which I encounter each day, each one bearing the lines of pleasure and pain, the marks of peril and promise ...

But, look! There, deep within the eyes. Do you see it? Yes, there it is ... the spark of divinity!

So may it be.