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## Toward a New Conception of God

By Jacob Needleman

In the present highly publicized debates about the nature and the existence of God, both sides tend to treat God as a purely external entity said to be accessible only by faith—faith, in this case, defined merely as belief unsupported by evidence or logic. Entirely missing from these debates is the idea of God as a conscious force within the human psyche which is accessible through deep self-examination. A study of the psychological disciplines at the heart of all the great spiritual traditions of the world shows us, however, that the process of precisely guided self-examination brings about a knowledge that is as rigorous and as supported by evidence as anything science has to offer. At the same time, this point of view redefines faith as a form of knowledge that is attained not only or not principally by intellectual means, but also through the rigorous development of the emotional side of the human psyche. Such emotional knowledge is unknown to the isolated intellect and has therefore been mistakenly labeled as “irrational.”

This “new” idea of God proposes that all the characteristics traditionally attributed to the purely external God are, within the scale of the human psyche, also attributes of this inner force of consciousness. When this inner energy of higher

consciousness is experienced, it then becomes clear that such an energy permeates the entire universe. In this way, it is through self-knowledge that the existence of an external God is verified and understood.

When I started my career as a professor of philosophy I was required to teach a course in the history of Western religious thought—much against my then existentialist and atheistic inclinations. In order to teach this course, I had to do a great deal of research in the writings within the Judaic and Christian traditions and I was astonished to find in those writings philosophical thought of great power and sophistication. These writings completely overturned all my opinions about what I had taken to be the irrationality or immaturity of religious ideas, opinions which were and still are fashionable in many intellectual and literary circles today.

But even so, somewhere in myself, I was still unconvinced—down deep I was still an atheist when it came to my personal, intimate feelings. It was only when I embarked on a personal work of guided self-examination that I experienced a glimpse of a reality that could be called “God.” As my personal explorations continued, I experienced this quality of inner reality more and more and could no longer doubt that the meaning of God lay in this direction. At the same time, these undeniable experiences lit up and were in turn illuminated by all the philosophical and historical knowledge I had by then amassed and I began to understand in an entirely new way the teachings of both Judaism and Christianity as well as the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. I was again astonished that nothing of this understanding seemed to be in all that I had heard about religion and God when I was growing up and when I was being educated in some of the best universities in America.

Here are a few of the many spiritual and philosophical ideas that helped me to glimpse the deeper meaning of Judaism, Christianity and the religions of Asia:

--The idea that God needs man (Judaism) as a uniquely free being who is at the same time under supreme obligation.

--The idea that scripture is often deeply allegorical and symbolic, with many levels of highly sophisticated philosophical and psychological meanings. Many of my former atheistic leanings were due to my literal interpretation of all scripture, which in numerous places paints a horrific picture of a presumed just and loving God.

--The idea that Jesus Christ was a highly developed human being who was a great teacher and that the notion that he was also God needs to be taken in a much more nuanced way than was commonly presented. In Judaism, for example, a highly spiritual human being was often referred to as "son of God," without thereby implying in some simplistic sense that he was God Himself in the form of a human being.

--The idea that there exists such a thing as genuine mystical experience (as opposed to many self-deceiving claims throughout history) and that these experiences really validate through direct evidence the fundamental teachings of religion.

--The idea that all authentic religions, Western and Eastern and throughout the whole world and human history, converge in genuine mystical experience (which may also be called higher states of consciousness). The differences between religions are mainly differences involving the pathways that lead toward the practice of directly experiencing higher levels of faith, perception and understanding. All religions are

paths to a metaphorical mountain-top variously named wisdom, enlightenment, self-realization, the kingdom of heaven, righteousness, etc. Differences that lead to violence and persecution are based on a corrupted relationship to the teachings and practices of religion.

In fact, almost all of us have had experiences during our life when we sense with great clarity and power a tremendously heightened state of presence, of *being there*, an immediate and unforgettable sensation of *I am*. Perhaps it is a moment of great danger or even impending death, or a moment in a strange place or foreign country, or a moment of indescribable joy or a moment with no apparent cause at all when suddenly we are stopped within ourselves and feel our sense of identity more intensely, silently and purely than anything our everyday life has to offer. Such moments occur more frequently, perhaps, in childhood. These great moments of pure presence are vividly etched in our memory as though they happened yesterday.

Our culture does not know how to interpret these moments, these experiences. Maybe they are called “peak experiences” or “mystic moments” or “breakthroughs”—we lack any precise words for them. In fact, they are, so to say, “messages” from our genuine Self as though saying to us: “I am You. Let me into your life.”

The work of cultivating such experiences until they become more accessible is part of the essential nature of genuine spiritual discipline. These are moments, at the very least, of approaching the experiential verification that there does exist something Higher within and perhaps also outside of ourselves. Moments at the very least of approaching what the religions call God.

Every human being is born with an intrinsic yearning to understand, to contact and, eventually, to serve something higher in ourselves and in the universe. Plato calls this yearning *eros*. It defines us as human beings—even more than our biological nature, our social conditioning or our ordinary reasoning capacity. Our modern world-view tragically misperceives and wrongly defines what it is to be human. We are conditioned by our society to believe happiness comes from pleasure, or from getting things or power over people or money or fame or even health and survival. None of these sometimes very good things can bring ultimate meaning to our lives. We are born to be deeply conscious, inwardly free and deeply capable of love. The longing for these things is the definition of what it means to be human. At the present moment in our culture this yearning for meaning and consciousness, this yearning to give and serve something higher than ourselves, is breaking through the hard crust of our widespread cultural materialism and pseudo-scientific underestimation of what a human being is meant to be, together with an equally tragic overestimation of what we human beings are capable of in our present everyday state of being.

Of course, many very serious people believe that God is a personal God, existing outside of themselves, with whom they can have an intimate relationship. And such belief when it is sincerely and deeply held by no means contradicts the central importance of inner experience of a higher power.

Spiritual experience will show that the conventional sharp philosophical and theological distinction between personal and impersonal God is a purely theoretical or even a merely verbal dichotomy not supported by actual experience. It is a

fundamentally false dichotomy often introduced to distinguish the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God from the God of Asian traditions such as various forms of Hinduism which often speak of Brahman only as a supreme energy, rather than as a “person”—or Buddhism in many of its expressions which seem to deny not only the idea of personhood in God, but also the very existence of God and, for that matter, the very existence, or reality, of a personal human self. The higher energy of consciousness in an individual human being exhibits an incomparably intense quality of what one might call “I-ness”. It is a profoundly *personal* force; it is I as I is never known in our ordinary everyday sense of identity. That is why this energy is called the Self, with a capital S in Hinduism. Similarly, but in inverse form, in Western religion, especially in its “esoteric” or contemplative forms, the experience of a personal God --Jahweh appearing to Moses, Christ appearing to St. Paul, Allah speaking to the Prophet —is a force inhabiting a material reality whether as a great voice or human messiah. This is clearly the case in individual experience—the personal contact with the true person within, the “golden person” of Hinduism, is more truly oneself than one’s socially constructed self or ego.

Space does not permit even a few of the countless examples of the impersonal God being worshiped as a personal figure in the East or the personal God being worshipped as an impersonal energy as in the teachings of Jewish and Christian mystics. The main point to emphasize is that the highest or most real always has the character of I-ness whether it is understood as a cosmic reality defining the fundamental nature of the universe or as the true individuality within the contingent and fundamentally empty reality of the ego as understood in Buddhism. Buddhism

concentrates on deconstructing the ego in order to allow the true infinitely personal energy of pure consciousness to shine through and inhabit human life.

There are a thousand aspects to this question which would take us into all the subtle and delicate human experiences and essential powerful ideas related to the idea of God that have been completely lost to view in the cacophony of simplistic argument and fanaticism that can characterize both sides of the atheism/fundamentalism debate.

But one thing more must be said. It is paradoxically both obvious and elusive, that great faith in a “purely” external God can only take place within a transformed human psyche. To have such faith --and space does not permit elaborating on the deeper meaning of this sometimes tarnished word—such faith can only be attained through a transformed relationship to one’s own inner mind and emotional life. Therefore authentic faith in an external God is already evidence of inner work on oneself whether or not it is named as such. It is therefore erroneous and dishonorable to oppose the work of interior self-examination as somehow superior to profound faith in the universal, “external” God of love, justice and mercy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Of course, if one is comparing the deep self-examination of, say. the Hasidic Jew, the Christian monk in the deserts of North Africa or the Sufi in his spiritual brotherhood with naïve, sentimental or fanatical impulses that are given the name of faith, then of course, that is a wholly different conversation.

Spiritual experience will often also show that the inner God of higher consciousness is not simply a product or aspect of the individual person. It is experienced as more intimately “myself” than my ordinary sense of self while at the

same time it is seen, with total certainty, as not “my own,” but as a quality of reality itself beyond oneself and beyond man or any other separate entity in the conceivable universe. This touches on an extremely crucial point that we can only mention in passing: namely, that there are many, many ways leading to the mountain, but the work of climbing the mountain is very, very similar in each pathway. Religions that are strikingly different along the way to the mountain are even more strikingly similar in the ascent of the mountain. (See my essay, “Why Philosophy is Easy” on my website).