

## GOD REVISED

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### Abstract

*This article promotes a faith in God determined by our experience and particularly how we articulate that experience. Postmodernism suggests that language can only express signifiers and metaphors in the absence of any essential meaning. Therefore, we are free to create meaning. But we don't do this alone. We do this in the context of community. Listening to others' stories as well as articulating our own allows for potential and possibility. It gives us an ethic of compassion and 'mission'. God then becomes more than an objective existence. God becomes the source and reason for all of our values and creative action.*

**Keywords:** Community, *Différance*; Postmodernism; Storytelling, Truth

The God that I was brought up to believe has finally worn out its usefulness. God no longer exists *out there* somewhere. I have had no experience of the typical imagery, the almighty, the omnipotent or even omnipresent who takes care of everything. As too many scientists, historians and philosophers have observed, there are as many signs to the contrary as there are for such a God. Does that mean that I have no right to speak of God?

I long to be where Thomas was – to touch Jesus' hands and his side, but I don't have that luxury. I am left with my own experiences and intuitions. And I am left alone to verify them. None of us may ever return to that point. The event may never have happened. But that doesn't matter. The implications still reverberate to us here and the event remains the question to pursue, not as a curiosity, but as a source and purpose for life. Maybe that is what Jesus meant in his response to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."<sup>1</sup> But Thomas has the courage to ask questions and express doubt. In the faith of today, that kind of bravado is rarely shown. Are we really all that blessed? How often can we look with squinted eyes and say, *show yourself*?

William Carlos Williams says that art "is not, at its best, the mirror – which is far too ready a symbol. It is the life – but transmuted to another tighter form."<sup>2</sup> To him, good poetry, especially, should "revive the senses and force them to re-see, re-hear, re-taste, re-smell and generally revalue all that it was believed had been seen, heard, smelled and generally valued. By this means poetry has always in the past put a finger on reality."<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg raises a question about reading scripture as a historical record only. He presents an alternative approach that he calls the metaphorical method. "A metaphorical reading does not confine itself to the literal, factual, and historical meanings of text. It moves beyond to the question, 'What does this story mean as a *story*, independent of its

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:29, *NRSV*.

<sup>2</sup> William Carlos Williams, "Against the Weather", *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1969), 198.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, "The Tortuous Straightness of Charles Henri Ford", *Selected Essays*, 235.

historical factuality?’<sup>4</sup> This analysis sheds some light on what William Carlos Williams is saying about poetry. According to both, truth can express more than just facts.

Here, perhaps, is why I am a poet. Some truths will always be beyond my grasp, and yet, I will always want to seek the truth, ‘transmuted’ or not. And language has the mysterious power to evoke conclusions I had either no intention of realising or didn’t know existed. It opens forbidden paths.

Some would argue that only logical propositions that have to do with facts express truth. Whenever we express anything ethically or aesthetically, we may not be necessarily expressing anything that is true. We are only expressing our own opinions, feelings, and values.<sup>5</sup> However, if we look to postmodernism we might realise that these arguments answer their own riddles and challenge us not just to accept truth as it is given but to create it within us.

Postmodernism is a deceptive and often threatening word because what is often implied is a historical period following modernism. Some would believe we are still living in the modern age. Therefore, it is an idea that doesn’t make sense because we haven’t even left modernism, yet. However, postmodernism is more than a periodisation, especially for those who work with its concepts. It is a challenge to the ideas of the modern world, a subversion of the values of modernism, a position that values “fragmentation, openness and multivocality.”<sup>6</sup> Any claim to unmediated or ‘pure’ knowledge is held in suspicion and even deconstructed. Deconstruction “seeks to expose, and then to subvert, the various binary oppositions” that are so prevalent in the rational attitudes dominating the Enlightenment and modernism, especially between what is ‘objective’ and what is ‘subjective’.<sup>7</sup> It emphasises and promotes the grey areas in dualistic thinking and works to dissolve certain dichotomies.

Jacques Derrida, one of the leading philosophers of postmodernism, proposes that all knowledge is mediated through language.<sup>8</sup> Inherent in language or any other symbolic representation is the idea of *différance*. *Différance* is the ‘unavoidable’ element, “in which signifiers can refer not to referents (the ‘underlying reality’) but only to other signifiers.”<sup>9</sup> Derrida’s invention, *différance*, is a wordplay incorporating two usages of the French word *différence* – to be dissimilar in nature, quality or form and to defer, to delay, postpone. Meanings of words constantly differ and are deferred according to their contexts, usage and even medium (written or spoken). Language doesn’t communicate essential meanings. It breaks down the hierarchical and empirical structure of essential meaning. Language necessarily communicates by absence of meaning using signifiers signifying other signifiers to the point where there are no signifieds. The signifieds become only other signifiers. “Language is thus the play of differences which are generated by signifiers which are themselves the product of those differences.”<sup>10</sup> As the British sociologist Nicholas J. Fox describes *différance*, it is “the slippage of meaning which occurs as soon as one tries to pin

<sup>4</sup> Marcus J Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2001), 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Bradley Dowden and Norman Swartz, “Truth”. In James Fieser, founder and editor, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2002, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/t/truth.htm>> (6 October, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas J Fox, *Postmodernism, Sociology and Health* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Reynolds, “Jacques Derrida”. In James Fieser, founder and editor, The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2002, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/derrida.htm>> (6 October, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 45-49. See also Fox, *Postmodernism, Sociology and Health*, 6-11.

<sup>9</sup> Fox, *Postmodernism, Sociology and Health*, 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Sarup, *Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 44.

a concept down.”<sup>11</sup> Meaning is always just beyond our grasp – sometimes by as little as one character. And yet, that one character can make all the *différance*. One can know that *différence* and *différance* are two separate words only when they are written down. And their usage depends upon their medium, context and even their audience. Even “*différance* itself is endlessly deferred.”<sup>12</sup>

Each signifier also presupposes the absence of other signifiers that could as easily be applied. So, what is not being communicated, and why, becomes as important as what is. All knowledge is representative. It is offered only through filters. Any truth that claims to be objective can never distinguish itself from subjective experience and is therefore making a false distinction by calling itself objective. What may be true for an elitist few would not be true for all people and even discriminatory for various groups of people culturally, racially and sexually. Facts and experience are actually synonymous and false dichotomies. The sanctity of the rationalism of the modern world can now be questioned.

*Différance* can either have implications or just cause more mystery in our search for God. At Jesus’ trial in the Gospel of John, Pilate asks Jesus a remarkable question: What is truth? And Jesus’ silence is even more remarkable.<sup>13</sup> Pilate is left to make his own conclusions about truth from what he knows and has experienced about Jesus. Jesus can’t answer his question for him.

Ludwig Wittgenstein claims that logic doesn’t decide what is true and false for us but how we apply that logic. The application of that logic is our language, and “*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*”<sup>14</sup> I cannot know or speak of the world beyond my language. This limitation also diminishes the separation between the expression of ‘I’ and the world. The limits of ‘I’ are the limits of my world, and how I know myself is through my articulation of myself. “The world and life are one. I am my world.”<sup>15</sup> The subject ‘I’ then is no longer.

The postmodernists say that truth is not something that is objective but decided by human decision. It is not an objective reality. As Bradley Dowden and Norman Swartz suggest, “Or, to put it another way, to the extent that there is an objective reality it is nothing more nor less than what we *say* it is... The ‘subjective’ and the ‘objective’ are rolled into one inseparable compound.”<sup>16</sup>

So, in this sense, language has the power to *create* reality. Without the language to produce ideas of what exists, we cannot have any concept of anything’s existence. And no longer is there a distinction between subjective and objective. Therefore ‘I’ and my world are the same. The limits of what I can see, of what I can know, possibly of what I can believe are the limits of my world. I am not just a psychological subject with human soul or a human body that is only part of the world.

I am my world and my world is limited by what I can see and know. But with each person contributing what they know, what they see, what they believe in language to me, my own vision of the world changes, transforms and is enhanced and the limits expand. If I were listening to someone discussing an abstract subject like justice, I would learn from

<sup>11</sup> Fox, *Postmodernism, Sociology and Health*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Sarup, *Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 44.

<sup>13</sup> John 18:38, *NRSV*.

<sup>14</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. German text with an English translation by CK Ogden. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, 1981), par. 5.6; 149.

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, pars. 5.621-5.63; 151.

<sup>16</sup> Bradley Dowden and Norman Swartz, “Truth”. In James Fieser, founder and editor, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2002 <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/t/truth.htm>> (6 October, 2004).

that person even if I were not in agreement. However, if a third person joins the conversation and says that justice is something else, then, the whole concept or picture of justice has changed and expanded. Whether I agree with the third view or not, a new idea is introduced and has to be considered. The meaning of justice is also affected by the context in which it is used. 'Ecological' justice has a different meaning from even-handed justice. With each contribution to the subject and in each context, the concept of justice begins to transform and redefine itself. The philosopher, Michel Foucault, provides a humorous example of just how complex and mysterious the whole process can become:

A 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' which classifies animals as being divided into a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush... n) that from a long way off look like flies...

In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own.<sup>17</sup>

Foucault shows the need for us to respect language and how it is used in the other. If we have the language to describe anything, we begin to have a reality. And that reality changes, depending upon how that language is used and who uses it. Being an American living in South Africa, I have come to realise just how powerful language can become, how easily it can be abused and how the arts, especially poetry and literature, take a leading role in the search for truth. From what I have seen and experienced, part of the effectiveness of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa was to impose one use of language and try to prevent other languages and stories from being told, thus shutting out the majority of society. I, myself, have to be careful not to repeat the same oppression of the rural people with whom I work and live, a people who have a particularly distinct cosmology that expands my own world view.

A metaphor or symbol presupposes a story that gives it meaning and identity. The story gives life to the metaphor. Without the story, the metaphor dangles in mid-air. The great images of religion become useless without their stories. The Resurrection is meaningless without the cross. The cross is meaningless without the Resurrection. And both are meaningless without the teachings and events of Jesus' life. Each religion has a story that gives its symbols, as well as all of us significance and identity. It is what defines us, what we believe, what we don't believe.

Derrida's *différance* prevents us all from adopting a *laissez-faire* attitude about meaning. It keeps us all in check. Concepts still have definition by the fact of their difference from other concepts. Signifiers still refer to other signifiers even though we may never know the essence of anything, and the acceptance of signifiers must be subject to our own questioning and inner wisdom. Signifiers must hold up after this rigorous interrogation or even deconstruction of them. The community, of whom we choose to be a part, plays a vital role here in the discernment of what is our experience of truth. But there is one caveat: we still make the choice to join that community and take on its beliefs.

Don Cupitt writes in his book, *The Sea of Faith*:

No religious beliefs are free-floating; they are all tied to communities, in such a way that every member of a community may be expected to accept a whole set of them, and those

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by AM Sheridan Smith. (London: Tavistock, 1973), xv.

who do not belong to the community are not expected to accept any of them... It would be against the very nature of religious beliefs to suppose that the content of faith in Christ's resurrection could ever be established as part of the public body of tested knowledge. You need faith to believe a thing of that kind; that is, you need to be committed to a certain community and its way of life.<sup>18</sup>

This statement is a wonderful example of how the teachings of William Carlos Williams, Marcus Borg, the postmodernists and even the rural people outside of Grahamstown can be applied to faith. Faith is not something that can be arrived at by facts. Faith is not objective. Faith is about language and how that language determines one's life and one's world.

Marcus Borg touches on this when he talks about the importance of hearing sacred stories in premodern cultures:

In Arabia, traditional storytellers begin their stories with "This was, and this was not." In Georgia (the country, not the state), similar words are spoken to introduce a traditional story: "There was, there was, and yet there was not." A favourite of mine is the way a Native American storyteller begins telling his tribe's story of creation: "Now I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true."<sup>19</sup>

As Borg is suggesting here, stories can get at truth where facts cannot, and that truth restores and renews us as human beings. We are not human without our stories. And stories have to do with language.

As a monk, I have a story and its theme is to seek God. Even if I no longer believe in a God "out there somewhere" who is "the almighty, the omnipotent or even omnipresent who takes care of everything", I still seek some kind of meaning behind my existence, and that might mean that I create that meaning for myself. In short, we each have a story and that story is the story of our world and our reality.

The very first word of the Rule of St. Benedict is important to remember: *Listen*.<sup>20</sup> It says volumes about our search for God. We listen not as a mental exercise. But we "listen with the ears of the heart", as Benedict tells us. Perhaps stories point to reality that can be listened to in this way – a reality beyond just the verification of facts. Listening "with the ear of the heart" also suggests a listening that involves decision and choice. If we are listening in this way, we are choosing what we will hear and not just taking in everything like a sponge, not accepting out of necessity, but out of choice and free will. This kind of listening is an act of commitment. Instead of asking what is the true life that we can attain, we could ask how can we *create* the true life for ourselves? Instead of how are we redeemed, saved, recreated – how can we save, redeem, recreate? We come to accept that we are an active participant in our story, not just a passive recipient of events. Our stories create faith for us. Religion is born here.

Language has the capacity to weave symbol, sign and fact into a complex design for life. And we have the unique capacity to comprehend all the freedom that the story expresses. It is this weave that will save us, not any one part. The threads can't exist individually. If we are to understand all the fullness and complexity of life, then, our language has to create this fullness. Obvious facts can never be enough. Depending upon who is telling the story, it can have different meanings, different nuances, and the story expands with each telling of it even if it is being told the same way by different people. In the story the distinction between subjective and objective is dissolved.

<sup>18</sup> Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Saint Benedict, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. by Timothy Fry, OSB. (Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1981), Prologue v. 1, 157.

Don Cupitt again writes:

God simply *is* the ideal unity of all value, its claim upon us, and its creative power. (God is indeed the creator, for value indeed makes the world.) But the Platonic notion of God as an objective being, out there in a higher world, does nothing to explain the way he functions as *our* God, chosen by us, our religious ideal, our life-aim and the inner meaning of our identity. Just as you should not think of justice and truth as independent beings, so you should not think of God as an objectively existing superperson.<sup>21</sup>

If the meaning of justice and truth becomes 'transmuted' depending upon the speaker, the context and even the outcome, then, the image and idea of God depends upon the same. This statement questions the whole endeavour to prove the existence of God. God becomes as diverse and disparate as there are speakers, contexts and reasons for describing God but not dissipated. Each image, each idea, does not weaken our faith. God becomes only that much larger in our imagination and takes a more prominent place in our discourse and in the way we create meaning for our life. Our life will have value as long as we keep the unity of value in our consciousness.

And it is our faith community that helps us to do this. Each member of the community has their own experiences that contribute to the community's faith. Still, there has to be some sense of unity in any community. But once doctrines or dogma, the system of belief that tries to tell us that God is *this* and nothing more, enter into the community's faith, then we are excluding ourselves from the full potential of God to work in that community.

If we look to the Jewish faith after the fall of the Temple and the further exile of Jews throughout the Roman Empire in about 70CE, a need for an immanent God began to develop. God was needed in the midst of the people, not remotely situated only in the Temple. Each Jewish congregant received God according to their own ability and needs. God became as the people of Israel experienced and needed God to be, and "any official doctrine would limit the essential mystery of God."<sup>22</sup> The Jewish people even today consider ideas about God a private matter that is not enforced by any kind of established institution.

This view of God eventually led to seeing the community as the "new Temple enshrining the immanent God."<sup>23</sup> The relationship between God and the community strengthened through the relationship between members of the community. The covenant with God became expressed by the covenant made with each other. Humanity becomes sacred, and "offences against a fellow human being were a denial of God himself, who had made men and women in his image."<sup>24</sup>

Suddenly the community, relationships and love become the focus in the search for God. Could God be found and defined in the very faith communities in which we live, move and have our being? St. Benedict certainly would suggest this in his Rule where God's voice is to be found in the community.<sup>25</sup> Obedience is the very act of listening, to the abbot, to scripture and to each other. It is again a listening that goes beyond just mental comprehension but an act of will involving our whole being. We are to care, and we are to be aware and alert in our listening. The listening is not just in one direction either.

<sup>21</sup> Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, 270.

<sup>22</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 74.

<sup>23</sup> Armstrong, *History of God*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> Armstrong, *History of God*, 78.

<sup>25</sup> See *RB 80*, Prologue, Chapters 2, 4, 5, 7, 23, 27, 49, 63, 64, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73.

“Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God.”<sup>26</sup>

The magnificence of our story only begins here. It is not determined who we are or what we will do or what will happen to us. And thus, we have possibility. We have potential. We have future. Our identity is intrinsically linked to our own story as well as to the story of our faith community. And the story does not become real until we have the language to express it.

From our present context, we create meaning for ourselves. We choose the details of what the story will be and there create the past and the future. Again it is an act of will, it is an act of imagination, of creation, of freedom, not fate. We are always on the cusp of our stories.

The Jungian psychologist and writer, James Hillman, in his book, *The Soul's Code*, assents to this describing how we create our identities by how we *choose* to tell our stories.<sup>27</sup> We read history backwards relaying only the details that relate to our present context. We tell our stories how we want to and the details are always a subjective decision, never an objective reality. These decisions have large implications. In the end, it may seem that we have more control over our identity than we thought. I am a monk from the United States living in South Africa, and I tell my story differently now because I have witnessed and heard a new story. I talk about my origins, my own growing up, my own nation and even my own family and friends differently just because I have seen and have understood more. Exposed to another country, I realise just how my development, emotionally, socially and even politically and economically, has implications for the rest of the world.

Also, the God I grew up believing seems not to apply to my current context. Since I have witnessed such amazing resiliency, courage and joy in the midst of such flagrant injustices, uncertainty and poverty in the story of post-apartheid South Africa, I have to explore God in a way that requires more risk and uncertainty and yet, is more expansive and flexible. I don't trust absolutes and limits. I look to horizons for assurances. In the face of death, I need life. Where would I turn for that life? I would turn to humanity itself, in all of its creativity and imagination.

We are a people of hope always looking forward, but we are not escapist. If we were, we wouldn't be living from that unity of value. Our story is how we come to terms with our own unredeemed reality. If we hope, then “human life must be risked if it would be won. It must expend itself if it would gain firmness and future.”<sup>28</sup> Such is the paradox of Jesus' calling. “Those who save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel will save it.”<sup>29</sup>

If we are to hope, then we will act for a future. We will even create it. We will not just wait for it. We will not just accept the reality as is.

Now we are just beginning to discover that God is larger and more elusive than any objective idea or classification we can present. Now we are just beginning to discover that God is not nearly as remote and inaccessible as we have made God out to be. Now we are just beginning to discover that God is much more significant than the mere ‘superhuman’ that Cupitt argues against. God has become as near to us, as creative to us, as mysterious to us as our language. Finally, God is truly becoming the Word.

<sup>26</sup> Benedict, *RB 80*, Chapter 71:2, 293.

<sup>27</sup> James Hillman, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*. (New York: Warner Books, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 337.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 16:25, *NRSV*.

Our experiences of God are of prime importance. That is the truth that sets us free, but with that freedom comes responsibility. We have come to our own understandings, our own interpretations and realise that there are no absolutes. In other words, we have to rely on ourselves and each other much more for what we believe and accept. If we are true to our experience, our stories and others, an ethical standard develops quite naturally. How can we not but allow for the possibility of compassion, of 'mission'? We are taken out of the empiricism of knowledge, the dualities, the metaphysical 'truths' and into the flexibility and imagination of language, the bed of experience and the intuition of our own truth. William Carlos Williams calls art life itself, and it is for this art, this life, that it is worth risking all.

This ethical decision requires listening to stories as well as articulating them. Teaching Sunday school to rural South African children from ages 5 to 13 teaches me much about my own limitations, where my image of and relationship with God has been remote. The children bring an intimate and concrete image to me who often thinks too much in abstracts. Many of them, living the kinds of precarious lives that I can only imagine, seek and sometimes even perceive a God as flesh and blood that they can touch, that is as close as the hand of their brother, sister, parent, friend or even my own hand. This perception can only serve to become a source of conversion for me. If I accept only one truth without my own assessment I have shut down possibility. Once I have silenced language then God will not continue to work.

Are we in danger of making God in our own image? Well, yes we are if we make our own images of God sacrosanct and absolute. It isn't just our image or experience that we consider. We can't just impose our will on the world. Something deeper is at work. If we truly understand this, God is as rich and as full as there is language to articulate God and yet, with all language, what is not articulated is as valid and represented as what is. God is steeped in potential and possibility. God is even beyond what can be contained in this piece of writing.



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