

## Sub Specie Aeternitatus: Toward New Theologies

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As the modern critics of religion rightly remind us, we don't need a church or a synagogue to be good people. We don't need the confines and structures of a denomination to be kind, or to give to noble causes, or to validate our unions, or to foster friendship. But, perhaps, what these critics fail to realize is that a religious community isn't merely about these things. That may sound shocking to some of you, for what can be more important than morality or justice in the world? The answer is simple: what we do in a religious community *isn't* more important than morality and justice. It is, however, different.

What a religious community provides is a *place* and a *language* that allows us to look at being good, at giving, at our human relationships and all other human acts and endeavors *from a fully human perspective, or as the theologians and philosophers put it using an old Latin phrase, sub specie aeternitatus* - - that is, it gives us a place and a language to look at our lives, at justice, at morality, not from the viewpoint of the titles or positions we hold, or our rung on the economic ladder, or our age, or our particular interests, but "under the aspect of eternity", which is what that Latin phrase means.

Yes, in places like these we make room in our language and in our places of religious gathering to endeavor to look at things from the point of view of eternity, as a whole rather than as pieces, to grasp all of our lives in a single and grand thought.

Our lives are filled with the ordinary. But what is “ordinary,” after all? In some traditions, the “ordinary” is called the quotidian, or the secular. But in a religious community the secular transforms into the sacred, the ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary. In these places we call meetings, services. Descriptions of the magnificence of the natural world are called reverence.

The ordinary is a way of *seeing* and a way of *talking* more than it is a statement about the things that we *call* ‘ordinary’ in themselves. We have all had the experience of seeing and talking differently about something, and having that something change before our eyes. Some *thing*, some *act* that is called ordinary, something as simple as washing a car, can be transformed into the *extraordinary*, by stepping back and seeing such an act within the full web of our lives and of human experience. You can see washing a car as a contribution to your aesthetic enjoyment of the simple and ordinary act of driving, and thus transform the experience itself. Step back farther, and you see in the form of the car a massive statement of poetry and prose – if we were to imagine the steel and rubber transmuted into words – about the desire of people everywhere to be able to journey and to gain access to new places; about the desire for freedom; about the hope for new beginnings (remember Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*, and similar road literature); about human empowerment. The car becomes a text, imbued with meaning, and not a mere tool or commodity. We transform it from its situatedness, its association with pollution, its cost to maintain, and *sub specie aeternitatus* it ties us to all other human beings in what it represents. We move, then, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and the aesthetic and spiritual experience enriches us and transforms our view of the world, and reminds us of something that we too often forget - - who and what we really are. We drive for the sake of driving; we wash our cars for the sake of beauty in the world, for the sake of our

contribution to that beauty, for the sake of reveling in our power to move our bodies to places we prefer or long to be. Washing our cars is transformed into an act of poetry, and even something more. For poetry, by one definition is simply a literary expression in which words are used in a concentrated blend of sound and imagery to create an emotional response. But a view of things from the point of view of eternity is more than that.

If we step back even farther, moving farther toward a vantage point sub specie aeternitatus, farther into this powerful thought experiment that has the power to transform a bucket of soap and water into a palette of colored paints, we can see how the entire world can be thus transformed. But not only through a thought experiment, not only by a merely intellectual exercise, but by the alignment of all of our capacities - - inviting our logic, our mood, our emotions into the same inner room of the soul to dance together for a time.

We erase the divisions within ourselves, and we erase the divisions in the world we perceive. And this is the sacred moment.

It is at such times when the whole world is no longer easily described using the language of physics or of science or of commerce or even of poetry. We witness the birth of a child, and no poem and no scientific statement can express our overwhelmed state, the state of seeing ourselves born before our own eyes, which is in fact what the birth of every child is, at least as seen outside of the context of the child as mine or as yours -- the 'ordinary' way of describing things -- but rather sub specie aeternitatus.

Stepping back, back as far as we can go, back as far as our imaginations can stretch,

back in such a way as to give ourselves over to the wonder of the cosmos and the wonder of one's place in it, is the ultimate sublime act. It is the moment that undergirds the religious or sometimes mystical experience. It is to enter into an alignment of everything we are with a full turning toward all that is. That act, we call spiritual, for it is pragmatic in only the most tenuous sense. It is the moment where in we Relate our selves to Everything in one fully-engaged moment of presence or prayer. And when we speak of such moments we often use God-talk to capture and convey the experience, we often use the language of reverence.

As a student of religion and philosophy, I believe that this is the experience that gives rise to all God-talk, regardless of the tradition. **This simple experience.** It always has, and I believe it always will. But the trouble starts when people begin to interpret this experience. They create a God that is a far flung *object*, a *named deity*, a *commanding personality on high* filled with moral indignation or which is the source of moral law. And they call these interpretations The Faith and all who contend with it are the infidels, the decadent ones, the immoralists, the blasphemers. This has always been the trouble with many old and entrenched theologies. In such theologies, there is the fine parsing of metaphysical sentences, tortured circular and self-referential reasoning, dogma, fear, purges and heresies, claims of certainty of ultimate things which cannot be supported by anything that thoughtful people call evidence. But these things are not the last word in theology any more than Dillon Thomas was the last word in poetry. There are new theologies, wherein God is neither a point in the sky, nor a point in the heart; neither the occupier of a place called heaven or the creator of a place called hell; neither a neutered singularity or a multiplicity, nor a gendered being for whom the word 'he' or 'she' applies. For many, such predicates are what have turned the experience of God and of

God talk into absurdities, even among people who **remain** in traditional religion. But, I proffer, all of these predicates have been errors for the whole long history of traditional theology, at least in most traditions. What is God then? You will, of course, have your own answer. But for me, I am content to view God as an engagement with the world, a relation with a capital R between I and World, not between I and a grand Thou. God is that moment when we leave off our particularities and divisions and engage with the world under the aspect of eternity, from a point of view that makes our personalities, our jobs, our party affiliations, our wealth, of no account. It is the point of view that snaps us out of our false belief that we are only a collection of our various acts and of our various duties, or the equally toxic belief that human experience can be reduced to chemistry. The ability to view the world *sub specie aeternitatus* has always been part of what it means to be human and is hardwired into us for sure, but it is not merely that hard wiring. We all possess the capacity, more dormant in some than in others, to synthesize into a sacred whole that which we analyze into pieces in our daily and so-called 'ordinary' lives wherein we fixate on our bills or Johnny's braces or Suzie's grades. But in the hands of old theologies we have seen that some of its effects have caused much human suffering because of the urge to take from the experience of God fatuous propositions and knowledge claims that were and are imposed on others who are entitled to their own impressions, to their own private propositions and conclusions concerning how the experience of God will affect their own lives. The propositions and knowledge claims have been written down in *summas* and systematic treatises. But one need not conclude that the ethical abuses for which theology of this type is in part culpable make the function of theologizing, of viewing life *sub specie aeternitatus*, odious, or insipid, or vacuous, any more than the word and practice of government is bad because some governments are tyrannies. Some governments, we note, are *not* tyrannies.

And some theologies are not insipid or fatuous or of little use in the modern world.

We, I believe, do ourselves a grave injustice and commit a serious logical error when we become anarchists in response to tyranny, as though that were the only alternative. Sure, such a response is understandable, but is it the best response? And we do ourselves an equal injustice when we let old theologies and traditional God-talk block our paths to the new or different, causing us to turn our backs on our own inner healing and peace. Theology is not owned by churches, mosques, temples or synagogues. Theology is simply the attempt to put the experience of our Relation with the World into words.

But what good does theology do that poetry can't do? Or philosophy? Or an act of meditation? Or political engagement in just causes? There are very long answers I could give to these challenges. The simple answer is that none is about the singular moment of viewing the world under the aspect of eternity. They are all pieces of the picture. Poetry seeks to effect the soul, but may be about many things, even though theology may use poetic language. One need only read e.e. cummings or Ginsberg or Frost to see what I mean. While poems can point to the theological moment, they are only pieces of that moment. Much the same with philosophy, which has focused on the rational aspects of our nature. The mere act of meditation is not a positive statement about wholeness, but rather makes no claims about the world, forges no argument that might tie us to such wholeness, not until meditator speaks or writes his or her impressions and, thus theologizes. And as for just causes, that is the realm of the ethical, and determining justice is an act of pragmatic engagement in particular situations. Theology, as I am describing it, is not better than these - - it is different.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are therefore encouraged to reclaim our right to theologize and to build our own theologies. We are encouraged to reclaim our right to embrace the world and to see it *sub specie aeternitatus*, to grasp the whole truth of the world, not its particular truths, and to experiment with what we think we have found. Just as we do not permit the word religion to be stolen by those who claim to know its essence and to define it in narrow and narrow-minded ways, we also embrace the idea that theology is not limited to the reflections of bearded males in Galilee or Judea or Persia. Each new generation must reflect for itself, find its own meanings, encounter God anew, define God for itself. It is an undertaking open to all, because it cannot be taken away from any. When we do not permit ourselves to theologize for fear of sliding backwards into old, dusty and dangerous way of thinking, we abuse our spirits, and to use the words of Forest Church, we live in a state of “sin” - - which he defines as inner division, a carving up of our spirits, a fixation on the so-called ordinary, a refusal to see the connections all around us, to the environment, to members of other cultures, to ancient peoples, to future peoples. This state of sin is, clearly, a danger. The unwillingness or inability to see connections has what has led to the destruction of much of our natural world, and to the corporate and political scandals of recent times. We must be careful, surely, not to claim so-called ultimate knowledge of ultimate things, for no knowledge of such things is available. But we must cast off our fears of building our own theologies, of grasping the healing moments, of transforming the ordinary into the sacred.