

**THE NEW STORY:
GOD AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD**

PART 1

By John O'Neill

Your voice is gone now; I hardly hear you.

Your starry voice all shadow now

and the earth dark again . . .

Now, everywhere I am talked to by silence¹

For many human beings God does not appear to be real. God seems ineffective, and deaf, or at least speechless. . . . Many still call on God, but few expect a response. . . . If one cannot properly speak of God because God is a mystery; if one cannot call on God because God does not respond; if second causes are all monopolized by scientific explanations of the present or the future; if the sorrows of the human heart are better remedied by human love than by the divine . . . then what function remains to that which so many traditions have called God? . . . The God at the acme of the hierarchy of beings appears impotent, and from that moment forward is silent. Human beings discover, with great pain, their own isolation.²

MY EYES SO SOFT

Don't

Surrender

Your loneliness so quickly

Let it cut more

Deep.

Let it ferment and season you
As few human
Or even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight
Has made my eyes so soft,
My voice so
Tender,

My need of God
Absolutely
Clear.³

Somehow, despite the miraculous technological feats that provide us with a comfort and security of life that other ages could only dream of; despite the astounding discoveries of modern science that have revealed the fundamental secrets of the physical and biological universe; despite the exponentially proliferating knowledge in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology that endeavor to unravel the mystery of human nature; and despite the intoxicants and the constant stimuli intended to entertain and divert us from our cares and anxieties – something (or someone) seems to be missing in the modern world. We have only to look around to realize that there is a “spiritual devastation” prevalent in our time. Religious and non-religious people alike share a deep distress over the meaninglessness of modern life, the shallowness and fragmentation of contemporary culture, and the loss of a sense of transcendence. *Angst* and *ennui* are two foreign words we have come to know well. In desperation, people have sought meaning and identity in nationalism, religious fundamentalism, racism and ethnocentrism, and ideologies as disparate as Marxism and fascism, producing in the process death camps, killing fields, and ethnic cleansings too numerous and disturbing to list. Behind all this is, in the words of a recent popular song, a “God-sized hunger underneath the laughter and the rage.” All of these phenomena are the traces of the One who is missing. The silence and absence of God felt

by many is summed up most powerfully in the anguished cry of Elie Wiesel: “Where was God at Auschwitz?”

An inquiry into the wide-spread experience of the death of God shows that this event is not merely the result of an abstract intellectual process. It is first and foremost a lived experience. One of the most paradoxical aspects of this experience is that just as a person who is absent may be more present in the minds of a group of people gathered in a room than they are to each other, God is often a far more living reality for those who have lost God than for those who continue on in simple belief without confronting the absence. American poet W.S. Merwin captures this experience beautifully in a short poem:

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.

Perhaps in no other time has the longing for God been more powerfully or poignantly felt and the need of God so absolutely clear.

The recognition of the historical phenomenon of the death of God is not necessarily a call to atheism. For many, the death of God does not mean the loss of the God-experience, but, rather, the failure of a culturally transmitted image of God that no longer rings true. In any case, the experience of the death of God is *the* defining religious event of our time. It marks the revolutionary eclipse of one worldview and opens the possibility of a new one. The central importance of the death of God in understanding our age is affirmed by theologian Robert Altizer: “If there is one clear portal to the twentieth century,” he writes, “it is a passage through the death of God.” The proclamation of Nietzsche – who saw himself as the Christ-like prophet of our age – captures our situation: “Whither is God? . . . I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.” This event, which became a central theme in the twentieth century, could hardly have been

imagined a couple of centuries ago.

To speak of the death of God is to utter what is, for many, still a blasphemous untruth. Quite clearly, God is very much a living reality in the lives of billions of believers around the world. In fact, these faithful share a deep conviction of, and a great investment in, the ongoing survival of God. For believers in our day, to speak of the death of God may name an external cultural phenomenon or the ideology of atheists or secular humanists, but it does not seem to name a condition shared by the religious believer. Nonetheless, the truth of the matter is that gods *do* die when they no longer speak to our experience of existence, our thirst for being, our quest for meaning, our need for salvation; when they become silent in the face of the deepest challenges of our lives; when their absence becomes more apparent than their presence; when the concept of God that we hold, or have been given, no longer matches our experience of the world.

In the midst of the wide-spread experience of the loss of God there remains the deep and innate human longing for self-transcendence, for the assurance that there is some larger Reality to which we belong, and that this larger Reality is holy, sacred, and good. Even if the overly anthropomorphic form of God transmitted by traditional, orthodox religions no longer speaks to many people's hearts, the quest for God goes on. Perhaps the longing for God is felt even more deeply and strongly today than in the past precisely because of the challenges it faces in the modern world. Discovering the nature of the ultimate Reality we call God and finding our true relationship with that Reality is no longer simply a matter of accepting culturally transmitted conceptions and doctrines. We are, in fact, each on our own personal quest for ultimate Reality. We have the richness of the teachings of the past and the ever-proliferating knowledge of the present to draw on, but in the end each of us must find out the secret of this Reality for ourselves.

The contemporary quest for a God who can speak to our time must pass through the dark night in which no answer to our question of God is satisfactory. In that sense, we must each experience the death of an inadequate conception of God in order to experience the livingness of the true God who embraces our lives and speaks to and through our hearts. In the powerful

words of the 20th-century Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan, we must be prepared to shatter our ideal (that is, our concept of God) on the rock of Truth (that is, the omnipresent but ultimately mysterious reality of God). The concept of God that has died for many people is what the philosopher Martin Heidegger termed the “onto-theological God.” By this term he means a God who has been turned into a being among beings, a thing among things – God as the Supreme Being. The modern experience of the death of God is, in fact, a profound deconstruction of the God conceptualized as the Supreme Being – God as anthropomorphic, monarchical, patriarchal, static, all-controlling, and “Wholly Other.” For some, the silence of the onto-theological Supreme Being is the silence of absence and death, but for others it is the silence of mystery and a new kind of presence. This mysterious presence requires a new and radically different expression in symbols and metaphors that point to an ultimate Reality that is experienced in a form other than God conceptualized as the Supreme Being. The path of loss is, therefore, also the path of discovery and of affirmation. As the American poet Wallace Stevens once wrote:

After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future of the world depends.

A prophetic understanding of our present time passionately affirms that the future of the world truly does hinge on discovering the God who can speak to our modern human situation. The intensity of the search for the God for our time means that we are living in what is very probably one of the most spiritually dynamic and revolutionary times in human history. What we could call the “Old Story” about God no longer satisfies many, leading to the “death of God” announced by Nietzsche. At the same time, with the worldwide emergence of fundamentalism and sectarian religious intolerance we see the Old Story being used as a justification for violence, injustice, discrimination, and oppression. Clearly, what is needed is a new religious vision for our time, a vision that affirms the centrality of the spiritual, sacred dimension of existence while also providing a profound sense of how to live as full human beings, embodied in physical form and embedded in the natural world around us. What is needed, in short, is a New Story. As contemporary theologian and ecologist Thomas Berry observes: “It’s all a question of story. We

are in trouble now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story.”

THE NEW STORY

The conviction that we are living in a time when a New Story is emerging is shared by many around the globe. Some have called this the New Age, others the Message in Our Time, the postmodern era, or the Aquarian Age. Regardless of what name may be used, the worldview communicated by the New Story cannot be merely another philosophical or theological system. It must reach deeper into the human heart than rational arguments; it must enthrall the imagination through an all-encompassing creative vision. It must take the form of a new mythopoetic story. This New Story must give meaning to human life by describing our place in the universe and also guide us in creating a positive future. The emerging New Story addresses all aspects of human existence – nothing is left out, nothing is “unspiritual” or “beneath” its concern. The New Story embraces modern science with its wondrous new creation story (the Big Bang) and its dynamic, evolutionary view of the cosmos and terrestrial life. The New Story affirms the ecological movement’s call for humankind to awaken from the anthropocentrism that has caused so much destruction to the natural world and, instead, to celebrate our place as natural creatures embedded within the exquisite web of life on planet Earth. The New Story echoes the longing of feminism for the full equality of the masculine and feminine dimensions of life, for the validation of the body as a sacred temple, and for the healing of artificial dualities that lead to separation and oppression. And the New Story seeks a new God Ideal that can speak to people of our time.

The New Story is not a once and for all revelation that descends complete and fully formed from above; rather it is arising from the earth, from the deep roots of the human heart. The New Story is being expressed through the longing and insight of millions upon millions of individuals around the world who have answered the challenge of the Sufi poet Jallaludin Rumi:

But don't be satisfied with stories, how things
have gone with others. Unfold
your own myth . . .

The millions of new myths about God – each true in their own way and each limited by the limitations of their human creator – are, in fact, the millions of faces of the One Being who is both revealed in these many forms and also hidden in the transcendent mystery beyond form. What, then, does the New Story have to say about the God for our time?

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1. Louise Gluck, "Vespers" in *The Wild Iris*, Hopewell, NJ: The Echo Press, 1992, p. 55.
2. Raimundo Pannikar, *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*, translated by Robert R. Barr, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989, x-xi.
3. *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, Penguin Arcana, p. 277