

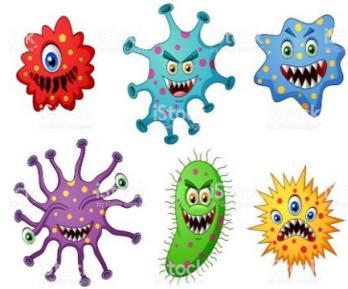


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Pilate was right: what is truth?

Some reflections on the writings of Ronald Rolheiser on challenges to faith

Few today can forget that memorable moment when Kellyanne Conway, an advisor to President Trump referred to another member of Trump's staff as offering what she called *alternative facts* about numbers attending the presidential inauguration. In other words, we were to believe what he was saying rather than rely on what we were observing with our own eyes.

It was a smart way of speaking as it removed all negative connotations associated with the statement and turned them into alternative facts. Not mistakes. Not errors but alternative truths, alternative facts. He was not lying, just offering an alternative truth.

It is a bit like the Newspeak in Orwell's novel. In his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "truth" is described as being *designed and controlled by the state in order to suppress free thought, individualism and happiness*. The State decides what people are to think, feel and observe. One thing this reveals is how "truth" is not some objective reality. "Truth" is something someone chooses it to be, for reasons they alone understand and know. It is therefore flexible, variable and always open to change as the circumstances of life change.

The problem of agnosticism among believers

How does this apply to us? It takes us back to some basics in the life of the Church. Believers over the last century have argued over all kinds of aspects of the how of do Church. What it should look like, the language of theology and its internal structures for mission and ministry. Today – perhaps going back over the last sixty or seventy years – the arguments are more likely to be about the existence of God. Our world is one in which unbelief reigns a reality both inside and outside of the Church.

For too many of us, God is more like something clinging to the peripherals of our lives but with little presence in the bulk of what we do, think and plan. As Ronald Rolheiser observes...*rarely is there a vital sense of God within the bread and butter of life. We make space for God in our churches but He is given a very restricted place everywhere else.*

This is what philosophers and commentators like Friedrich Nietzsche mean when they say *God is dead*. God no longer matters in the day to day events of people. Our attitude to God has left a generation of men and women who are at best, ambivalent to the possibility of a faith relationship with God. He has disappeared though there are still some sense of Him because of past traditions to which we hold fast. This is what Nietzsche calls *the long shadow* of God that endures. The challenge for the Church of is that people in the future will no longer have even this shadow to sustain our parishes.

God is more often related to us as a religion, a church, a moral philosophy, a guide for private morality, a driving force for justice. For too many in our parishes, God is a religion, the way of life experienced in a parish; He is guidance from the Bible, guiding us in all matters of life – sex within marriage, honesty, no cheating, swearing and the need to love others and behave well with others.

What this means is while we may be sustained by some experience of God we have had in the past, He only rarely comes across as the giver of life, as a living being empowering all aspects of our lives, a Being to whom we listen and to whom we speak. Not many relate to Him as a friend, a person a lover or as a child to a parent and yet those are precisely the relationships opened up to us in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes God is more concept than reality

One of the reasons we struggle to “sell” the Good News of the Kingdom is that we project an image of God that portrays Him more as a moral principle than a living person. He anchors a way of living but has little impact on our day to day activities. When as Christians we become involved in social issues, works of justice and charity; when we become active in parish life and building our faith communities we are often motivated by our own self-interest, or by a kind of moral philosophy or even basic human instincts rather than by a relationship with a God who lives, who has *made His home among us*.

Here is the way Rolheiser sees the situation...*There is more than a little unbelief among us believers. God is a neurosis, a religion, a cause...and only rarely a living, informing, comforting, challenging person whose reality dwarfs that of our everyday life.* This is how Nietzsche put the situation in his book *the Gay Scientist*.

The madman turns and says to the crowd...*God is dead, I tell you, we have killed him, you and I. All of us are his murders. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet*

This sounds odd but the living-God is often absent in our workplaces but He is also frequently absent from our religious activities – meetings, planning sessions, decision making and even from our worship.

owned has bled to death under our knives...they have done this to themselves. They have killed God.

The philosopher was addressing his parable to believers, to members of the church communities. He presents church life as being a kind of agnosticism. It is not that God is denied but rather that God is absent from much of our lives. He is not alive enough or important enough and this is what kills off the possibility of faith by those outside of the church. Nietzsche is right here: *we have killed God* but that does not mean that God is indeed Dead, a person without a home on earth.

God is a Living God - but we struggle to tune into that life

One of the reasons for this may be because God appears to be silent, invisible when we need Him most. It can seem as though God has withdrawn from us and has left us to our own devices. But His “death” could also result out of our own blindness, our preoccupation with the world around us and our need to achieve our human goals.

John of the Cross calls this apparent absence of God our *dark night of the soul*.

Here is a question we need to ask: What is it that is less than perfect in us that dulls and muddies our ability to experience and respond to the living God in what is happening to us each day?

It is important to keep this understanding clear in our minds. This ongoing struggle to experience God as being alive within and around us, is our struggle to become aware of God. God is there but we have trouble discerning and responding in a personal way to that divine presence. It is our failure of awareness that is under consideration here.

God is always present, but we are more likely not to be present to God. The struggle is ours. One author wrote...*God is no more present in a church than in a drinking bar, but, generally, we are more present to God in a Church than in a bar* (Sheila Cassidy). But we would probably not contemplate the possibility of a contact with God in a bar. But why would God not be there? This becomes a sad reality because of our own lack of a vital experience of God. If we are to bring God alive to those who do not know Him, we must first of all train ourselves to build relationships with God as a living Being in every corner, every aspect of who we are and in what we do.

This is not about blame. It is an invitation to discernment

We should not be dismissing this kind of thinking as being too negative and not reflective of our own faith lives. The Spirit is leading us forward into tackling the question: *why are we unable to bring people to Christ?* If we can answer that question, we are then in a position to reflect on the way we “do” Church work and mission. It is also timely because the present Covid virus provides us with an

opportunity to listen more carefully to *what the Spirit is saying to the Church*. As institutions in which we have placed so much trust fail to provide us with the kind of life we have come to expect, people are encouraged to look around for something or someone coming with a greater guarantee of peace, hope, mercy, love and healing. We have that in Christ but we can only convince the world of the generative power of divine love for us if we ourselves are alive in the intimacy of our relationship with God.

There is more to come!

This is but an opening reflection and will be followed by an exploration of what might have changed in the world around us. What are the roadblocks to faith, buffers to which we need to focus our responses and alternative messages? Given the enormity of the social changes across Western Civilization over the last century that is going to be no easy task. But with the Spirit guiding us; by engaging with the Living, Risen and Glorious Christ in our midst, this is not an impossible task for those who are willing to leave all they have and follow after Him. The problem is not the challenge ahead. The real challenge is to be found in our willingness or not to take up the sacrifices, the personal transformation and the humility God's mission requires.

The next essay will focus attention on the direction taken by the West and the kinds of communal thinking and acting that makes our ministry so much more difficult.

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