

1-1-2006

## Being Confronted by the Presence of God: Marveling in God's Holiness and Transcendence

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### Recommended Citation

Carr, Raymond (2006) "Being Confronted by the Presence of God: Marveling in God's Holiness and Transcendence," *Leaven*: Vol. 14: Iss. 3, Article 9.

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# Being Confronted by the Presence of God: Marveling in God's Holiness and Transcendence.

RAYMOND CARR

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“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Psalm 8.3-4<sup>1</sup>

One of the great contributions of early twentieth century theology is seen in its critique of religion. Theologians pointed out that religion emphasizes the human pursuit of God, but de-emphasizes God's presence and action in the world. Religion, when understood in this fashion, can be subtly agnostic, atheistic and susceptible to manipulation by individuals, churches and nations. However, the Bible is not concerned with the human pursuit of God (religion), but with God's pursuit of humanity (revelation).<sup>2</sup> From beginning to end, the Bible is about God's coming into the world: God is in pursuit of you! The title of this theological reflection embodies an appreciation of this critical shift.

This shift also has important implications for the theme of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual Bible Lectures at Pepperdine University: *Life Together*. First, when we speak of our life together with God, it includes the living God and us along with all creation. We must be mindful of God's activity and concern for, yes, all creation, including the earth, animals, plants, friends and, more surprisingly, enemies too. The Christian concern for fellowship should reflect the divine concern for the world. Secondly, our life together with God should be understood with a very peculiar emphasis: it is not just God and us, but *God* and us. The holiness and transcendence of God provide a needful reminder that God is *God*.

The terms holiness and transcendence emphasize the *otherness* and *greatness* of God, distinguishing God from all creation. These terms can also be stated with the synonyms *strangeness* and *freedom*.<sup>3</sup> In either case the terms identify God as one who is different from and unbounded by any limitations. God, in fact, sets boundaries rather than being beset by anything (Psalm 104.9). God overcomes any kind of limitation whether intellectual, social, cultural or political—transcending any kind of obstacle whether it is a

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1. In this brief essay I use Psalm 8 to provide an outline and set the background for a consideration of God's holiness and transcendence, expressed throughout the Bible. I chose this text because the psalmist's concern is comprehensive and inclusive—acknowledging God, humanity and nature. This reflection is also an initial response to recent discussions in Churches of Christ on the subject of the transcendence of God. See especially C. Leonard Allen, Richard T. Hughes, and Michael Weed, *The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 1991) and *Leaven, The Secular Church* 1, no.3, ed. Mike Casey (Summer 1990).

2. Avery Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 90-99.

3. It is this combination I have in mind when emphasizing the marveling that arises because of the activity of God expressed in creation and scripture. The freedom of God is commonly known as the aseity of God, i.e., God's being in Godself. Philosophically, scholars often refer to God's ontological independence. Such nomenclature is designed to demonstrate that God's freedom is not solely a freedom from any external limitations. It is also a freedom rooted in the being of God or in God's self. For a brief discussion of aseity, see John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 7-8.

country, corporation, institution or ideology. God transcends all of these things and, according to the biblical writers, overcomes even death itself.

At the same time, God's freedom *from* the constraints of the creation allows God to be radically free *for* the creation. God walks in the garden, God hears, God sees, God listens. Therefore the transcendence of God understood biblically is not an abstract term that represents an uninvolved, deistic view of God or a God who remains eternally in heaven with no relation to the earth. It should be understood as describing God's concrete relationship to the world.

Throughout history the transcendence of God has been witnessed to in different ways by various theologians. Often these theologians are seeking to understand the distinctiveness of God while maintaining God's relationship to creation. Such approaches encourage us not to understand the greatness of God in a way that "makes him a prisoner of his own majesty" (Barth);<sup>4</sup> to know that God is best understood as the "beyond in the midst of our life" (Bonhoeffer);<sup>5</sup> that God is, in fact, "present in the entirety of His being at the same moment everywhere" (Augustine).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, God is one who is "ever Greater" (Rahner).<sup>7</sup> God's majesty allows God to be near us, to hear us, to smell our sacrifices. The fact that God is able to overcome even the limits of what we typically mean by transcendence is a testimony to the transcendence *of God*.

The Bible is remarkably concrete in how it describes God's greatness with respect to humanity and creation. Terms such as creator, majesty, terror, sovereignty, glory and splendor all in some way touch on transcendence. Passages which describe God as being enthroned above the heavens, or stretching out the heavens, also emphasize the cosmic dimensions of the greatness of God.

To bring this point closer to home biblically, the fact that Abraham could be blessed by the enigmatic Melchizedek, that Moses could witness a bush burning but not being consumed, that Joseph could be sold as a slave and eventually become the governor of Egypt, that Balaam—the prophet of God—could be saved by the ass on which he is riding, all say something about the *strangeness* and *freedom* of God. In each of these examples we see Yahweh working in the common life of the world in marvelously *strange* and *free* ways.

### **FREEDOM ROOTED IN THE FREEDOM OF GOD—PSALM 8.1-2, 9**

The freedom of God has tremendous implications for the child of God. The marveling that is produced by witnessing God's wonderful presence and action in the world provides the foundation for the first point I have drawn from the psalmist: Christian freedom is rooted in the freedom of God. The deepest foundation for human freedom and lasting relationships is not a particular spiritual experience: it is God himself.

Not only is God not a prisoner of his own majesty, God is able to be God to humanity without dominating and running roughshod over our integrity as his creatures. God affirms our differences without homogenizing us. Moreover, Christian freedom understood biblically is not grounded in a particular government or a particular way of life. No. Christian freedom is rooted in God's freedom and desire to address the whole person.<sup>8</sup> The wonderful range and diversity in the world and scripture are testimony to the reality of the one God.

"O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth," exclaims the psalmist. These words reveal the experience of a person who has eyed the creation and whose marveling arises from witnessing

4. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1960), 71.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition* (New York: MacMillan, 1972), 282. In another writing from this collection, Bonhoeffer states as follows: "The beyond is not what is infinitely remote, but what is nearest at hand." *Ibid.*, 376.

6. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford and New York: Oxford, 1992), 4-5.

7. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol 1* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 19.

8. For an excellent discussion of Christian freedom in relation to God's freedom see Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 69-96.

the beauty of the creation itself. For Israel the experience of the majestic God rang throughout the earth — Yahweh has a special relationship with the earth. In fact, “all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.” The psalmist does not just begin the Psalm with praise, but also ends it with praise, seemingly caught up in the liberating knowledge of God. And although the earth was not always kind to the ancient person—consider the chaos at the beginning, the capricious nature of the Tigris and Euphrates, earthquakes, and even the harm caused by heat from the sun (Psalm 121.6)—God graciously stood as a liberating presence.

Such an approach provides a litmus test for theology. Does our theology glorify God? Does our theology praise God? Is our freedom related to God? All good theology should begin and end with praise of the Creator. If God is not present at the beginning of our theology, neither is God present at the end; without God, theology becomes a petty system of thought akin to any other philosophy.

Augustine aptly demonstrates this point. When seeking relief for his ‘restless soul,’ he appealed to the creation for understanding.

And what is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said: ‘It is not I.’ I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession (Job 28.12f.). I asked the sea, the deeps, the living creatures that creep, and they responded: ‘We are not your God, look beyond us.’ I asked the breezes which blow and the entire air with its inhabitants said: ‘Anaximenes was mistaken; I am not God.’ I asked heaven, sun, moon, and stars; they said: ‘Nor are we the God whom you seek.’ And I said to all these things in my external environment: ‘Tell me of my God who you are not, tell something about him.’ And with a great voice they cried out: ‘He made us’ (Psalm 99.3). My question was the attention I gave to them and their response was their beauty.<sup>9</sup>

For Augustine and the biblical writer even the creation itself witnesses to the love and concern of God for humanity. Although God is not strictly identified with the creation, the God who established the earth cares about humanity! Creation reflects the grace of God, and our response to God is a direct result and acknowledgment of God’s prior act, viewed physically in the creation and spiritually in the covenant.<sup>10</sup> As a result, humanity can be understood as being confronted by the presence of God in a comprehensive sense.

While it is easy to posit transcendence as a type of philosophical dualism contrasted with immanence (where God’s otherness in some way minimizes the importance of creation), the biblical idea of God reveals a God whose transcendence or freedom allows him to know the creation intimately—to know it better than it knows itself, to affirm it. God’s utter transcendence or freedom allows him to be pervasively immanent. It, likewise, allows us to be radically free in him.

The church is the community that rejoices in the presence of God in the world. This marveling about God’s action occurs at times because of the *way* God acts in the world. God works in ways I like to describe as being *predictably unpredictable*. The psalmist, for instance, observes that God establishes strength through the mouths of infants (v.2). Even through the mouth of a child, with whom strength is not normally associated and whose speaking is often marginalized, God establishes strength, perhaps even eloquence. Since God establishes strength through infants it suggests that the church should be prepared to discern God’s voice emerging from uncommon places. We must be open to the strange ways of God.

The cross, the central event in the Christian faith, is such a phenomenon. As L. E. Maxwell writes in *Born Crucified*, the cross was an instrument of utter shame and contempt.<sup>11</sup> Cicero, the great Roman orator

9. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 183.

10. For a discussion of how the creation and the covenant can be dialectically related see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.1* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 1958), 94-329.

11. L. E. Maxwell, *Born Crucified* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 31.

once said, "Not only let the cross be absent from the person of Roman citizens, but its very name from their thoughts, eyes and ears."<sup>12</sup> Ironically, this same cross, which two thousand years ago stood as a symbol of shame, a symbol of Roman power, and an instrument of death, now stands as a symbol of reconciliation. It is an instrument of life because of the death of Christ. What, except God's predictably unpredictable ways, allows us to now see the cross as a witness to God's freedom and our freedom?

### **FREEDOM AS CONCERN FOR UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD—PSALM 8.3-4**

Secondly, Christian freedom produces a concern for universal brotherhood. For the psalmist, awe for the creation of God led to a consideration of the value of all human beings (v.3-4). "What is humanity that you care for them," he exclaims. Genesis interestingly depicts the image of God in a way that precedes the call of God's special people, Israel. This means that by way of creation *all* people have a special dignity. The people of God, however, because of Yahweh's gracious presence become a special model of the image of God. The beauty in a historical study of the book of Psalms is that in it we see Israel, a people who have been confronted by the presence of God, considering its previous experience with God.

More importantly, the OT promises to Israel have been extended and fulfilled. God revealed in Christ is not only for us, with us, and in us, but the Christian witness deepens God's special concern for the world. Someone may ask, "Does this mean everyone is a Christian?" Such concern does not mean that everyone is a Christian, but it certainly does mean everyone is someone for whom Christ died. Is there anyone outside the love of Christ? Is there any sin that overwhelms the efficacy of the cross of Christ?

In light of Christ's death, Christians care for all society. This universal and inclusive dimension of the Gospel is first seen in the creation account, which demonstrates the love of God—for without creation love would be impossible, and without love, creation would be unbearable. God's love is then extended in the call of his special people, beginning with Abraham. Yet, the promise to Abraham is not exclusively for Israel; it is a gracious promise that includes the whole world (Gen 12ff.; Gal 3.6ff.). Abraham's concern for the world is epitomized by his mediation on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. He pleads their case before God, interceding for them. Abraham has a 'priestly heart.' Unfortunately, this episode is negatively remembered more for the sin of Sodom than positively for the priestly heart and appeal of Abraham.

The same inclusive concern is seen in Solomon's prayer for foreigners. Did you know that Solomon wanted God's house to be a house of prayer even for foreigners (1 Kings 8.41-43)? How often do we pray for God to hear a foreigner's prayer? The call of God should be actualized and deepened as a gracious calling to the world, rather than a condemnation of the world. However, it often requires that one's love of God include the opponent.

Interestingly, Marshall Keeble, who by some accounts baptized well over 40,000 people, was once challenged by his associates as to why he called everyone he met his brother and sister. Keeble's response is insightful. He responded, "if I miss 'em in Christ, I'll hit 'em in Adam." Keeble's response reveals a concern for universal brotherhood that is often lost in today's church. Perhaps his approach also reveals the difference between a constructive and reactive theology. Reactive theology tends to revolve around what others are doing wrong; it focuses on heresy, using watchwords such as guard, defend, preserve and order. Ideals such as love, openness, concern and freedom are displaced and seldom mentioned. Theology, however, can be constructive when it is centered in Christ and turned toward the world.

Such universal concern is also seen in the theology of Francis of Assisi who is still celebrated today because of his "worldly" concern. Francis was not only attentive to God. He was attentive to all people and the whole of creation. Francis even had the audacity to call the sun, moon, stars, fire, water and wind his "brothers and sisters." Moreover, when Francis believed his message concerning the poor was ignored, he

12. Ibid.

preached to the birds. Amen birds! And when medieval Christians engaged in war against Muslims, Francis equipped his followers with a missionary spirit. So, rather than teaching his disciples to conquer, he taught them to have a universal concern for all men, including his religious opponent.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Francis' meeting with the Muslim Sultan still stands as a memorial to the church's shame, and although we may not completely agree with Francis' theology, such an approach can be critically appropriated and actualized by Churches of Christ.

A universal and inclusive concern not only honors the presence of God in the world; it also honors the example of Jesus. Ironically, when the Church of Christ allied itself with the Roman Empire, it surrendered what H. Richard Niebuhr calls its "supra-national ideals" to values that identified with and sustained the notion of *Pax Romana* (Roman peace).<sup>14</sup> However, can any nation bring about the peace of God? Should we strictly identify any nation with the presence and action of God in the world? Can any nation bring about the Kingdom of God?

### **FREEDOM AFFIRMING THE WORD OF GOD IN CREATION—PSALM 8.5-9**

All of life issues from the Word of God. Yet because of the need to distinguish God from creation, it is always easy to assume God is uninvolved in the creation. However, as stated above, God's radical freedom *from* creation allows God to be free *for* the creation. God's presence in the creation also determines the Christian concern for and posture toward the world. The Christian community affirms God's Word when it lives in the world in a way that acknowledges God's presence and its relationship to God. In this way the church introduces the world to God. This leads us to our final point: Christian freedom affirms the Word of God in creation.

The psalmist's recognition of humanity as having dominion is linked to the biblical notion of being created in the image of God (Gen 1.26-31). The idea of dominion has positive implications for how Christians live in God's world. Humans live as co-regents or function as delegates of God. In either case, it means that human rule is not absolute. Our position is described as being "a little lower than god." Nevertheless, it is a royal function that models the freedom mentioned in our first point and the concern mentioned in our second point above.

To put it more practically, it means on the one hand that humanity does not express dominion by dominating or exploiting the world in which it lives. On the other hand, it means that the creation is never worshipped as if it is the Creator. Both approaches distort the radical witness of the church, dishonor the word of God in the world, and dishonor the proper vocation and identity of human beings. Mechanistic domination brings about the destruction of nature and honors certain ways of life as being more important than the creation itself.<sup>15</sup> Such is a real temptation in modern societies. For example, the current dilemma over fossil fuels and their impact on earth is a concern Christians should take seriously, regardless of one's political persuasion.

When the creation is worshipped as if it is the Creator, human beings are in essence dehumanized. When tradition is idolized the word of God is nullified (Matt 15), when sex is idolized women are treated as objects, when race is idolized people are treated as property (chattel slavery). Moreover, this type of idolatry is not limited to society; it occurs even in churches. We should even venture to ask if sectarianism is not the work of an idolatrous notion of church? Ironically, in this case the threat of idolatry encourages us to affirm the creation as a reflection of the Word of a gracious God all the more.

13. For a good unflinching introductory account of Francis of Assisi's life, see Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 112-115, 201-211.

14. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 111-114.

15. I am indebted to Jürgen Moltmann for the language of Mechanistic domination; he is interested in a future which is an "ecological world-community"—see his *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 11-13.

The church is always tempted to take up the attitude of the nation in which it is closely identified. Examples of this type of idolatry are seen in the nationalism of Nazi Germany and the idolatrous racism in American history. Sunday morning is still, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “the most segregated hour in America.”<sup>16</sup> This, of course, does not mean that one cannot have a respect and concern for one’s country, but it militates against a totalizing trust. Furthermore, any such totalizing trust amounts to idolatry, since these alliances lead us to miss the gracious, liberating presence of God. The freedom of God even calls into question any totalizing trust in militarism to bring peace and any totalizing trust in democracy to bring true and lasting freedom.

We honor and affirm God’s word when creation is celebrated in the way that honors the presence of God. Creation, in fact, should be understood as a constant reminder of the presence of God.<sup>17</sup> When we reach out and touch another or open our eyes to witness the beauty of the Pacific, we see the presence of God. He made it! He is as ubiquitous as the creation, and we affirm His Word when we acknowledge it. The church testifies to God’s concern for humanity, and it demonstrates that he gives human beings their proper identity in relation to the rest of creation.

Moreover, when Christians understand creation as a witness to God and live in light of the presence of God, they affirm God in the everyday, ordinary life of the world. Life can be embraced with a joyous abandon when lived in the presence of the free God. Such is the case in every situation, no matter how trivial. When we eat, sleep, cry, and even when we celebrate, we model freedom from bondage in the world. Such living withstands outward forces such as consumerism or nationalism, which are able to shape and form the church into their own image.

The church that knows it has been confronted by the presence of God is the church that enjoys true freedom within the world—it cares for others, it lives radically in the common life of the world, right now; it remains open to the holy and transcendent God who constantly surprises us and sends us marveling on our way.

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16. King would often use this quip. One such example is in “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” *Testament of Hope* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 270.

17. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, see note 9.