THE FUTURE OF THEISM

The shifts that have take place in theologizing in the last twenty years or so is the theme of our convention this year. The topic which has been given to me for this opening talk is the future of theism. Since such a vast and many-sided theme can be dealt with only in a very limited way, much that is important will necessarily be omitted. I will not give an account of the history of theism, not even recent history. I will not critically examine the proofs for God's existence. I will not touch directly on process theology, nor wrestle with the notion of person or even try to define theism. My concern will be with several contemporary phenomena which are pushing us, I think, toward an expansion and enrichment of our understanding of God. Not to an adequate understanding, of course, but perhaps to a less inadequate one, for in speaking about God, what can one say without becoming ridiculous? Yet perhaps we can learn to avoid, or at least counterbalance, some ways of speaking of God which could be harmful in their one-sidedness. Who will deny, for instance, that God is a powerful Father? But we need to say more than that.

Artistotle observes, somewhere in the *Metaphysics*, I think, that even a little knowledge about the most important reality is more valuable than a computerful of data about trivialities (my own free translation). So if the phenomena I wish to consider can help us to balance off a one-sided understanding of the mystery of God through attention to neglected ways of thinking, I will feel that our time has not been wasted.

I began by saying that in this talk I would confine myself to several current phenomena which are moving us toward an expansion and enrichment of our understanding of God. I have settled on three.

First of all, I would like to attend to the overall phenomenon which is the context for the shift in theologizing of the last couple of decades: the disintegration and even the collapse of many structures: ritual structures, verbal structures, conceptual structures, societal structures. The fact of this radical shift has been noted ad nauseam, either in lament or in celebration. No need to rehearse all that. It is the significance of this shift for our relationship to God and our understanding of God that deserves our attention. So that is the first influence on the future of theism I would like to reflect on: the extensive collapse of older structures.

The second is the impact of the women's movement on our understanding of God. I freely admit that my knowledge of the women's movement is very incomplete, but I think that the matter is too important for our fuller understanding of God to allow my limited grasp of the subject to keep me from dealing with it.

The third influence shaping the future of theism is that of Eastern religions, by which I mean mainly Hinduism and Buddhism. Vatican II has invited Catholics to an unprecedented opening toward these ancient and sophisticated religious traditions, leading Karl Rahner, in a seminal article of a few years ago, to write of the beginning, finally, after 2000 years, of

the era of the world church.

Three points, then: How is our understanding of God (and consequently of ourselves and our world) being reshaped by the collapse of structures, by the women's movement, and by the growing impact of Eastern religions?

First, to the collapse of structures, a many-sided phenomenon. I use the word structure not in the strict sociological sense but in a large sense, large enough to include social institutions like marriage, family and the relations of the sexes; ecclesiastical institutions such as dioceses, parishes, basic communities, forms of ministry, and the like; ritual structures like liturgy; verbal-conceptual structures such as theology; unarticulated conceptual and symbolic structures like beliefs and prejudices; normative structures like moral principles; and structures of personal prayer. All these structures, and this list is incomplete, have been radically shaken up in the last couple of decades. What effect is that having on our understanding of God?

One simple way to put it is that in all of these areas we have been moving away from a God who was there to vouch for the structures as they stood, to guard them and impose them. Many of these structures formerly had a kind of inviolability, and attention was given largely if not mostly to the structures themselves. God was there, certainly, but seen more out of the corner of our eye than directly head-on.

As these structures have been increasingly relativized, some people have simply lost their bearings, and God himself (or herself) has faded from view. But for others, the experience has been more positive. It has meant a turn of attention from the collapsing structures to the reality of God in direct personal experience. Let me spell that out in more detail.

In social structures such as, for instance, marriage, family, and relations between the sexes, older norms and standards which once came from church, family and friends have lost much of the social pressure which supported their observance. This is especially evident in the attitude of the younger generation toward these issues. But even professional moral theologians, who formerly, when pressed to solve a difficulty, used to routinely reach for an encyclical, now are compelled to dig deeper. So many new situations now arise and so many new questions are being posed that moral theologians, like ordinary religious men and women, are now more frequently forced willy-nilly to a first-hand examination of their experience, both personal and commmunal.

And when that project is seriously undertaken, God is always a part of the process. St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises, when he is guiding those who make them toward a decision about their life, wants them to deal directly with their Creator and Lord.[1] The times we are living in are such that all of us, if we would lead lives of responsible integrity, must more

[1] *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, translated by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), p. 6, no. 15.

frequently and more profoundly deal directly with our Creator and Lord. We must relate to this divine presence nor merely as the custodian of a set of fixed regulations, but more and more as the source of our clarity and guidance in difficult and complex choices.

Something similar is happening as ecclesiastical institutions have become increasingly relativized. Through the impact of the Second Vatican Council, the ecumenical movement, the charismatic renewal, basic communities, the diminishing number of priests, and the new developments in ministry brought about by all this, church structures which we used to regard as divinely established no longer seem so absolutely sacrosanct. Many of us can remember a time, for instance, when even the idea of a vernacular liturgy seemed quite inconceivable. But now the stakes are higher. As the decades have rolled by, more and more of the traditional church structure for ministry, for teaching, and for organizational direction have come to be seen as means to an end, means which can be changed even radically. My point here is not to either defend or criticize this phenomenon, but to note again what it is doing to our understanding of and our relation to God. One can react in two different ways. If God has been for us too closely identified with these structures, then when the structures vanish or significantly change, our idols are smashed, and God is in danger of vanishing with them. But God need not vanish in the process. Such an experience can help us to attend more fully to the reality of God, which, after all, is what such structures are all about in the first place.

"Let nothing upset you," Teresa of Avila tells us, "Let nothing frighten you. Everything is changing; God alone is changeless."[2]

One particular structural shift which is affecting our understanding of God is the remarkable growth of small Christian communities, basic communities, as they are often called. They have countless forms and flavors around the world, from pentecostal prayer groups to liberation theology groups, but their most important common denominator seems to be responsible participation of all the members in a loving, committed community. The God of such communities is different from the God of large "service station" congreagations in which "services are provided" by the clergy and staff, and most people hardly know each other. The God of small communities is more a God in the midst of his people, rather than one who is merely out there, or upon the altar. All these changes in the style of Christian communities are helped along by a more flexible and participatory liturgy, and the liturgy is in turn shaped by these changes.

Structures of prayer are changing too, as we can see from the worldwide popularity of Anthony de Mello's *Sadhana* book.[3] In addition to a variety of devotional styes and modes of praying with the imagination, a

[2] Cited in *God Makes the Rivers Flow: Passages for Meditation.* Selected by Eknath Easwaran. (Petaluma, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1982), p. 30.

[3] Anthony de Mello, S.J., *Sadhana: A Way to God.* Anand, India: Gujurat Sahitya Prakash, 1978. Distributed in the U.S. by Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis University, 3700 W. Pine Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108.

great deal of emphasis is placed on nonconceptual and nonverbal awareness meditation, which relates us to God in quite a different way. Although this prayer has antecedents in the Christian tradition, especially in the Eastern Church, it is more typical of Hindu and Buddhist meditation, about which we will have more to say later on. Father de Mello's book, though first published only five years ago, had at last reckoning been translated into nineteen languages, and seen twelve editions in English, three each in Spanish and Japanese, and two each in Portuguese, Thai, and Italian. So when we speak of the growing popularity of this kind of prayer, which sits silently with God as the Holy Mystery within, we are dealing with a phenomenon spread among Christians all around the globe. Now there is a direct correlation between the way in which we relate to God and the way in which we exist and have our own being, between the qualities we see in our God and the qualities which grow in ourselves. If God is for us the Holy Mystery within, our own inwardness and inner wealth unfolds. If the God into whom we let ourselves drop is beyond words and concepts and gender, our own spirit loses many of its restrictive boundaries of thought and feeling. Often when we deal with God "personally," we unconsciously project on God our own limitations. And there is no guarantee that the Jesus we visualize and re-create in our imaginations is always the real Jesus, that he is not to some extent the creation of our own distorted fancy. So this kind of meditation, in which we put aside our own images, concepts, words and judgments about God and expose ourselves patiently and directly to God's incomprehensible but intimately present and powerfully working reality is a healthy counterbalance.. Such prayer is also a concrete expression of our conviction that God always stands at the door and knocks, that the first initiative comes from God, that if we can come to God with unobstructed openness and freed from attachment to our own petty thoughts and desires, the divine Presence will invade us as the sea surrounding an empty sponge.

These important new developments in the prayer of large numbers of Christians are of a piece with the shifts we have already enumerated, in which specific structures of social and religious reality have yielded to more simple and direct experience. It seems that ages like ours, ages of chaos and radical change, are normally accompanied by more direct and primary experience of the reality of God. For in such times (fourteenth-century Europe would be another example), everything else is clearly revealed for what it is: changeable and impermanent.

One final example of how we in our times have been experiencing the collapse, or at least the relativization of structures, an example which touches all of us very closely: theology. Before Vatican II it was considered daring to speak of a pluralism of theologies. I can remember publishing a short popular piece in a Catholic magazine around the time of Vatican II and having the editor, not a closed or narrow person by any stretch of the imagination, cautioning me against writing of Catholic theologies in the plural. But now it is quite ordinary to talk that way. Not that all theologies are equally satisfactory. But we rather generally recognize now that there is

more than one legitimate way to speak theologically about God and the things of God. We theologians, whether we called ourselves dogmatic, scholastic, or systematic theologians, have consistently asserted that speaking of God is analogical talk, and falls infinitely short of the reality itself. But once we had made all the necessary qualifications and acknowledged our limitations in speaking of God, we sometimes forgot all that and acted as though we were constructing precise and fairly complete accounts of what God is really like. We were tempted to feel that this was a more accurate way of speaking of God than the rather primitive parabolic language of Scripture, full of metaphor and myth, story and parable. There was a time, and perhaps it has not yet entirely disappeared, when no one in Western Christianity dared claim to be doing theology if he or she failed to use the accepted mode of abstract rational conceptual discourse which was honored as serious theology.

But now we see a greater variety of approaches. Story and metaphor, archetype and koan are being explored more sympathetically as possibly legitimate modes of theological discourse. And concurrently with all this, direct experience itself is once again highlighted as an essential, even *the* primary theological source. Peter Berger calls this experiential approach the inductive option, which he honors more highly than either the deductive or the reductive option. He defines all three: "The deductive option is to reassert the authority of the religious tradition in the fact of modern secularity. . . . The reductive option is to reinterpret the tradition in the face of modern secularity. . . . The inductive option is to turn to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations."[4] As we choose the inductive option and turn more directly to religious experience it becomes more and more difficult to find satisfactory language to articulate it. We are also faced with the subtle task of sorting out and evaluating our experiences. In any case, we end up, it seems, when speaking of the divine, talking out of both sides of our mouth: he is far, she is near; she is empty, he is full; God is death, God is life. But we shall return to that later when we come to consider the contemporary influence of Eastern religions on our understanding of God.

The second influence which in our time is shifting our understanding of God is the women's movement.

Now and again, particularly in the context of group prayer, when I hear the words like "We pray to God that in her loving kindness she will console and comfort us," I realize clearly, from my own personal response, that the gender we use in addressing God does make a difference. All the words we use about God are, of course, incomplete and inadequate, but each one we use evokes in us an awareness of different aspects of that inexhaustible reality. We can address God as father, mother, brother, sister, friend, lover, divine child, and no one of these titles is adequate, yet each one provides yet another window on the endless riches of God that lie beyond naming. Because of the patriarchal history of the cultures in which

[4] *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 61-62.

God has manifested himself to us—and by us I mean here especially the religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, beginning with Abraham—our understanding of God has suffered from one-sidedness. Correspondingly, the qualities which have developed in ourselves, in our culture, and in our churches have been too one-sidedly masculine. I am aware as I say this that there are those who consider all sex differences apart from purely biological ones to be entirely conditioned by culture, and think that the ideal is to bring about a world in which the one common reality of being human is enough. Although I know that it is difficult and risky to draw exact lines, although I hesitate to venture even a short list of feminine and masculine characteristics, and although I recognize that both men and women have both kinds of qualities, it seems to me that these differences do exist. To come directly to my main point in this matter, I believe that the Western world and the church have been excessively masculinized, that we are suffering from a lack of the feminine, and that speaking and thinking of God in exclusively masculine terms supports and perpetuates this imbalance. I will be reckless enough to name a few of what I consider masculine traits: rationality, aggressiveness, competitiveness, power, and control; and corresponding feminine traits; intuition, receptivity, a wholistic grasp of reality, empathy, and communion.

How did we come to the present state of an over-masculinized culture? Here is a brief sketch of what some well-known scholars tell us. The very earliest sculpture which archaeologists have unearthed in probing the origins of our race are feminine figurines. They have been found set up in shrines, so that Joseph Campbell concludes that these figures "were, apparently, the first objects of worship of the species Homo sapiens."[5] Ken Wilber suggests that "in her purest form, the Great Mother represented all nature, matter, instincts, body, crops, earth, fertility, sexuality, emotions, desire, magic, and the beginning of myth."[6] Woman was uniquely associated in the primitive mind with life, since no one realized at that stage, it seems, that male semen had anything to do with pregnancy, birth, and new life.[7] As far as they could tell, all life came from the woman's menstrual blood.[8] So civilization at this stage was woman-centered, and men were, as Campbell puts it, one jot away from insignificance.[9]

How then did civilization shift to a patriarchal mode? This is not the place to review and evaluate in detail theories proposed by anthropologists, mythologists, and experts on the development of cultural consciousness. Enough to note that gradually the situation did change. The myth of the Great and Chthonic Mother, in which no one succeeds in breaking free to independence of her, is broken by the new Hero Myth.[10] The Hero

[5] Cited in Ken Wilber, *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 120.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 122.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 124.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 125.
[9] Cited in Wilber, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 183.

breaks through, refuses any longer, to be "Momma's boy," and asserts an independent ego. This shift, thought to have taken hold somewhere in the second millenium B.C., initiated the period in which we now still find ourselves, especially in the West: the age of patriarchy and the Father God, of the aggressive, competitive, independent, controlling ego, which is no longer simply a part of the community living a common half-conscious myth, but now is rational, cerebral, aware, and in charge.

When I speak then of counterbalancing the masculine traits which rule our culture by providing an opening to feminine traits, am I advocating a regression from rationality, an abdication of responsible independence, a falling back into the womb of the Great Mother, a Freudian infantile regression? No, for to move from an earlier consciousness submerged in the Great Mother and all she represented to an independent ego was at that time a step forward. But this move was not made without considerable loss. Transcending the Great Mother is one thing. Repressing her is another. The Western ego did not just gain freedom from the Great Smother, if we can invent that name for the side of her that needed to be surpassed; it also severed its deep interconnectedness with her. There was no longer harmony with the Heavens, but a "conquering of space"; no longer respect for Nature, but a technological assault on Nature.[11] The themes, words, and structures of the Great Mother corpus were simply left out of subsequent Western mythology. Yet, despite these deformations and repressions, the move about 4000 years ago from unreflective mythic consciousness to the rational ego was a step forward.

Nevertheless, the situation to which we have been brought through an overemphasis on masculine traits clearly calls out for some kind of counterbalance. Something other than aggressive, competitive rationality is called for. Unfortunately, when we think of something that is not rational, something that is not an independent ego, we, echoing the fears of Freud and most orthodox psychology, think that it is necessarily a step backward. In some cases it surely is, but what we need to realize is that there is a dimension of ourselves, and of our awareness of God, which is not rational, not prerational, not subrational, but transrational or contemplative. It is distinguished from the prerational or subrational not by being less aware and awake, but more so. Can we not hope that as the male once rescued consciousness from the earthbound matriarchate, so today the female might help rescue consciousness from the patriarchate.[12] We need a new hero myth. The dragon we must now fight is one-sided aggressive egocenteredness itself. We need liberation, in Merton's words, from "our inordinate self-consciousness, from our monumental self-awareness, and from our obsession with self-affirmation."[13] We need to develop intuition and alert but passive awareness as we yesterday needed to develop assertive logic and an active mentality. The lead in this new development can

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[13] Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 31.

come most easily from the female, since our society is already so strongly masculine.[14]

One effective way to move in that direction is to allow ourselves to acknowledge and relate to the feminine traits of God, to her compassionate and unconditional love for us; to her dimension of mystery, which can be touched by no rational effort but only by loving contemplation; to her presence to and reverence for our whole selves, body, soul and spirit as one; to her nourishing and life-giving care for us; to her sensitive intuition, which tunes in perfectly and is empathic to our every need; to her desire not to be Master and Lord, but intimate companion and friend.

It will take us a while, with some trial and error, to get used to the idea of addressing God with female names, titles, and images, particularly in public shared worship. However, I think it is well worth the trouble, since it will make us aware, in God and in ourselves, of qualities that are badly needed in our competitive, aggressive, indeed obscenely violent world. The popular notion of God, especially when it is connected with national loyalty, still contains strong echoes of the powerful war God who is on our side and will violently destroy those who oppose us. Do you think that Jesus would recognize as his Father the immensely popular God of "Star Wars," the Force, whose principal function seems to be to help us to blow to colorful smithereens all those who are not on our side? Do we even notice to what extent aggressive violence is taken for granted as a component of our recreation, entertainment, and our national life?

The more we accustom ourselves to images of God which counteract this destructive kind of power-God, the better. Feminine images of God can be helpful here. At present I notice a tendency to deal with the matter of gender in addressing God by simply eliminating both genders. But to me, although neutering God in the kind of prayer in which we address God as person may be a necessary initial tactic, it is not the goal. For in this kind of prayer, in which we address God person-to-person, we enrich our understanding not by diminishing but by multiplying titles. Silent awareness contemplation is another matter where other rules might apply. More about that later.

But first, a concluding observation about the women's movement. In discussing the ways in which the disintegration of structures has been pushing us toward a more direct and immediate attention to God, we noted the renewed significance given to religious experience. Women tell us that this element has been an especially strong one for them.[15] Most of the structures in our society and church were shaped by male culture, so that for men the structures, even when they became shaky, still provided a bridge or a foothold while moving to something else. One could hold back a little more and a little longer from immediate experience. But women, for the most part, as women, did not have this kind of a bridge for

[14] Wilber, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

[15] Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 5 ff.

themselves. To create appropriate structures for themselves, whether linguistic, ritual, symbolic, or normative, was largely a matter of starting from scratch. So experience, their own personal experience, almost necessarily became a primary resource. And that, I think, has helped all of us to return with greater confidence to God as the one we find when we open ourselves to our own personal and communal experience.

We have taken a look, then, at the way in which two contemporary phenomena are shaping our understanding of God: the falling apart of structures, and the feminist movement. Now to the third phenomenon: the growing influence of Hinduism and Buddhism in the West. In the last century the interest in Eastern religions in America was mostly a bookish phenomenon, and confined to a relatively small intellectual elite. Today it is also a phenomenon of personal experience, and in no way confined to a small coterie. Thanks to the availability of jet travel thousands of young and not so young people have had direct personal experience of these religions in India and various Buddhist countries. Hundreds of thousands more have had contact with Eastern teachers who have come to this country, or from Westerners trained by these teachers. Furthermore, this teaching is usually more than simple doctrinal instruction. It is normally also initiation into some spiritual practice. More and more university graduates and even, increasingly, high school students, have access to informed instruction about these and other religious traditions. Those who seem to be most frequently drawn to other religious traditions in a serious way are young people who are concerned about their spiritual growth, but have found their parents' religion—Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant—either too rigid or simply empty ritual. Their complaints about the God of the religions they have left behind usually come in two forms: "Your God is too small," and/or "Your God is remote, abstract, and has no connection with my experience." These young men and women sometimes find their way into seminaries or schools of theology, but it seems to me that most of those who enter such schools know less about non-Western religions than the average college student. Nevertheless, that too seems to be changing. And yet Peter Berger notes as recently as 1979 that "It is interesting to observe how few Christian theologians show any interest in the non-Western religions. Most Christian theologians today," he observes, "be it Protestant or Catholic, liberal or conservative, go on as if the Judaeo-Christian tradition were alone in the world—with modern secularity as its only external conversation partner."[16]

"Your God is too small" is the lament we hear from those who have grown up in a world in which space travel has expanded our imagination and horizons, a world in which one can travel anywhere in the world in a couple of days, and can see and hear events anywhere at the time they are happening. This is a world in which we find it more and more difficult to overlook the fact that most of the people on the planet, who are neither more stupid nor less virtuous than we Western Christians, have for many

[16] Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

centuries—even many centuries before Christianity—experienced their religion as the principal source of goodness and wisdom in their lives. Is it surprising that some Christians begin to question the narrowness of much of our understanding of God? Meanwhile, we daily grow more aware of the serious problems which are emerging out of the rational technology of which we in the West have been so proud. In such a world more people, especially young people, find too small a God who can be easily and neatly described, and who has only a peripheral interest in any religious group that is not Christian. The problem of a God too small becomes most acute in the area of Christology; indeed, a narrowly exclusivist Christology is probably the principal occasion for the objection of a growing number of Christians that our God is too small.

So, quite apart from any particular doctrine about God in these ancient and sophisticated religions, the simple phenomenon of increased contact with them is shaping and modifying our understanding of God. For our understanding of God is not a thing apart from the rest of our world, our experience and our theology. Each new moment of experience in our lives adds another qualification to our understanding of the God who is somehow in the midst of it all.

But in addition to shifts that are taking place in our understanding of God simply from our growing awareness of a larger universe and of the presence of other significant religious traditions, there are also the changes which come from the specific content of these traditions. This kind of influence is particularly at work in those who are not only vaguely aware of the existence of other religions, but have some significant contact with them either by serious reading and study, or by direct experience, or by both. What, then, are some of the elements of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions which are moving us to a new understanding of God?

Two elements common to both Hindu and Buddhist approaches to ultimate reality seem almost ready made to meet the two criticisms we have heard leveled at the current Christian understanding of God: "Your God is too small," and "Your God has no relation to my experience." The charge that "Your God is too small" meets in both Hinduism and Buddhism a way of relating to ultimate reality which puts it beyond all words, all concepts, and all rational operation of the human mind. For Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, the form of Hindu philosophy which has had most influence in the West, God, or Brahman, is beyond all categories. Though devotional relationship to God as a person, whether it be the yogic Ishwara, the male Shiva, the Divine Mother, or Baby Krishna, is acceptable as a lower approach to Brahman, the final result of the relationship is the disappearance of all that. All categories vanish and realization dawns that these personal categories are all too limiting to apply to Brahman. I suspect that the widespread and growing feeling among many Christians that God is not a person is simply a way of acknowledging God as an inexhaustibly unlimited and pervasively omnipresent reality. Despite all the efforts of theologians to purge the word person of constricting anthropomorphisms, those lingering images of limited human persons seem to

still remain. I think that this uneasiness with speaking of God as a person springs from a basically healthy instinct, and can purify and open up our understanding of God.

An added note: Significantly enough, millenia before Copernicus enlarged our Western images of space, and Darwin and Einstein expanded our sense of time, the Hindu cosmology was already vast and spacious in both time and space, compared with the relatively miniscule cosmology which the biblical authors inherited from their surrounding culture. The general direction, then, of the Hindu understanding of God provides a welcome approach to those who are uneasy about a God who is too small.

Similar things can be said of the Buddhist approach to ultimate reality. The Buddha did not even consider it to be an appropriate matter for speculation, so far is it beyond the capacity of our rational mind to grasp.

The second accusation which comes from young Westerners who have found their parents' religion too rigid or else too routine and rote is that "Your God is too remote, too abstract, and has no relation to my own experience." It might seem at first that what enables Hinduism and Buddhism to provide a God who is beyond words and concepts would simultaneously make him less accessible to experience. Yet it does not turn out that way. Direct personal experience is the mode of access to ultimate reality for Hindu and Buddhist traditions alike. Hinduism teaches that the rational mind cannot grasp Brahman, but that the proper yoga, the proper spiritual practice, will open me to the realization that Atman, my deepest self, has always been Brahman, the primal reality, and that all other judgments were illusions. For Buddhism too the rational mind is unable to reach ultimate reality, but when all clinging has ceased, even clinging to my own mind and my own self, the direct experience of awakening or enlightenment ensues. Even the most rigorous scholarly dialectic of Buddhist teachers like Nagarjuna, the foundational Mahayana philosopher of the second century B.C., is directed entirely toward leading the inquirer to direct contemplative experience of ultimate reality. That remains true today.[17] When an interested inquirer comes to a Buddhist—or a Hindu—teacher, the primary task to which he or she is set is not reading or doctrinal instruction, but experiential practice.

To put it very simply, the experiential contemplative approach to God, so badly neglected in our own culture, and, I'm afraid, in our Christian churches, is given pride of place in Hindu and Buddhist practice. That means that for many Christians with a spiritual hunger, the reality of God comes experientially alive for the first time through Hindu or even Buddhist practice (even though Buddhism is not a theistic religion). It also means, though less frequently, that Christians who already have a rich experience of God add new dimensions to that experience through practices drawn from these Eastern traditions.

Now that we have taken a look at three current trends which are reshaping our understanding of God, it is only fair to evaluate them. Are

[17] T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960).

these shifts leading us toward or away from an authentically Christian understanding of God? The test for us Christians is always found in the person of Jesus, since he is for us both the face of God and the exemplar of the right human attitude toward God. As God's face turned toward us, he shows us what God is like by the way he speaks and acts and is. As the complete and integral human, he shows us how we should think and act and be in relation to God.

Let us conclude our reflections this morning, then, by examining the shifts in our understanding of God in this light. I think we will see that most, if not all, of these shifts are bringing us closer to the understanding that was found in Jesus, seen from these two perspectives: God facing us in Jesus, and Jesus with us, facing God.

What about the shifts occasioned by the disintegration of structures? Familiar ground for Jesus as we see him in the Gospels. Over and over again he warns against attachment to old structures, and is radical in calling us back to direct personal experience of God. Not legal prescriptions, not ritual forms, not rote prayers, but direct contact with the Father, and openness to the Spirit who enlivens our loving relationships to each other—that is what Jesus preaches and shows us as the right human attitude toward God. He acknowledges the mystery of God by speaking of God in parable and paradox, and by frequent use of questions rather than statements.

What about the enrichment of our understanding of God which the women's movement is bringing about? This too corresponds to the kind of God we come to know through Jesus. He addresses God as Abba, no macho title, and he sees his Father as a tender God with a motherly concern for all, sending his sun and rain on all alike, counting the hairs on our head, caring for us with more concern than for the birds of the air or the lilies of the field. Jesus himself, as the window through which we see and feel God shining on us, is no warrior king, but a humble empathic friend who serves us, nurtures us, lays down his life for us, and feeds us with his own body and blood. We see in Jesus that our God is not the commander-in-chief of an army that achieves its ends by brute force, but one who wins us by the gentle but strong power of unconditional love.

And finally, what about the new aspects of our understanding of God which come from our growing contact with Eastern religions? Do they resonate with the God of Jesus? Are they authentically Christian developments?

The God of Jesus is no provincial God. He teaches that his Father is not just the God of a small chosen people, but the Father of all peoples, and by parable and direct confrontation contradicts his adversaries for having a God who is too small. Over and over again he calls for a contact with God which is not just external observance, but direct experience. And his own life, filled with regular and extended times of personal openness with God, corresponds to his teaching.

One final observation: Could it be that developments in our understanding of God, and particularly those which make us aware of her nonviolent

feminine qualities, are not something added to our Christianity? Would it not be more accurate to see them as challenging us to begin to catch up with the understanding of God which was already exemplified in Jesus, but which, for many reasons, never had a chance to come into its own?

DANIEL J. O'HANLON, S.J.
Jesuit School of Theology
at Berkeley