

IS GOD HERE? THERE? NOWHERE? EVERYWHERE? August 20, 2006

When I visited my daughter and her family recently, her husband gave me a book. He has been fascinated by Native American culture for many years, and has quite of collection of Native American literature and art. The book was *God Is Red*, by Vine DeLoria. It was first published several years ago, but recently a second, updated edition was released.

I found the book very interesting, and commend it to you. One of DeLoria's insights was that the Divine for Western Civilization and the Divine for Native Americans were based on two very different basic ideas. The God of Western Civilization is a god of Time and History. The Divine for Native Americans and other aboriginal people is centered on Place.

That is, the God of Western civilization is based on Yahweh, the god of the ancient Israelites. While Yahweh was similar to other ancient Middle Eastern deities in that he demanded worship and adoration, he also entered history, directing the actions and fortunes of the Israelites. Thus time became far more central to their lives.

The Divine in Native American cultures is, however, centered on place. The Earth itself is sacred, as is the sky above. All matter is thought to be alive in some way. And all matter is related in the larger family of life. Specific places that exhibited special characteristics took on a divine quality. In these cultures, time is cyclical, and tied to the seasons.

Thus my question about God, using that word as a metaphor for the divine: *Is God Here? There? Nowhere? Everywhere?* Let us explore the question today.

When Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep, he grew curious about a strange phenomenon. He observed a bush that flamed, yet was not consumed. As he came closer, a voice from the bush spoke his name. The voice said, "Moses, come closer, but take off your sandals, for this is Holy Ground." The voice named itself *I Am Who I Am*. It also identified itself as the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the progenitors of the Hebrew people.

In that time and place, god usually stayed put. The gods of Egypt stayed in Egypt, and the gods of Assyria stayed in Assyria, and the gods of Caanan stayed in Caanan. They were local gods. However, the unnamable god of the Hebrews showed up on a strange mountain among nomadic peoples to one Hebrew—an outcast who fled a soft life in the courts of Egypt because he killed a man. And God named that place where he appeared as *holy*.

Yahweh continued this behavior. He directed Moses to free his people, and then guided them as they wandered in the desert. Moses and those who followed him eventually built an Ark in which the spirit of Yahweh could reside after they covenanted with him. For forty years, the metaphor for *a very long time*, they wandered in the wilderness, carrying the Ark with them. And Yahweh continued to direct their efforts, speaking through the priests. He stepped into history, and supported them in their efforts to become a great people.

Later another god-obsessed man entered history and time. His name was Jesus of Nazareth. His followers taught that he was the Son of God, and that he rose from the dead, thus triumphing over mankind's ultimate fate, succumbing to the ravages of time. These prophets and apostles said that his message was universal, for both Jew and Gentile. They extended the religion founded on his teachings and person throughout the Mediterranean, then into Western Europe and North Africa, then eventually to the *New World* across the great oceans.

The religion based on the person of Jesus, called Christianity, was not tied to a specific locale. His life and teachings happened at a particular time and place, but the faith was available to anyone, anywhere. It was based on *before and after*, not Bethlehem, or even Jerusalem. That is, before professing belief in Christ, and after doing so. It was a religion of time, not place.

A few hundred years later, a few hundred miles south, another prophet arose, based on the original Abrahamic, Mosiac, religion. His name was Muhammad, and he is known among those who follow his teachings as *The Seal of the Prophets*. In this version of the Abrahamic religion, Al-Lah, (or the God) is also a god of history. Islam is also a universalizing religion. Allah, who was identified and first worshipped in the desert of the Middle East, is not tied to that place. He is present everywhere his followers worship him—and they have spread all over the globe.

Thus, the god of Western and Middle Eastern Civilization is a god of time and history—not place. And if the Divine is Everywhere, but Nowhere specifically, then we need not revere the earth, or specific portions of it. We need not weep when a river is toxic, or a wetland destroyed. We need not regret blowing the top of a mountain off in order to have easy access to the coal lying within its deepest recesses. We need not deny access to our sparkling ground water to companies seeking to sell it in the Southwest. I encourage you to think further about the implications of this concentration on time and history as opposed to place.

Although DeLoria concentrated on his people, the Native Americans of our continent, most aboriginal people share a similar pattern of relating to the Divine. That is, the Divine is immanent in the Land and the Natural World. Most have a version of Mother Earth and Father Sky. Creation stories vary widely however, they share a similar base. At some point of the landscape—a mountain, a river,

a great rock—the original parents emerged and brought forth progeny. Ever afterward that point was considered sacred.

If there was a place that was unique, something out of the ordinary, that was also deemed a sacred place. While I was in Wyoming, I visited Yellowstone National Park. One of the places I saw was the still bubbling caldera of the ancient volcano that formed that exciting land. As I walked around the steaming pools that spotted the shoreline of Yellowstone Lake, I thought about the first people that stumbled into that fantastic landscape. The pools were colored red, orange, ocher, green, and variations of all of the above around their edges. Mud bubbled and bubbles rose through the water. Steam rolled along the cold water of the larger lake.

What must those ancient peoples have thought, when they first viewed this unique landscape? Surely they must have recognized the power of the Divinity that resided in this land and these waters. I am told that the land around Yellowstone was known as *The Sacred Smoking Land* among some Native Americans. There were several tribes that divided the responsibility of caring for its treasures.

Even I, an educated product of Western Civilization, was awe-stricken at this site. I know about volcanoes, and have read about caldera, the centers of volcanoes. *The Sacred Smoking Land* is a caldera within a caldera. It is a place that gives birth to land, and it is a holy place.

Native Americans do not restrict their reverence to such wonders, however. The entire creation is envisioned as alive and deserving respect. A great mountain has its own personality, and rivers and streams theirs. Places, animals and humans are all related and regarded as brothers and sisters. Animals that sustain the people, such as buffalo, have great spiritual value. Plants that were cultivated for food, such as corn, have sacred stories attached to them of how the People were gifted with their seed.

However, the most sacred thing is the land itself, for the Native Americans understand it to be the ground for all Life. That which is sacred is a place, or places. All life is interconnected, and all matter is alive, including stones and mountains and deserts and prairie. People who are literally *grounded* in such a manner do not lightly remove glittering ore from the bosom of Mother Earth. They do not discard toxins in the sparkling water upon which all life depends. They do not kill animals (their relations) for fun. They take life for food, for they understand that life feeds on life. However, the idea of hunting as a *sport* is foreign to them. The idea of exterminating great herds of buffalo is anathema.

So, how does this affect us, we who are liberal religionists? We are products of Western Civilization. We trace our history back through the Puritans who came to America, through the left wing of the great Reformation movement, through the

ancient desert fathers of the Early Christian movement, and back further to Jesus, to Moses, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We emphasize reason in our approach to religion, and often rebel against the orthodoxy of the day.

We were reared in the tradition of Western Civilization. We know about time, we wear wristwatches, we study history. We think in terms of going forward, of making progress, of shaping history. Yet we also, most of us, value the natural world.

The Transcendentalists, who found the Divine present in the Natural World, shaped our theologies and history. Ralph Waldo Emerson's most famous essay was named *Nature*. Henry David Thoreau engaged with life in depth on the shores of *Walden Pond*. And Walt Whitman's masterpiece is *Leaves of Grass*. Generations of Unitarians and Universalists, as well as other people, read and reflected on their work.

Periodically the Unitarian Universalist Association surveys our people to find out just what it is they do believe. A few years ago they did so, and found that more people marked the designation *naturalist* than *theist* or *humanist*. (Based on memory.) I am sure the term means different things to different people, but it illustrates that we are a people that value the natural world.

We have often been a home for artists and poets. We are also a home for environmentalists and ecologists. Some of our study material points out that an understanding of time as cyclical is still present in older cultures. Our great concluding Principle says that we affirm *the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part*. All of this is to say that we are caught in the middle of this great divide between time and place.

Our training and study is based on Western Civilization's emphasis on time and history. I must confess that history has been and continues to be one of my great interests. I love to read about the interplay of forces that formed our societies. I like both the *great man* writing of history, AND the newer emphasis of studying the common people of a particular time and place. I like the history of the church and the history of theatre. I like straight history and speculative history.

And I have read feminist theory that first alerted me to the idea of history as cycles. I garden, thus I am well aware of weather patterns that repeat from year to year. I have read Native American literature and about the Australian aborigines' *Dreamtime*.

I feel caught in the middle of two competing and valuable ways of thinking and believing. I both value time and history and I value space and place. I both think that we should not be blowing the tops off mountains, and I am part of this culture that relies on abundant energy. I both thoroughly enjoyed my vacation in

Wyoming, and deplore the amount of very expensive gasoline I purchased. I am caught in the middle; and so I extrapolate that some of you are also.

Living in the middle is often not a comfortable way to make our way through life. Let me suggest some ways we might proceed. We liberal religionists have often been allies of Native Americans. We have supported their right to the use of peyote in some religious ceremonies. Some churches have supported local tribes in their disputes with governments. In this church we have shared ceremonies with Native American friends. They have honored us by bringing their drum to our church, and we have shared our respect and love for their land with readings and song. We must walk a fine line between honoring their culture, and attempting to confiscate it.

Several of us have been active in environmental issues. We have sought to preserve the land, *even unto the seventh generation*, as we learned from our Native American friends. We know how to organize and petition and try to influence decision-makers. If preservation of the sacred lands of Native Americans is important to us, we might be valuable allies in that struggle. And any work in the field of ecology helps preserve the land upon which all our lives depend.

Is God here—on this spot of ground, within these walls? Or is God there—along the shores of Lake Michigan, perhaps present in one of the great White Pine trees? Is there no god—neither here nor there? Or is God everywhere—present in the human heart, the spirit of Brother Fox and Sister Moose, the great Platte Rivers, the Rocky Mountains, the fishing streams of the Upper Peninsula? Only you can answer that question. In your understanding, wherein lies the Divine?

Let these words encourage you to think and reflect. Let your heart be inspired to continue growing and expanding.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.