

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

Romans 12:2.

William Willimon, *Preaching Master Class*

In a church history course my last year at Yale Divinity School, the professor invited an orthodox priest to lecture. He gave a rather dry talk on the development of the creeds. At the end of the lecture an earnest student asked, “Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?”

The priest looked confused. “Well, you just say it. It’s not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can quickly learn it by heart.” “No, you don’t understand,” continued the student, “What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed – like the Virgin Birth?”

The priest continued to look confused. “You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you must keep saying it. It will come to you eventually.” Exasperatedly, the student, a product of the same church that produced me, and as a representative of the ‘60s, pleaded, “How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?”

“It’s not ‘your’ creed, young man!” said the priest. “It’s ‘our’ creed. Keep saying it, for heaven’s sake! Eventually, it may come to you. For some, it takes longer than for others. How old are you? Twenty-three? Don’t be so hard on yourself. There are lots of things that one doesn’t know at 23. Eventually, it may come to you. Even if it doesn’t, don’t worry. It’s not ‘your’ creed.”

At that moment I realized what was wrong with much of the education I had received. A light shone. I got saved from the ‘60s. I thanked God that, in my ministry, I was not being left to my own devices. I did not have to think for myself. Saints led the way. As a theological educator, I need to recover a sense of myself as accountable to the church rather than subservient to the academy. I need to listen to the church more carefully than to the alleged “issues of the day.” Only then might we, as leaders of the church, be given to allow our people to arise above the mere contemporary and to engage in “critical thinking” worthy of the name. Theological education begins by being formed by the saints.

Mortimer Adler:

During this long stay in the hospital, I suffered a mild depression, and often when Caroline visited me I would, unaccountably, burst into tears. Father Howell, the Rector of Saint Chrysostom's Church, also visited me, and once when, at my bedside, he prayed for my recovery, I choked up and wept. The only prayer that I knew word for word, was the Pater Noster. On that day and in the days after it, I found myself repeating the Lord's Prayer, again and again, and meaning every word of it. Quite suddenly, when I was awake one night, a light dawned on me, and I realized what had happened without my recognizing it clearly when it first happened.

I had been seriously praying to God. But had I not said at the end of *How to Think About God*, that no one who understood the God of the philosophers as well as I thought I did, would worship that God or pray to him. Only if, by the gift of grace, one made the leap of faith across the chasm to the God of religious Jews and Christians, would one engage in worship and prayer, believing in a morally good, loving, just, and merciful God.

Here after many years of affirming God's existence and trying to give adequate reasons for that affirmation, I found myself believing in God and praying to Him.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

Romans 12:2.

Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God*

But because of ideas arising out of the eighteenth century – focused primarily through “British Empiricism” and the Kantian/Rationalist reaction to it in Germany – the richly informative language needed to nourish thoughtful faith in God is no longer functional in our cultural setting. The ideas of Modernity now dominate the academic centers of the world, even where they are not consciously identified or understood, and even where they are explicitly rejected. This is also true of many of the Christian seminaries where ministers and teachers are educated, and where it is commonly thought to be a deep question whether or not we can succeed in thinking about God at all or can speak intelligibly of him.

We are all products of this modern thought system, and you yourself can test its power by observing your response to a representative statement about God from a century or so ago.

In the grand and carefully phrased old words of Adam Clarke, God is

the eternal, independent, and self-existent Being; the Being whose purposes and actions spring from himself, without foreign motive or influence; he who is absolute in dominion; the most pure, the most simple, the most spiritual of all essences; infinitely perfect; and eternally self-sufficient, needing nothing that he has made; illimitable in his immensity, inconceivable in his mode of existence, and indescribable in his essence; known fully only by himself, because an infinite mind can only be fully comprehended by itself. In a word, a Being who, from his infinite wisdom, cannot err or be deceived, and from his infinite goodness, can do nothing but what is eternally just, and right, and kind.

It would be surprising if you found this easy reading. However, it is a lot like Shakespeare – not just old, but incredibly rich. Possibly you even began to think the words are just meaningless. Nevertheless, with some earnest thought we can all appreciate what a vast difference it would make to anyone’s life to actually believe in such a God as these words portray. Think of someone who ever action, whose slightest thought or inclination, automatically assumes the reality of the God Adam Clarke describes.

When you do this you will have captured nothing less than the thought of Jesus himself, along with the faith and life he came to bring. And with such realities in mind, it then becomes illuminating to say that God is love. This proves to be very different from forcing a bedraggled human version of “love” into a mental blank where God is supposed to be, and then identifying God as *that*.

Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*

The word of sacred order, by virtue of being an ongoing human production, is ongoingly confronted with the disordering human forces of human existence in time. The precariousness of every such is revealed each time men forget or doubt the reality-defining affirmations, each time they dream reality-denying dreams of “madness,” and most importantly, each time they consciously encounter death. Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it.