

# Stories of a Relational Spirit

## *Between I and Thou*

BY MURRAY SHORT

**There's a beautiful area of native bush in the central North Island called Ohinetonga Scenic Reserve. My wife Niwa and I camped nearby in Owhango during a recent holiday and explored the bush each day. The many massive rimu, tawa, matai and kahikatea are an imposing presence. Some of these trees have stood there for more than 500 years and as I spent time with them, I imagined the comings and goings of many human generations they had witnessed over their lifetimes. These encounters with giants in the bush elicited a palpable sense of awe and wonder and I realised I had no sense of awe and wonder for the image humans have used to try and explain what might have created these giants. As I reflected on that, it occurred to me that whilst humans have worshipped such an image, they have continued to destroy trees at an alarming rate.**

This experience in the bush highlighted that in my thinking, I had moved away from the dualism that is inherent in Western Christianity that separates the sacred from the natural world. I realised this was another step on a path I had been following for some time.

I had long been uncomfortable with the idea of worshipping an image, which creates other problems as well. In her book *A Case for God*, Karen Armstrong suggests that such worship can become a form of idolatry.

Idolatry has always been one of the pitfalls of monotheism. Because its chief symbol of the divine was a personalised deity, there was an inherent danger that people would imagine 'him' as a larger, more powerful version of themselves, which they could use to endorse their own practices, loves and hatreds – sometimes to lethal effect. There can only be one absolute, so once a finite idea, theology, nation, polity or ideology is made supreme, it is compelled to destroy anything that opposes it. (Armstrong, p. 308)

There can be substantial implications then, of using this image God. The question for me, however, has been "If I reject the 'personalised deity' symbol, how do I 'imagine' God to be?" As I have progressed on this pathway, I have also had frequent 'attacks of atheism'.

A relatively recent step on my path was the liberation I experienced when I finally understood the idea that the Bible needs to be approached as a collection of stories, or as "mythos" rather than "logos", as Karen Armstrong would describe it. The Bible does include some history which complicates things, but much of it is composed of stories and metaphors used by the writers to illustrate often difficult concepts and values. Applying a test of

historical or scientific 'truth' (logos) to the stories is as irrelevant as with a Shakespeare novel, the meanings and power of which we understand and absorb whilst accepting it as fiction. We know for example that Iago is a fictional character but through him we are led to understand the nature of personal power, control and jealousy.

Evidently, I had always been influenced by the "fact fundamentalism" that Armstrong says characterised the period of human cultural evolution called modernity. This view held that if something can't be proved scientifically then it doesn't exist, which is the mode in which much of the God debate has unfolded. It was the idea introduced during the period of modernity by Newton and others that the existence of God would soon be proved scientifically. This opened the way for the opposite idea, that the existence of God could be disproved, an idea called atheism. For a time, I would have described myself as atheist, in part because I was approaching the religious stories in the logos mode.

The idea of reading the Bible as mythos was liberating for me because it led to an exploration of other ways of conceptualising and describing the underlying meanings that the Bible stories were designed to explain. Centrally, what were other ways to conceptualise what is presented in many parts of the Bible as the personalised and all-powerful creator and controller called God?

As I continued my exploration I came across Buber's work, which opened an entirely new way of thinking about God. Central to this thinking was the idea of what I call a relational rather than a personal God.

The Buber idea is that God is encountered in the I-Thou connections person-to-person and person-to-nature, rather than being a separate "thing" that we experience as individuals in an I-It manner. He goes even further in emphasising the relational nature of God by suggesting that rather than residing separately in each person or in nature, the spirit is actually in the connection itself, i.e., *between* rather than *within* each. Buber illustrates this by contrasting the blood that flows within the person to the air that is between and shared by people and the rest of nature. He likens Spirit to love, and references John's gospel in which God is described as love. "Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love ... Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content'; its object; but love is *between I and Thou*." (Buber, p. 14-15).

Buber was influenced by Feuerbach, a nineteenth century

anthropologist whose view, according to Geering (*The World of Relation: An introduction to Martin Buber's I and Thou*), was "... that the essence of what it means to be human is not found in the individual human being but in the personal relation which exists between two human beings. He made the point that just as it takes two human beings to procreate the physical individual, so it requires at least two human beings to bring forth the spiritual component of what it means to be human. Only by communication and dialogue between person and person do ideas arise and they are subsequently tested in the apprehension of truth."

We learn and change then, not by isolating ourselves and seeking the guidance of a personalised God, but by engaging with others, whether in person or through others' writings and other recordings. Everything we know and understand is a product of this collective process. We are vessels carrying the combined learnings of the generations before us, not prophetic vessels conveying messages received from God.

It is a matter of balance because individual insight, vision and creativity are critically important for breakthrough ideas. However, they are still one way or another, a product of, and building on collective learnings. We also need always to keep in mind that our inspiration can be faulty. We can misinterpret "God's message" or we can lack key pieces of information to mention just two of the many ways in which we can be misled as individuals. There are as many false prophets as true ones and a large dose of humility is always necessary as it opens our hearts to hearing the views of the other and to sensing the spirit in the connection.

In commenting on the need for "individual guidance to yield to corporate guidance" Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, makes the following points:

There must also come a knowledge of the direct, active, immediate leading of the Spirit *together* ... Much of the teaching on divine guidance in our century has been noticeably deficient on the corporate aspect. We have received excellent instruction on how God leads us through Scripture and through reason and through circumstances and through the promptings of the Spirit upon the individual heart. There has also been teaching – good teaching – on the exceptional means of guidance: angels, visions, dreams, signs, and more. But we have heard little about how God leads through his people, the body of Christ. On that subject there is profound silence.

Foster suggests that the emphasis on private guidance in Western cultures "is a product of their emphasis upon individualism". In my view the individualism in turn is in part a product of the conception of a personal God, or a God out there from whom the individual learns and takes private guidance. A cultural over-emphasis

on individualism damages community and yet it is community that creates and fosters the connections in which we encounter Spirit which I believe helps explain the fundamental importance of community to Quakerism from its earliest days.

**Editorial note:** An extended version of this article was presented to the participants of the seminar, Stories of the Spirit, in June 2022 at the Quaker Settlement. Murray Short was too ill to present his own material (long Covid) so his presentation was read out by others. The longer article can be read in the Newsletter section, Selected Articles, on the Quaker website.