

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## Wrestling with God in Our Times

H. Paul Lemaire, S.J.

*Philippine Studies* vol. 21, no. 1-2 (1973): 111–124

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

## Wrestling with God in Our Times

H. PAUL LEMAIRE, S.J.

You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed (Gen 32: 29).

The school of radical theology has for the past ten years provided an invaluable service both for the professional theologian and the concerned Christian living amid the changing values and attitudes of the secular world. It has analyzed the religious sentiments<sup>1</sup> of the modern Christian, sentiments nurtured not by institutional Christianity, but by life in the secular world. It has vividly and convincingly shown how difficult it is to reconcile traditional theism — whether it be of the Thomistic, liberal, or neo-orthodox type — with modern man's emphasis on his autonomy, the beauty and significance of this life, his lack of concern (not necessarily denial) of life after death, his deep rooted optimism that the problems of war, hunger, and poverty are soluble.

The analyses of the school of radical theology<sup>2</sup> have found empathetic understanding in the hearts of all those Christians who can be called "modern."<sup>3</sup> A frequent response has been:

1. "Sentiment" is here used in Allport's sense: "... an indistinguishable blend of emotion and reason, of feeling and meaning." Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and his Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1950), p. 18.

2. For an excellent summary and critical analysis of this school, see Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), especially pp. 107-146.

3. We are all too prone to forget that those whose attitudes and sentiments have evolved with and been shaped by the modern world still constitute a minority, albeit, a significant and articulate one. The growing of a

"Yes, this has been my attitude and my problem, though I have not been able to articulate them up to this point." And so, the concerned professor of religion teaching undergraduates almost invariably captures the interest and attention of his audience when he embarks upon an analysis of their problem of belief. This is why the professor, who is also a sincere Christian seeking God in the secular world and struggling with his own unanswered questions, is disconcerted when on occasion a student suddenly says to him: "You know, I lost my faith in your class." One may argue and even console oneself with the thought that this way of expressing it is a hangover from a prior mode of thinking, since faith is not something that is lost like a child's rubber ball, but slowly disintegrates from a concurrence of various factors both subjective and objective. Be that as it may, it is still a disconcerting experience if for no other reason than that this was not the intent with which the teacher began the semester.<sup>4</sup>

The more constructive and more arduous task for all of us comes after our analysis of our problem of faith. "Is it possible to believe today?" At the risk of an oversimplification, let it be said that the school of radical theology answers that question negatively. Although there is no consensus about the manner of his death, God is dead. We are left to console ourselves with and find inspiration in the "contagious freedom" of Jesus, his paradigmatic character, or in the God who by undergoing the process of death is incarnating himself in men. These are perspectives not to be denied, since they are valid and valuable Christian insights that have given courage to many of us to continue to face

beard by a student or the wearing of a tie by a Roman Catholic clergyman is no guarantee of modernity, of either understanding or agreeing with the theological changes that have taken place. One of the great virtues of Tofler's book, *Future Shock*, though not concerned with theological problems, is its warning that we are not prepared for the changes in the world that are taking place and will continue to do so. This could prove devastating for the individual and society as a whole.

4. It is worth noting here that contrary to popular belief the college student of today is not foundering upon the reef of sexual liberalism. He seems better able to integrate sexuality and sexual departures from the "traditional" norms of morality into the total texture of his life than the preceding generation.

up to our problem of God and with God during the dark night of the soul. They are valid and valuable, but not sufficient, since faith in God is impossible if God no longer lives.

Moreover, on the methodological premises of this school, it is impossible to know a transcendent God even if he were not dead, since he is not empirically available to us. Thus, to put it frankly, the school of radical theology soon reaches a theological deadend.<sup>5</sup> It may validly continue as some kind of sociology, psychology, or phenomenology of religion, but insofar as theology must wrestle with belief in God or else confess that there is no such thing as theology, the radical theologians soon implicitly affirm that they are not theologians since they broadcast their inability to come to grips with belief in God except by proclaiming his death.

We cannot accept the methodological presuppositions of this school of thought. Because of its penetrating analysis of the problem, we have, it must be confessed, too long bought the whole package. We have recently become more discriminating, especially with a renewal of interest in the notion of transcendence.<sup>6</sup>

Becoming more discriminating, however, makes the task no easier. When the theology professor tries to move from an analysis of the problem of God to tentative solutions to or at least confrontations with this question, he often loses the interest and attention of a disturbingly high proportion of his students and they leave his class with only half of his message. Why is this? Two reasons come to mind: a lack of interest in doing metaphysics and a lack of a socially and/or personally accepted concept of God. It is difficult to talk of the existence of someone if one has no idea of what he is like. This may seem like a reversal of the

5. Theology's *sole* concern is not God, as we may have thought in the past, but he certainly must be one of its concerns or else we should coin a new word. For a description of an anthropological approach to doing theology, see E. Schillebeeckx, "Faith Functioning in Human Self-Understanding," *The Word in History* (T. Patrick Burke, ed.; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), pp. 41-68.

6. See, for example, Martin Marty and Dean Peerman, editors, *New Theology No. 7: The Recovery of Transcendence* (New York: MacMillan, 1970) and Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, N.Y.: Double-Ancor, 1970).

normal procedure of approaching this problem, but if we go back to our childhood (a worthwhile path to follow at times), it becomes clear that we were first concerned with what things and people were like before we were worried about whether they were real or not.

But let us return for a moment to the first question: to talk about God is to talk about someone who is transcendent, i.e., someone whose reality is not totally contained within the reality of the world empirically available to us.<sup>7</sup> To discuss a reality not totally contained with this empirical world is to do metaphysics. Here is not meant an abstruse type of metaphysical analysis peculiar to the professional, but the kind of metaphysics all of us do in the analysis of ourselves as men, which students today find so appealing. But when the object of their analysis becomes not themselves but God, the professor is frequently "shut off." Two reasons come to mind for this: God does not seem relevant nor meaningful to them because I believe they have no concept of God. (We will take this point up below.) Secondly, students of today, believe it or not, can be just as stubborn and closed as they accuse the older generation of being. The ability to listen to the other is a rare quality in any generation.

Let us take an example of the second point: in teaching courses on marriage and the other Sacraments in the past few years, we had frequent occasion to discuss the proposition: "Whatever my conscience says is right, is right." While this is in some sense a legitimate outcry against the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church's authority over conscience, at the same time it neglects a consideration of the sociality of man and the social process involved in conscience formation. A person's conscience is formed not only by his individual experiences, but also by the experiences of the society and culture in which he lives; in fact his experiences are filtered through culture and society so that he sees them from a point of view largely created by culture and

7. A misleading error in Leslie Dewart's fascinating book, *The Future of Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), is his failure to make a distinction between the transcendence of God and the transcendence of man.

society. There is, moreover, an interplay and creative tension between one's subjective experiences (what happens to the individual person) and one's objective experiences (what one sees happening to others). Thus, at least a partial norm of morality for the individual Christian is the (Christian) community in which he lives. It is a norm because man is fundamentally shaped by this community; partial, because moral values evolve precisely by individuals transcending the norms of their society and culture. At the same time that it is not a complete norm, it is one that could be profitably applied to some of the perplexing moral questions facing the concerned Christian today: what do his fellow Christians, with equal or greater insight, think of his particular moral dilemma?

The point, however, of this long illustration is this: the message never got across! What is most frustrating to the teacher is not when a student disagrees, but when he has not heard enough to disagree! This is somewhat the same dilemma facing the teacher when he tries to show the student that to wrestle with God today, he must talk metaphysically. The attempt to bring students to talk metaphysically of God meets with resistance.

This brings us to the second point: lack of a concept of God. This lack may explain why the student is "turned off" by metaphysical talk about God, although he finds it challenging when it is about man. God is not meaningful, relevant; he is no longer exciting.<sup>8</sup> He appears to play no part in the life of man and the tremendous enterprise of world reconstruction facing him today. In one way or another, most of us can empathize with this.

Two observations are in order. On the one hand, we do not sufficiently appreciate that most of what is truly worthwhile in life must be *made* relevant, meaningful, and exciting through our own creative effort — art, literature, study of man and society, etc., — because meaning is not something given to man today. He creates meaning and value for himself and others. Thus, strenuous effort and a generous expenditure of energy is

8. Perhaps "exciting" is valid, more up to date translation of Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (John W. Harvey, translator; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

required of all of us, the student included, if we are to confront the problem of God.

On the other hand, we suffer from a paucity of concepts of God. We know what we do not like, but we are not so sure of what we do like. We do not find much appeal in the image of God as father, since man has come of age. We do not find appealing the concept of God as ruler, since man is autonomous. We find grave difficulty imagining God as acting in history, especially as depicted in the historical books of the Old Testament, because we do not see evidence of his activity today. We are not moved by a God who will reward us with happiness in the next life, because we are concerned with this life which we find to be challenging, beautiful, and meaningful. Supreme Being, Creator, object of ultimate concern frequently fail also to awaken our religious sentiments.

The rejection of certain concepts of God developed and accepted in previous ages as lacking in meaning today is a cause of sincere religious disturbance to many. What we fail to realize sufficiently, though we are frequently at least subliminally aware of it, is that the concept of God has evolved, developed — and let us say it — *changed* through the course of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. One is hard pressed at times to show the identity between the God depicted in certain parts of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament. This is disturbing to many since it raises the question of the immutability of God, sacrosanct at least since the days of Aquinas, the unchangeable nature of truth, and the defined statements of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

The question whether God changes or not will not occupy our thinking in this article, fascinating though it may be. Let us approach the question from a somewhat different point of view, a point of view, I would hazard to say, which would seem to be acceptable to many “secularists” in the world today. If God is God, then the richness of his personality must be exceedingly great and should challenge us to think creatively and extravagant-

9. For a discussion of the last two statements within the context of Catholic theology, see Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief*, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–121.

ly about him and to discover those features of his personality that most attract us and show the most promise for further development. Here another illustration provided by a student comes to mind. Last year in a course on marriage, we had a woman sociologist, married ten years with five children, lecture on married life. During the discussion period, one of the students presented a question of concern to many today: "Don't you get bored with one another after so many years of living together?" She replied that in general this had not been her experience, since she had found that there are always new interesting aspects of the other's personality revealed in the day to day process of living together and interacting with one another. A splendid answer! What she did not mention was that this requires effort, a dogged determination on the part of both. A deep and abiding love, like meaning, value, relevance, does not happen. We create it!

Perhaps an even more mysterious phenomenon of the human person, besides the fact that his personality is never completely discovered either by himself or the other, is that he appears differently to different people and in different circumstances. To his wife, for example, he is a gentle, thoughtful husband; to his children, a somewhat stern disciplinarian; to his associates, a shrewd, rather ruthless business man. One man may be rather quiet and reserved in the context of the home, but the life of the party at a social gathering. He is fundamentally the same person, yet he sometimes reveals both to himself and to others paradoxical character traits in the circumstances composing the texture of his life. These circumstances bring to the surface various potentials of the individual personality. For example, a successful teacher who has taught well-organized, clearly structured courses for years, has had splendid relations with his students and peers, is chosen for an important administrative post on the basis of his past record. Experience shows us that we can never be sure how he will fare as an administrator and what characteristics of himself he will reveal until he has dynamically interacted with this new set of circumstances.

This is not to say that a somewhat integrated picture of one-



self or the other is impossible, but rather that it is difficult and a never-ending task. Moreover, the attempt, as we all know, to describe ourselves or a loved one to someone who has not shared our experience produces only meagre results. Language is a well-developed tool for depicting the universal, but it breaks down when it attempts to verbalize the particular, the unique. Here we frequently rely on un verbalized experience and intuition.

Have we drifted too far afield from the concept of God? I don't think so. If God is truly "personal," then there is an endless richness of personality that can never be exhausted or fully discovered in much the same way as the richness of the human person can never be fully unfolded to our eyes. It is a disastrous mistake either for theology or personal piety to think that one concept, e.g., *Ens Supremum*, I am who am, Father, Ultimate Ground of Being, Lord of history, or a host of other concepts can ever adequately or definitively exhaust the personality of God. Thomas Aquinas caught this divine feature when he observed that it was far easier to say what God is not (*via negativa*) than to say what he is (*via positiva*). Some of these concepts of God may seem self-contradictory to us, as is the case with the human person, but our inability at a particular moment to reconcile them does not *ipso facto* invalidate them. Perhaps we have failed to realize that we can reap an abundant harvest of insight from the inconsistencies of the human mind.

An approach to thinking about God of this type has two practical applications: certain concepts of God's personality will be more appealing, meaningful, exciting to particular periods in the history of the world's development. What then happens to "objective truth?" The term is a misnomer. We realize today that concept and judgment are not totally objective; they are the result produced by the mind confronting reality not statically, but in a dynamic, creative way. The mind produces concepts and forms judgments not by mirroring reality, but by interacting with it. Thus, a concept is a happy or unhappy mixture, depending upon its success in imparting understanding to the mind, of the objective and subjective.

This is clearly shown, for example, in the theology of the Eu-

charist. Trent explained it by means of categories prevalent in the culture of that time. Transubstantiation became the summarizing word. Today, many of the better theologians explain it by using Transignification as the summary word. Both terms are products of a particular historical period. Both are "true," but the latter more appealing and relevant, since it is the result of the mind of today, formed by the culture in which we live, confronting the dynamic, continuing presence of Christ in the Eucharist and trying to make it not only understandable, but meaningful to people of this day and age.<sup>10</sup>

We are not saying that all truth is totally subjective in the sense that there is no such thing as error, for this would be to fall into the same pitfall as those who complacently assert that whatever my conscience says is right is right. We are saying: (1) that the mind is not a mirror; rather it is the product of a particular age and culture. (2) This culturally and socially conditioned mind confronts reality, interacts with it, and attempts to explain it in a meaningful, but never exhaustive way. Aquinas caught this mood well when he wrote: "Quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur."

Today, for example, many people find it meaningful and productive of an interpersonal relation with God to think of him as the one to whom I am responsible. I stand before God as a free man with the responsibility of making myself into a total, integrated, autonomous, socially aware human being. God becomes the core inspiration of my life, the all-pervading atmosphere that touches everything I am and do. This concept is certainly different from, at tension with, and perhaps even at odds with, some of the more traditional notions that would compare man to the lilies of the field — totally dependent on God for every breath he breathes. One may explain this paradox with an analogy from human relations. The man of twenty-five has a different way of thinking of his father, of explaining the latter's role in his life

10. E. Schillebeeckx in his book *The Eucharist* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968) concludes from his analysis of Scripture and Trent that there are two unchanging features of this belief: (1) Christ is truly present in the Eucharist; (2) He is present as the result of a change in the bread and wine.

than he had when he was a boy of ten or twelve. The latter concept of his father has in a very real sense ceased to be true and has given way to, evolved into, a new understanding as the result of the continuing dynamic relationship between father and son.

The second practical application is this: just as on the social and cultural level, certain concepts of God will emerge in different societies and cultures as the more meaningful way to explain God, so on the more personal level, the individual must search out and strive to create the image(s) of God that makes him meaningful, relevant, and exciting. Does this mean that we will all end up worshipping different Gods? I don't think so. The basic unity and identity of the person of God remains, but we see him and he communicates himself to us in a variety of ways in much the same way as no one of us sees the other person in the same light. In fact two people see the other sometimes in ways that strike us at least as paradoxical, at most as contradictory. This is due to the complexity of the human person and the dynamic interplay that creates human relations. If this is true of ourselves, why should it not also be true of God? A God whom we totally understood would be boring and in the last analysis not God at all. The contradictory may be something we strive to eliminate from the area of the sciences, but it can be quite fruitful for understanding and appreciation in the arena of human relations.

Today we are sensitive to the effort it takes to know ourselves and the other person. If part of this creative effort could be channelled in the direction of understanding the otherness of God, it would augur well for the future of personal piety, theology, and Christianity. This would require an openness of mind and a spirit of introspection and inquiry that, despite the fresh air of Vatican II, we have yet to achieve in the Roman Catholic Church, especially among the clergy.

It would be interesting in a theology class or discussion group to begin by prescinding from the question of the existence of God and to launch into an attempt to ferret out what people think God would be like if he did exist.<sup>11</sup> If this proved to be

11. The author has never attempted this, but he will make a serious

successful, it would naturally flow into a discussion of "disclosure situations." E. Schillebeeckx in *God the Future of Man* describes them in these terms: "... the existential situation in which what can be directly experienced empirically discloses and evokes something deeper than that which is immediately experienced, something that reveals precisely the deeper basis and condition of possibility of the secular event."<sup>12</sup> This is, of course metaphysical talk with all the incumbent difficulties, since it is an effort to explain certain experiences in one's life that may not be totally explainable within the order of empirical reality and, therefore, may demand an appeal to a transcendent order. Secondly, the use of disclosure situations is clearly an attempt to move from the order of thought and concept to that of existence: if I begin by asking myself what I think God to be, if he exists, I naturally move on to a consideration of those experiences in my life which have been instrumental in or responsible for the formation of my idea of God. I have then uncovered the potential disclosure situations in my life. By examining them I try to discover whether I am able to make the leap from thinking about God to recognizing him as real, as a person present in my life.

It is unreal to expect, however, that these disclosure situations will ordinarily overwhelm us with a conviction of the presence and existence of God. They will not free us from the responsibility of taking the existential leap of faith or deciding that such a leap is not warranted by my personal experience. Other persons can, of course, help me to analyze and synthesize the various potential disclosure situations available to me, but this type of personal theologizing does not allow me to sit back and let the other convince me of the reality of God. It puts the burden of the responsibility of making this decision where it belongs — squarely on my own shoulders. Strangely, one meets many today, especially among the younger generation, who relish the new freedom in the order of morality, but still shy away from the personal effort in this direction during the coming school year. See Michael Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain and Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

12. E. Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (N.D. Smith, translator; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 74.

theologizing necessary to wrestle with God in our times. As a result, they have a tendency to drift around two peripheries, those of theism and atheism, without committing themselves to either orbit. I am not implying that a commitment either to theism or atheism must be a final irrevocable decision, since it sometimes happens that the only way we can discover we have made the wrong decision is by making it.

One of the most appealing and fascinating of these potential disclosure situations in today's secular culture is man's feeling of responsibility and his desire to grow in this responsibility — responsibility for himself and for his fellow man. Many men today — and their number is growing — realize that, given the breakdown in authoritatively and socially imposed values, they are called on to create their own values. Moreover, they are not as readily inclined as some seem to think to assert peremptorily that whatever values they do create are necessarily "true," meaningful, humanly justified values. They do attempt to discriminate between "true" and "false" values.<sup>13</sup> We are witness to all sorts of attempts in the area of value-creation and value-discrimination: sensitivity training groups, youth communes, interracial adoptions, peace movements, demonstrations, etc.

If anything today, we are overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of the responsibility we feel towards ourselves and others. The problems and questions concerned with ethnic cultures, developing nations, cities, environment, poverty, war stagger the mind and the imagination, but do not tempt us to give up the world as a lost cause. Even the most "traditional" among us must rejoice at most movements today, if not at their methods at least at their goals, since they incarnate the New Testament teaching of love of neighbor as the ultimate goal in life.

The crucial question is: do the empirically available and verifiable data at our disposal suffice to explain the phenomenology of responsibility? Or do the data make us wonder about the possibility of a transcendent order of reality? Such questions as

13. It would take us too far afield to discuss all of the criteria used in this discriminatory process. The point is that the desire is present and present strongly.

these must be sifted and answered. Are we responsible because we fear for our own survival, because of the prestige attached to this quality, because it is a way of earning a living, because we feel guilty, etc.? Or are we acting in this way because we recognize the other as another "I"? And if we do, why do we feel<sup>14</sup> this way? Are we responsible because we take literally the meaning of responsibility — to respond to someone? to someone perhaps who transcends this order of reality, before whom we stand responsible for our own creation and the creation of others?<sup>15</sup> Only I, in the last analysis, can say why I feel a certain way. Others can strike a responsive or unresponsive cord in my heart by the presenting of their own visions and motivational forces, but this is no substitute, in the final analysis, for my own personal activity.

It would be presumptuous to select any of the above questions and transform them into apodictic answers explaining the phenomenon of responsibility. Suffice it to say that (to talk metaphysically) it seems that the basis of responsibility must be found outside of the one who feels and to whom he feels responsible. Otherwise, we are somewhat hard put to explain phenomenologically why we feel responsibility towards our enemies or those whom we do not know. To say it is our common human nature is to talk metaphysically; one must perforce go on to try to explain the communality of this nature. The death of God theologians face a similar difficulty in their claim that, while God has died, Jesus remains the paradigm of human life and existence. The decisive question remains unanswered: why is he exemplar of human life and not some other illustrious, virtuous man of history?

One may argue in a similar vein regarding modern man's firm

14. "Feel" is here used with the same meaning as Allport's "sentiment." See note 1.

15. Let us Christians not be so condescending as to call those people who give answers satisfactory to us "anonymous Christians." The reality expressed by the term is valid enough; the term itself, however, is presumptuous and bespeaks a lack of respect of the other. Let us call a man by the name he himself has chosen. This is consonant with the Biblical tradition, since in the Old Testament to bestow a name upon someone is to exercise power over that person.

conviction that he must create himself into a worthwhile human being. While it is admitted that values evolve and change and will continue to do so, the criterion we frequently use, without being consciously aware of it, to decide between a true and false value, is what at this moment of history is the human thing to do. This implies at least an unchanging aspect of man's nature, a core that, while modified by the flow of time, remains basically unchanged. If this is so, how do we explain it?

These preceding paragraphs may be too tendentious, too "dogmatic" for some. They are not meant to be; they are posed for possible inquiry and reflection by the individual. We should examine phenomenologically and metaphysically modern man's growing feeling of responsibility and attempt to explain it. The same must be said of all other potential disclosure situations in our lives.<sup>16</sup> Only in this way can we satisfy the rigorous demands that the dynamism of our being makes upon us. Moreover, if we are not willing to struggle with the problem of God, then willy-nilly we should confess that there is no problem for us and we no longer share a widespread concern of many in the world today.

16. See, for example, E. Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, pp. 74 ss.; Berger, *op. cit.*, pp. 47 ss.; Karl Rahner, *Est-il possible aujourd'hui de croire?*; Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder), pp. 70 ss.