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Poetry and the Question of God

Richard M Liddy, Seton Hall University

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Poetry and the Question of God

Msgr. Richard M. Liddy
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

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When I was young, I thought a lot about the proofs for the existence of God – Thomas Aquinas’ five proofs, for example. Since then - the matter having been settled to my satisfaction in innumerable ways - I no longer worry about such proofs.

Still, many today are as I was – questioning, tentative, oscillating. And for such folk I would point to the very fact that we keep raising this question of God. And by “we” I mean, not just you and me, but poets, writers and thoughtful folk in general – such as the poets we read in the Paul Mariani seminar.

Even though some people claim to be agnostic or atheist – and there can be a conscious decision not to raise the question - for others the question of God keeps resurfacing. The resurgence of religion in formerly communist countries is just one example.

And so we can ask “Why?” “What does this question really mean?” For questions point to answers and, as Plato pointed out, well-phrased questions are shadowy anticipations of their answers. If we did not have such questions, we would not be able to say, “Yes! That’s it! That’s what I’ve been searching for!” Without questions we would not recognize answers as answers.

Sometimes, of course, we can raise the wrong question, or formulate it in a way that makes it impossible to answer. Still, recognizing that is usually a breakthrough to a whole new way of questioning.

More important than proofs, then – and I do believe there are valid proofs for the existence of God - is turning one’s attention to the dynamism of our own questioning; for that dynamism “is” an open question, a question that heads for God. In coming to terms with the infinitely open question that we are, we are virtually all the way home.

That is why poets are so important. Among other subjects, poets are continually painting expressions of the moods and experiences in which the question of meaning is articulated. Not always answering the question, they emphasize the many ways in which the question finds expression. Always it is a question of transcendence, of going beyond – even beyond this world, the world of clear and distinct answers, to the significance and meaning of our very searching beyond.

For of such searching we can ask: does not our unlimited searching imply an answer to such searching? Does not our very questioning presuppose that the world is intelligible, and if it is intelligible, that there is MIND at its root?
But why should the answers that satisfy the intelligence of the subject yield anything more than a subjective satisfaction? Why should they be supposed to possess any relevance to knowledge of the universe? Of course, we assume that they do. We can point to the fact that our assumption is confirmed by its fruits. So implicitly we grant that the universe is intelligible and, once that is granted, there arises the question whether the universe could be intelligible without having an intelligent ground.¹

Similarly, do our questions for judgment – is this so? Is that so? – presuppose an absolute Being at the root of the contingencies of our world?

And do our value questions – “Is this good? – and that bad?…this to be embraced and that abhorred?” - do such questions presuppose a basic Goodness at the core of our universe? As Bernard Lonergan puts it:

To deliberate about x is to ask whether x is worth while. To deliberate about deliberating is to ask whether any deliberating is worth while. Has "worth while" any ultimate meaning? Is moral enterprise consonant with this world?

Obviously, we are always praising and blaming. But the question can be asked whether the universe is “on our side”…

...or are we just gamblers and, if we are gamblers, are we not perhaps fools, individually struggling for authenticity and collectively endeavoring to snatch progress from the ever mounting welter of decline?...

Does there or does there not necessarily exist a transcendent, intelligent ground of the universe? Is that ground or are we the primary instance of moral consciousness? Are cosmogenesis, biological evolution, historical process basically cognate to us as moral beings or are they indifferent and so alien to us?

All these questions presuppose “the spark in our clod,” the fire within that heads toward the Fire. And so, no matter the concrete answers given to these questions, still at their core there is the drive of the human spirit toward unlimited questioning, including the implications of such unlimited questioning.

Paul Mariani’s workshop on “The Call of Poetry” pointed to this question of the Beyond present in the writings of five very modern – indeed postmodern – poets. For some, this question was explicitly the question of “God” with whom at times they wrestled – Hopkins’

…birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

(Girard Manley Hopkins, “Thou art indeed just, Lord”)

¹
For others this question was allusive. Still, the question, wrapped up in the meaning of their own existence, found expression in the feeling-packed images arising from their own human experience.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  
(Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West)

After centuries of apparently exclusive attention to the “this worldly” – in the West as in the formerly Communist world – the question re-surfaces among some of our most perceptive writers. Scratching the surface of our apparently secularist culture, our Moslem brothers and sisters might find in many of our writers a profound openness to religious truth. In our post-9/11 world the question of transcendence re-surfaces through the cement streets of our sometimes crude secularism.

For Augustine of Hippo this restlessness at the core of the human spirit pointed to an ultimate Rest. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” For Thomas Aquinas, not just our hearts but our very minds are restless. Radically capable of asking any question – “potens omnia fieri” – our minds are essentially the desire to know God as fully as it is possible for a creature to know the Creator. The medievals called it “the beatific vision,” the “super-natural” fulfillment of our natural desire to know. We have a desire to know that which goes beyond our capabilities.

So even through centuries of cultural alienation, the question of transcendence continues to re-appear. Unwilling to be in a world “without hope and without God” (Paul to the Ephesians), some intellectuals continue to point to this question. In a world that would distract us and keep our focus on the this-worldly (“one earns one’s money this way”), outstanding poets continue to express the everyday moods and feelings in which the very question arises. In spite of living in a world that “wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell,” still

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.  
(Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”)

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

MSGR. RICHARD M. LIDDY

1 Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 101-103.