

MODERN LIFE,
ANCIENT GOD

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ANCIENT GOD

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN THE AGE OF SCIENCE

THIRD EDITION

Steve Nichols

Foreword by E. Glenn Hinson

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To the memory of my mother and father,
Mary Alice and Nick,
who started me down the path.

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FOREWORD

Seventy years ago, as a second-year student at Washington University in St. Louis, I yearned to read a book like this, the story of a medical doctor's struggle to maintain his faith in a world nothing like the one the Bible portrays. Up to that point, I had not taken faith very seriously. The family I was born into created more confusion than conviction. My father was an alcoholic. When sober, he was an atheist; when drunk, he was a fundamentalist. My mother looked for resources to cope with her disintegrating marriage in Spiritualism and its contact with the world of the recently departed. What prompted me to start taking religion seriously was the deep but simple faith of my aunt and uncle, who invited me to live with them when I moved to St. Louis to attend Washington University. They lived their faith, and example is hard to escape.

After a couple of years of exposure to the authentic piety of my aunt and uncle, I got more actively involved in the Baptist church they attended. Members of the church had modest education and, accordingly, seldom questioned the fundamentalist sermons of the pastor. To my great benefit, some of the leaders found places for me to speak or teach, increasing my interest in issues of faith. In my first year at Washington University, they asked me

to teach a class of teenage boys, and in the next year a fairly large college-age class. Quite shockingly, because I had no thought of becoming a minister, the youth of the church elected me to preach the sermon on youth Sunday, although the church had five or six candidates for ordination. The deepening of faith that came with teaching precipitated a crisis: How could I reconcile the narrow, naïve faith that I taught the youth with the mind-blowing, world-encompassing things I was learning at Washington University? By the last half of my second year, this question had enmeshed me in a deep and intractable crisis of faith.

Early on, with some trepidation, I sometimes took one or two of my questions to the pastor, but after a few “You believe that, you’ll go straight to hell” responses, I stopped consulting him. Instead, I looked for help in the university, apart from my political science major. Huston Smith, a son of Methodist missionaries, taught two classes that I thought might help—*Religions of Mankind*, which I audited, and *Philosophy of Religion*, which I took for credit. In the former, I read Smith’s popular *Religions of Mankind* in manuscript in the university library. In the latter, I wrestled with what was becoming for me the question: In the world my university training was introducing me to, how does God fit into the picture? Having no background either in religion or philosophy, I was not well equipped to get a lot out of those classes, but one quotation of Smith’s father-in-law, Henry Nelson Wieman, jolted my religious sensitivities like a thunderbolt: “We ought to live each moment as if all Eternity

converged upon it.”¹ “Yes! Yes!” I thought, “Eternity is converging upon this moment.” Unanswered was how I could live with my senses attuned to Eternity when they exhausted themselves with attention to the Now. As you will suspect if you know my story, I have spent my life trying to answer that question and help others answer it.

As Youth Minister and then Interim Pastor the summer after my first year at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, I focused the youth on how they could believe in God in the world depicted for them in their schooling. I evidently gave much attention to faith and evolution, for that became one of the major fundamentalist points of attack against me years later. When I recommended one of my PhD students at Southern to serve as pastor of that church, one woman organized a campaign against him with the charge, “When Glenn Hinson preached here, he taught evolution”—the word “evolution” spat out. Eighty-five percent of the congregation voted to call him anyway, but sensing a battle just ahead, he declined to accept the call.

That very year, 1955, the first of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s writings was published. Had they appeared sooner, especially *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*, I would have taken a leap forward in my quest to understand how I could believe in God and yet accept the picture of the universe presented by science. Early in my third year at Washington University, I spent many sleepless nights asking whether I could go on believing given what I was learning. One night, I awakened at 2:00 a.m. from a fitful slumber. I felt an awesome sense of Presence,

and John 8:32 was burning in my mind: “And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” From that thought, there rolled over me like a tide what I yearned most to hear: “If God is truth, then nothing you discover by any legitimate means of inquiry will negate that. The truth that matters is personal, and only you can decide whether to live your life from the vantage point that the world is not merely moving at random, but that an Ultimate Personal Reality, God, is at the heart of things.” Free at last! Free to learn! Free to soak up all the knowledge of this universe I could! I could sleep to that.

The Wieman quote kept whirling around in my mind as I contemplated how I could “live each moment as if all Eternity converged upon it.” I expected seminary study to help me there, and it did to a certain degree. Yet I didn’t find a really satisfactory answer until I started teaching church history at Southern Seminary and took my first class to the Abbey of Gethsemani in November 1960. I didn’t take them to meet Thomas Merton, about whom I knew little at that time, but to expose them to the Middle Ages. Merton was our bonus. After he talked to us about life in the monastery, he asked if we had any questions. One of the seventy-five students asked what I feared one would ask. I can’t recall his exact words, but the sense of it was: “Why is a smart fellow like you throwing his life away in a place like this?” I waited for Tom to open his mouth and eat that guy alive. But he didn’t. With an impish grin, he said, “I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation.” You could have knocked me over with a feather. I had never met anyone who believed

in prayer enough to think of it as a vocation. All the way back to Southern Seminary that was on my mind alongside the Protestant rubric, “God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no voice but our voice.” And I realized that Thomas Merton and his fellow monks might have an answer to the way we may “live each moment as if all Eternity converged upon it.” I prayed that it might be so, that prayer mattered that much.

As I have learned from the Gospels, Thomas Merton, Douglas Steere, Teilhard de Chardin, and study of the contemplative tradition, prayer is, above all, attentiveness to God in all of life. God is not “out there,” removed from the world and ourselves. Our human challenge is to see and to listen—not easy to do in a world that does its best to distract us from what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the Beyond in our midst”² and Douglas Steere characterized as “that Love which is at the heart of things.”³ Jesus, remember, taught the disciples and us that the kingdom of God, by which I think he meant “God’s Mysterious Presence,” is near, among you or within you (entos, Luke 17: 21), and not “out there.” And I think that is what Dr. Nichols’ autobiography reiterates in such an honest, open, and yet profound way.

In this fine autobiography, a medical doctor and psychiatrist takes us on his quest to see how faith in the God we know through ancient scriptures can enter into the life of a person trained in modern science, as the title of his book—*Modern Life, Ancient God*—hints.

Making this transition gives no credence to a literal interpretation of the Bible or the assumption of some

inerrantists, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” No. No. The great challenge, Dr. Nichols makes clear, is to get to know the God to whom the ancients bore witness in their own languages and science and worldview and to translate that into our languages and science and worldview. What enables us to do that? Through the centuries, people of faith in all religions have relied especially on three media to get to know God—nature, history, and their own lives. These surely give us some insight into how an “ancient God” can still speak to “modern life.” As to nature, you know Psalm 19: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Psalm 19:1-4). I should think this kind of listening and seeing would mesh well with a psychiatrist’s vocation, for, if we really see and listen, we can discern intimations of God in the lives of human beings as well as in the world around us.

Still, we do not have to rely on our own experience alone. Through the centuries, saints have given testimonies about “that Love which is at the heart of things.” They have talked about God in the languages, science, philosophies, and customs of their own time and place. Thus, we confront the tremendous challenge of translation and interpretation, so that God will mean something to us in our day, with our quite different languages, science, philosophies, and customs. That is why Steve

Nichols' *Modern Life, Ancient God* has such infinite value for you and me. Here is a person who has immersed himself both in the wisdom of the Hebrew-Christian scriptures from his earliest days, and the wisdom of the world of the twenty-first century appropriated through years of study in science and medicine and practice as a psychiatrist. And he has emerged from all of his life and work with this "testament of devotion,"⁴ to cadge a phrase Douglas Steere invented to describe the inspired speeches and writings of Thomas R. Kelly.

That is what this book is: "a testament of devotion." If you want to learn about the God at the heart of this universe of 150 billion galaxies who is also present in your heart and mind and life, as the saints have testified through the ages, begin here.

E. Glenn Hinson
Louisville, KY
May 2021

NOTES

¹ As reported by Huston Smith.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, The Enlarged Edition edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: A Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1997), 282.

³ A favorite phrase of Douglas Steere's, as reported by E. Glenn Hinson.

⁴ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941). After Kelly's death, the publication of his book was overseen by Steere.

PREFACE

I grew up in church and in the modern world outside of church. By my late teens, I was trying to integrate my religious and secular lives into a unified whole. I had discovered the problem of religion and the modern mind. I experienced this problem both theoretically and practically. How do I fashion a worldview consistent with my religious heritage *and* modern science? And how do I recognize God's Presence in my everyday secular life?

Some people adopt a religious position that they defend against all secular input. Other people do the opposite, casting their lot with the secular against everything religious. Raised on both sides of the cultural division into secular and sacred, I internalized both, and chose the path of reconciliation. It proved to be far more difficult than I anticipated.

One of my physics professors used to say, "Sometimes we go all the way around the world to get to the back of our hand." I often felt that way as my faith journey over many years carried me further and further afield. At times I despaired, uncertain how to proceed. I present this story of my faith, and faith rediscovered, in the hope that it will provide encouragement to others.

For this third edition, the main text was reedited from scratch. It's the same story, with more specificity and less clutter. Meanwhile the appendix, containing questions others have asked—along with my answers, was expanded.

I considered moving the questions and answers to the end of their corresponding chapters. They can still be read in conjunction with each chapter. But hopefully, in appendix form, they'll serve as a useful summary of the book, while also enlarging upon its perspective.

Why not rework the main text to include the material in the appendix? The story itself is elemental, stripped down to the bare essentials, an ultra-distillate. Having achieved this concentrated statement of my spiritual life, I am loath to dilute it.

The addition of Glenn's foreword to this third edition has special significance. As the reader will discover, it brings closure to events from over forty years ago, when I was a college senior and still wet behind the ears.