

The Presence Of Ultimacy

by Fritz Guy

To the extent that a religious symbol “participates in that to which it points,”¹ the Sabbath is invested with the relatedness and the ultimacy of God. This means that to experience the Sabbath is to affirm these two qualities of God, and to deliberately disregard the Sabbath symbolizes a denial of them. According to Adventist theology, a misrepresentation of the nature of God’s relatedness and ultimacy was the very point over which the “great controversy” began in the first place, and over which sin was first actualized in our world.²

God’s relatedness and ultimacy are a theological polarity³ — a pair of elements or ideas that mutually complement and at the same time mutually limit each other. Other examples of this kind of polarity in our understanding of God include the threeness and oneness of the Trinity, and the humanity and deity of Jesus. In each instance, the meaning of one element of the polarity can be adequately understood only in relation to the other. So the idea of the relatedness of God to

human being makes sense only in connection with the idea of the ultimacy of God — and vice versa. Both elements of this polarity, along with the polarity itself, are symbolized by the Sabbath.

Characteristically, each religious symbol has a dual function. It represents something other (and more) than itself, and it also represents that “other” (and “more”).⁴ Thus the “meaning” and the “experience” of the symbol are inseparable in actuality, even if it is sometimes useful to distinguish them theoretically in order to talk about them one at a time in the interest of clarity. The Lord’s Supper, for instance, as a symbol of atonement refers back to the death of Jesus as a historical event, but it is also a means by which we can now encounter, and experience more deeply, the significance of that event for our own religious life. Similarly, as a symbol of the relatedness and ultimacy of God, the Sabbath both points to these two qualities and is a means by which they can be experienced.

We can readily identify four expressions of God’s relatedness to human being, as described in the biblical revelation. All of these expressions are comprised in the idea of a “living God,”⁵ and all of them are symbolized by the Sabbath.

Fritz Guy, professor of theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, received his doctorate at the University of Chicago. He is former associate editor of the *Youth’s Instructor* and of SPEC-TRUM.

1) The initial expression of the relatedness of God is the original *creation*. At first glance, creation might seem to be a unilateral, one-way affair: obviously, the Creator is active, and the created reality is acted upon. But this view turns out to be too simple. For it can hardly be supposed that what God has created does not matter to Him — as if He had no interest in the consequences of His creativity. Furthermore, whatever God creates, He allows to be itself. He lets it have its own integrity and dignity, and so it has the potential of affecting not only other created reality but even its Creator. This is particularly the case in the creation of personal, free being, such as angelic or human reality.

As every reader of the Old Testament knows, the first theological meaning of the Sabbath is its celebration of God's creative activity.⁶ This meaning is evident at the very beginning of the story of humanity, in the designation of the Sabbath as part of the creation of our world. Although the creation narrative itself includes no explicit statement that every seventh day is to be a Sabbath for human being, this intention is surely implied in the affirmation that "God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it" (Gen. 2:3). Otherwise, this particular blessing and sanctification of a day would have no meaning or relevance. In any case, the fourth commandment of the decalogue bases the significance of the Sabbath squarely on the fact that "in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day" (Ex. 20:11). And a little later in the narrative, God is quoted as saying that the Sabbath is "a sign between me and the people of Israel, that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth" (Ex. 31:17).

The Sabbath is thus a weekly symbol and celebration of the fact that God is directly related to the world by His own free, deliberate act of creation. This fact is important not only for what it says about the world, which has value and is "good" because it is the result of God's own creativity, but also for what it says about God. His creative intention is actualized in the production of a kind of reality that is distinct and different from Himself

and yet "in His own image" (Gen. 1:27). A free God has created human being with the awesome liberty to reject and defy its Creator.

2) God's relatedness to human being is also expressed in His *presence* in human existence. God did not create humanity and then leave it alone. He wanted to be with it and to be actively present in its life. This presence occurs in several different modes and is visible at different points of human experience.

The various modes of God's general, continuing and comprehensive presence may be seen in such things as (a) the maintenance of the "natural order" of physical, chemical and biological processes that are the necessary condition for human life; (b) the corporate experience of worship, "where two or three are gathered" in Christ's name (Matt. 18:20); and (c) the ministry of the Holy Spirit in individual human minds.

The various modes of God's special, particular presence, also may be seen (a) in certain historical events, especially in the history of Israel and the earliest Christian community; (b) in places of special sacredness, such as the Hebrew tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem; (c) in the ancient prophetic ministry of persons like Hosea, Jeremiah and John the Baptist, and in the more recent prophetic ministry of Ellen White; and (d) in miracles of many kinds, both biblical and modern.

The one absolutely unique mode of God's presence in human existence is the mission of Jesus as "God with us" (Matt. 1:22-23). God is God not only in creating a million blazing galaxies, but also (and especially) in being with the personal reality He has created and in making His presence known.

As a day of rest, of liberation from the secular pressures and mundane duties that crowd the previous six days, the Sabbath is a day for worship, for celebrating God's presence. "Six days shall work be done; but on the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work; it is a sabbath to the Lord in all your dwellings" (Lev. 23:3).

The Sabbath is an opportunity to *recognize* God's presence, to become more acutely aware of it in its various general and special

modes. It brings with it God's love for, and His claim on, human being. In this way, the primal relationship of the Creator and the created reality is continued and also enriched as it is actualized in ever new ways. God is known not merely as the original architect, engineer and builder, but also as the source of energy, the incentive for activity. The Sabbath is also an opportunity to *reflect on* the implications of this presence for the nature and meaning of our own existence — for its security and its possibilities. And the Sabbath is an opportunity to *respond to* the presence of God in profound gratitude for this grace and in decision to shape our future to be an appropriate expression of our gratitude.

“For the fact of the matter is that human being, individually and collectively, can be genuinely ‘in love with the seventh day,’ having discovered that the Sabbath is ‘a palace in time . . . the climax of living.’ ”

It is in this sense — as a day of liberation for worship that is the fullest possible experience of God's presence — that “the Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:28). In another sense, however, it is not merely an *opportunity* to recognize, reflect on and respond to God's presence; the Sabbath is *itself* a recognition and reflection of, and a response to, the presence of God in human existence.

3) Yet another expression of God's relatedness to human being is His *commitment* to humanity and its fulfillment. This commitment is initially suggested in the cessation of fundamental creative activity on the planet Earth after the creation of human being.⁷ The basic process of creation was complete; it had reached its goal, and God was perfectly satisfied with the result. “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). So God “rested” — in somewhat the same sense that a lawyer “rests” when he has completed the presentation of his case to the judge and jury.

The commitment becomes explicit in the covenant relationship, which is repeatedly expressed in the biblical formulation, “I am your God, and you are my people.”⁸ As human marriage was intended to be, so God's creation of humanity was in fact — not an experiment to “see what will happen,” but instead a total commitment to “make a go of it,” “for better or for worse.” And when the “worse” occurred, God's commitment led Him to give “his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The Sabbath is a symbol of this covenant-commitment between God and human being. “The people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant” (Ex. 31:16).⁹ But a covenant with God is a special kind of covenant. It is never made *a priori*; it is never the first word, the initiation of a relationship. Any covenant with God is made, rather, *a posteriori*; it is always a second word, so to speak, a consequence of a relationship that has already been established by God's own initiative and commitment. And this is the way it is with the covenant symbol of the Sabbath:¹⁰ “You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you” (Ex. 31:13). So, as a covenant symbol, the Sabbath may be seen not only as a sign of human beings' commitment to live in relationship to God, and thus to be “His people,” it may be seen also (and more fundamentally) as a sign of God's total and permanent commitment to human being; for this is where the covenant relationship necessarily begins.¹¹ “Hallow my sabbaths, that they may be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I, the Lord, am your God” (Ez. 20:20).

4) Finally (for this discussion), God's relatedness to humanity is expressed in His *responsiveness* to human decisions and actions. Here we have the most obvious kind of relatedness — in the fact that God's action is to some significant extent determined by the

action of human being, both collective and individual. In regard to the influence of collective human being on a historical scale, the biblical witness includes a direct word from God: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it" (Jer. 18:7-8). And conversely, "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it" (verses 9-10).

Some major illustrations of this responsiveness of God to human action come immediately to mind. Human nature being what it is, most examples are negative: the Flood, the exile of Israel, and (according to Adventist eschatology) the continuation of history into the fourth quarter of the twentieth century. Individually, the influence of human action on God's action may be less dramatic than the influence of collective action. Nonetheless, it is real and, happily, frequently positive. Whatever difficulties may be involved in understanding the effects of prayer on the outcome of human or natural events, the clear and consistent biblical evidence requires the conclusion that prayer does, in fact, result in certain kinds of divine activity that would not otherwise occur.¹²

As a celebration of creation, a day of worship and a covenant symbol, the Sabbath becomes an occasion for God's further activity in response to human decisions and actions. The Bible describes this possibility poetically:

If you turn back your foot from the sabbath,
 from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
 and call the sabbath a delight,
 and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
 if you honor it, not going your own ways,
 or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly,
 then you shall take delight in the Lord,
 and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;

I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
 for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken.
 (Isa. 58:13-14)

Now, it is possible to understand too superficially the relationship between "honoring the sabbath" and "riding upon the heights of the earth." It is possible, for example, to suppose that the connection between the two experiences is only extrinsic and therefore arbitrary, like the connection parents sometimes make between good grades in school and a monetary reward (for example, \$5 for every "A" on a semester grade report).

But such a view of the Sabbath entangles it in a form of social and economic coercion — a relation that is unworthy of the creator and unattractive to humanity. Besides, this view fails to see the religious dynamic of the Sabbath. For the fact of the matter is that human being, individually and collectively, can be genuinely "in love with the seventh day," having discovered that the Sabbath is "a palace in time," "not an interlude but the climax of living."¹³ When that happens, humanity has before it unimagined possibilities of experiencing God's creative and transforming power and unprecedented potential for spiritual development.

After a consideration of the relatedness of God, it is appropriate to put equal emphasis on the ultimacy of God. For the relatedness does not in any sense mean a relativizing or a dilution of the ultimacy. On the contrary, an understanding of the relatedness only increases our understanding of — and our admiration and respect for — the ultimacy.

The word "ultimacy" in this discussion refers to the fact that God is not only the supreme reality and value, but also the kind of reality and value beyond which nothing can even be conceptualized.¹⁴ This is the definition of deity in the classical sense of all monotheism, whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic. It implies two further, closely related ideas. One is the idea of "holiness," which is extremely difficult to define precisely,¹⁵ but which evokes the sense of awe and reverence that is regularly associated

with an awareness of the ultimate. The second idea is that of “otherness” or “beyondness” or “hiddenness.” It refers to the fact that God, although related to the world in a variety of ways, still has his own being outside the world, beyond anything and everything that is created. This fact means that the reality of God will always involve infinitely more than can be encountered or comprehended by human being.

The ultimacy of God has two principal dimensions. In the first place, God is the ultimate *reality and power*. He is the source of His own and of all other reality and power. He is neither dependent on, nor limited by, anything outside Himself. God is, in other words, eternal and omnipotent. If he were not, He would not be God. So the fact that God is related to the world and to the human being that He has created and that His activity is in some sense determined by this created reality must be understood as a *self-limitation* of God that results from His own creative intention. That is to say, the relatedness of God comes with His decision to create and is in no way imposed on Him.

An indication of this ultimacy of God may be seen in the fact that the Sabbath is a *temporal* symbol. Here it stands in contrast (but not in contradiction) to the symbols of the bread and wine, the water and basin and towel — all of which are material objects.¹⁶ In the first place, time, from which there is no escape for human being, but which defies every attempt to define it, is an especially apt symbol in relation to a God who is characterized not only by His “closeness” to human being but also his “beyondness.” In a way, therefore, the mystery of time can remind us of the mystery of God.

In the second place, time is the “material” of human existence. When “time is up,” life is over, and human being is no more. And when I give my time to something — a person, perhaps, or an endeavor — I am making an irrevocable investment; I am giving myself. A holy day is therefore an effective means by which to affirm the ultimacy of the eternal God. He is the origin of all time and the course of my own time. To Him, time is no problem, because He is the ultimate reality and power.

But God is more than the ultimate reality and power: He is also the ultimate *goodness and value*. In spite of the fact that reality and power usually seem to generate value (and therefore authority), further consideration makes it clear that this is not necessarily so. There are many familiar instances of reality without goodness, and power without value: the playground bully, the domineering spouse, the illegitimate government. So it is useful to make an explicit point of the fact that God is ultimate goodness and value, as

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well as the ultimate reality and power. This fact is most clearly evident in the special revelation communicated through the biblical documents, where it is discernible in the nature of God’s relatedness to humanity. Once recognized, it can be formulated as a theological or philosophical corollary of the Christian “good news.” In other words, the fact that “God is love” (I John 4:8) is intrinsically related to the fact that God is the ultimate goodness and value.

This second dimension of ultimacy is, on the one hand, the positive motivation for worship (in contrast to fear of God’s power), and, on the other hand, the central issue of what Adventist theology knows as “the great controversy.” It is not God’s reality or power that is challenged by the enemy, and that is finally to be vindicated for the benefit of the whole moral universe, but His ultimate goodness.

The Sabbath, as a holy day — a day of holiness — symbolizes the ultimacy of God in both of its dimensions. It reminds us of this ultimacy, sharpens our awareness of it and gives us a means to affirm it. In this connec-

tion, we can see most clearly the particular significance of the “seventh-day-ness” of the Sabbath.

Positively, to observe the Sabbath is to acknowledge and affirm the ultimacy of God, not only in terms of his reality and power, but also in terms of His goodness and value. For one thing, the seventh day is regarded as a Sabbath “to the Lord”;¹⁷ it is known as “the holy day of the Lord” (Isa. 58:13); and God is described repeatedly as referring to “my sabbaths.”¹⁸ For another thing, unlike the single day, the month and the year, the seven-day cycle has no “natural” basis. No astronomical, agricultural or physiological period gives it “practical” significance. This means that both its origin and its significance are distinctively religious: it is a command — and a gift — of God. In short, it is a way of saying “Yes” or “No” to the Creator. The “seventh-day-ness” of the Sabbath has this special meaning: it symbolizes God’s ultimacy as reality and power and as goodness and value. The dedication of every seventh day “to the Lord” is a recognition of His lordship over all of our days — which is to say, over all of our existence.¹⁹

Negatively, making the seventh day a Sabbath experience relativizes all non-transcendent values, including not only economic security and well-being but also personal and professional achievement, success and satisfaction. In this way, the Sabbath offers a useful protection against materialism and status-seeking — the twin gods of modern secularity, to whom even Christians are surprisingly (if unconsciously) obedient. For

it is a day on which both “pleasure” and “business” become unimportant. Furthermore, characteristically, humans tend to identify personal success with the ultimate good. This characteristic is true especially if we are professionally engaged in some humanitarian or religious enterprise. But the Sabbath comes to us as a powerful reminder of our createdness and relativity and as a valuable opportunity to put all of our efforts and intentions into the context and perspective of God’s ultimacy. It is a day primarily for rest and worship. It is not a day for pursuing the personal or professional business of our lives, however beneficent that business may be and however generously it may be motivated (although our motivations are probably much less generous than we like to think).

A recognition of the significance of the Sabbath as a symbol of God’s ultimacy (as reality and power, and as goodness and value) as well as His relatedness to human being (in creation, presence, commitment and responsiveness) makes it easy to understand why the experience of the Sabbath is so important in Adventist life and thought. It is not merely a distinctive religious practice; it is also a profound theological statement. This recognition explains why the establishment of another day of worship in place of the Sabbath is regarded as a crucial departure from authentic biblical religion.²⁰ It also explains the eschatological significance of the Sabbath as “the seal of the living God” (Rev. 7:2), identifying those persons who have understood the issues of the “great controversy,” have positively affirmed the ultimacy of God and are prepared for existence in an immediate relationship to God.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 42.

2. Compare Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif: Pacific Press, 1958), p. 42: “Satan . . . had sought to falsify the word of God, and had misrepresented his plan of government, claiming that God was not just in imposing laws upon the angels; that in requiring submission and obedience from his creatures, he was seeking merely the exaltation of himself.”

Outside of Adventist thought, a similar idea is put

into somewhat broader terms by C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1953), p. 92: “The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses. Even an inanimate object is what it is by excluding all other objects from the space it occupies; if it expands, it does so by thrusting other objects aside or by absorbing them. A self does the same. With beasts the form [is] eating; for us

[demons], it means the sucking of will and freedom out of a weaker self into a stronger. 'To be' means 'to be in competition.'"

3. The polarity of the relatedness and the ultimacy of God is an experiential corollary to the more general, ontological polarity of the immanence and transcendence of God, which is familiar in the classical tradition of Christian theology. Our particular interest here is with God and distinctively *human* being, rather than with God and the created universe in general.

4. Readers who are familiar with the theology of Paul Tillich may recognize a connection between the terms "representation" and "re-presentation" used here to identify the two functions of symbols, and his description of the characteristics of symbols in *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 41-43.

5. The term "living God" occurs at least 14 times in the Old Testament and 16 times in the New Testament, including the famous declaration of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

6. Ellen G. White's expositions of the Sabbath commonly emphasize its importance as a symbol ("memorial") of God's creative power and activity. See, for example, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 48, 307 and 338; *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1940), pp. 281 and 288; *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1950), pp. 54 and 436-38; *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1952), pp. 250-51.

7. Compare White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 47 and 115: "All was perfect, worthy of its divine author, and He rested, not as one weary, but as well pleased with the fruits of His wisdom and goodness and the manifestations of His glory." "As regards this world, God's work of creation is completed. For 'the works were finished from the foundation of the world' (Heb. 4:3)."

Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946), p. 82, notes that "the Hebrew word *shabat* [which is the verb "to rest"] means exclusively to be finished with an action or a situation, not to do or not to be something any more; it does not mean to rest or to leave something undone. What is involved here is in essence the completion of an activity or a function, its no-longer state."

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936-63), III-1, 214-15, sees important meaning in the fact that God ended His creative activity: "He was content with the creation of the world and man. He was satisfied to enter into *this* relationship with *this* reality distinct from Himself, to be the Creator of *this* creature, to find in *these* works of His Word the external sphere of His power and grace and the place of His revealed glory." In other words, "The reason why He refrains from further activity on the seventh day is that He has found the object of His love and has no need of any further works."

8. This formulation occurs at least 28 times: Gen. 17:7-8; Ex. 29:45-46; Lev. 26:12, 45; Deut. 14:4; 26:17-18; II Sam. 7:24; I Chron. 17:22; Isa. 51:15-16; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:38; Ez. 11:20; 36:28; 37:23, 26-27; Hos. 1:9-10; 2:23; Zech. 8:8; 13:9; Rom. 9:25-26; II Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3.

9. The close relationship between the Sabbath and the covenant is apparent also in two instances of poetic parallelism in Isaiah 56:

"To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me and hold
fast my covenant . . ." (verse 4).

"Everyone who keeps the sabbath, and does not
profane it, and holds fast my covenant . . ." (verse 6).

10. The Sabbath is not, of course, the only biblical symbol of the covenant relationship between God and human being. In the Old Testament, there is the rainbow (Gen. 9:12-13) and circumcision (Gen. 17:10-14); and in the New Testament there is the wine of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:28).

11. Compare Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), III, 350: "To those who reverence His holy day the Sabbath is a sign that God recognizes them as His chosen people. It is a pledge that He will fulfill to them His covenant. Every soul who accepts this sign of God's government places himself under the divine, everlasting covenant. He fastens himself to the golden chain of obedience, every link of which is a promise."

12. This idea occurs frequently in the teachings of Jesus. See, for example, Matt. 7:7-11; 18:19; 21:22; John 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:24.

13. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), pp. 15, 12 and 14.

14. This formulation derives from Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033-1109), *An Address (Proslogion)*, chapter 2: "a being than which none greater can be thought"; and from Boethius (480-542), *The Consolation of Philosophy*, book 3, prose 10: "Nothing better than God can be thought."

15. Herbert W. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 123, defines holiness in terms of the "glory" or "dignity" of God that "is the basis of His authority and gives Him the right to command." This definition is of particular interest here because it is offered in connection with a serious consideration of the theological implications of the Sabbath.

16. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, seems to overplay the contrast between time and space, giving a spiritual (and almost ontological) priority to time. This, it seems to me, is both unnecessary and unhelpful. While human being does tend to be obsessed with "the things of space" — that is, material objects of various sorts — the problem is not with their materiality (much less their spatiality), but with our obsession.

17. The translation "of the Lord," familiar from the King James Version, is not quite so accurate as the translation "to the Lord" that appears in the Revised Standard Version in Ex. 16:23, 25; 20:10; 31:15; 35:21; Deut. 5:14; etc.

18. Ex. 31:13; Lev. 19:3, 30; 26:2; Ez. 20:12, 20; etc.

19. Compare Matitiahu Tsevat, "The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 84 (1972), 455-58.

20. See White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 49-51 and 433-56.