

## Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

### D.H. Lawrence: Get Cracking with your Definition of God

By: Reverend Charles Brock  
September 2020



David Herbert Lawrence is one of the finest novelists of the 20th century. His mysticism is more about his relationship with nature and people rather than with God, but he gives nods to God in his own inimitable way. He had much to say in novels, poems, and essays. The following is a brief summary of his thoughts on love, religion, and the cosmos:

**Eros.** He saw Western life as a mess. It is grubby, greedy, and based on *what can I obtain now*. Even love is mechanical. He wanted to bring Eros and Agape<sup>1</sup> back into Western life and most of his stories either are dominated by this or touch on this theme. Later he wanted his vibrant version of Mexican native religion to replace lifeless Christianity.<sup>2</sup> He liked what Jesus was up to with his self-giving love (agape). He was the “supreme desireless lover.”<sup>3</sup> But he believed that Jesus didn’t go far enough and needed Eros, and in *The Man Who Died* he has Jesus coming back from the dead and

meeting a priestess of Isis (the Ancient Egyptian goddess of magic and wisdom), and through her finds partial fulfillment, splendor, ecstasy. But he doesn't stay with her long and moves on to the unknown regions.

**Reality.** He wants “*real*” life for all and fie on materialism and greedy capitalism (though Lawrence, unlike G.B. Shaw and many British writers of his day, is a firm anti-Marxist). The *sun* is a major symbol that brings true life physically and metaphorically.<sup>4</sup> The opposite is the pale Englishman, whether the Lord of the Manor (in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) or the typical American money-grubber. A northern English uneducated tempestuous miner has much more going for him than the sallow insipid Oxford-educated publisher.<sup>5</sup>

**Religion.** His last major effort was directed toward reforming the religion of the West. No task too great! “The human heart needs, needs, needs splendor, gorgeousness, pride, assumption, glory, and lordship ... perhaps even more than love ... or bread.”<sup>6</sup> Western religion has been reduced to mere morality and in his own life he rejected the way Christianity had truncated living just as most Western human relationships had ruined love. It did not reach the heights it could have especially the glories of a mystical relationship with the cosmos. He rejected his Congregationalist upbringing as narrow and mean, but he saw religion in the coal pits: “When I was a boy, I always thought a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night was a pit, with its steam, and its lights, and the burning bank – and I thought the Lord was always at the pit-top.”<sup>7</sup> But he was unable to see the degradation of miners in the UK and elsewhere, and very little of his time and energy was spent understanding how society might make their lives more equal and fairer in the economy as well as seeing to the health of the miners who suffered horribly from black lung, emphysema, etc.

**I-Thou; I-It.** This distinction made a huge impression on Western philosophy, and religion was first articulated by Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher. Lawrence has something similar that he calls I-Am; I-It. The idea is the same. The I-It relationship is mechanical, measuring, scientific, value-laden. The I-Thou relationship, whether between people, things, nature, God, is the acknowledgment of the other as authentic as oneself with an openness to the other's being at the deepest levels. A tree is an example Buber uses – one can measure, evaluate, estimate the cost, draw – or one can have a “rapport” and be changed and challenged by the tree. This is not easy to define, but most mystics know about it. “The modern physicist is on the brink of Nirvana”<sup>8</sup> in that the universe can be looked at in both I-It and I-Thou modes. Lawrence would have approved of Einstein's dictum: “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”<sup>9</sup>

**God.** There are two major conceptions of God. In general, the Western way presumes a separation and distinction between God and the world. The Eastern way is pantheistic – God is us and we are God. Lawrence wrote: “To the ancient consciousness, Matter, Materia, or Substantial things are God. A great rock is God. A pool of water is God.”<sup>10</sup> “That in the universe which contains the potentiality of all things, contains the potency also of thought and act and feeling and will, along with the rest. And this terrific and frightening and delighted potency I call Almighty God.”<sup>11</sup> The cosmos is alive, and he continually repeats in his later writings that the purpose of life is to be “breast to breast with the cosmos.” Lawrence is panentheistic, that is the world is God, but God is more than the world according to most Western theologians.<sup>12</sup> There can be both a subjective and objective relation to God. His final words were a diatribe against the mechanical monsters in church and state that wanted to reduce life to a spiritual rubble (like most of the West is today). Here are the last words he wrote: “How they long for the destruction of the cosmos, secretly, these men of mind and spirit! How they work for its domination and final annihilation! ... Man cannot destroy the cosmos: that is obvious. But it is obvious that the cosmos can destroy man. Man must inevitably destroy himself, in conflict with the cosmos. It is perhaps his fate.”<sup>13</sup>

**Conclusion:** Lawrence wanted splendor and the gorgeousness of the divine to replace the sick and sorry creed of Christianity. Mysticism is the common ground of all religion, but it is largely lost to the masses. It can be found again “**breast to breast with the cosmos**” and by using the religion interpreted by Lawrence of the Mexican and New Mexican native religions. “In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico, one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to a new.”<sup>14</sup>

It is important to add that mystical experiences in the Bible always led to issues of justice and righteousness. God speaks to humans in times of crisis and need. It is an engulfing experience and deep speaks unto deep. Cf. Exodus 3, I Kings 19, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 10, and also Luke 1, and Revelation 1. “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science” (Einstein) and add justice to this list too.

What Lawrence is saying in brief – **Get cracking with your definition of God. Bring back Eros and Agape. Find the splendor in all three.** Life is more than fear of death; and (though he didn’t say it) justice for the poor and oppressed is more than Capitalism. Again, Lawrence would have agreed with Einstein: “Concern for man and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavors. Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations.” (Einstein)

Citations:

1. Fiddes P.S. (1991) D.H. Lawrence: Agape and Eros. In: Freedom and Limit. Studies in Literature and Religion. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230389823\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230389823_7)
2. D H Lawrence, The Plumed Serpent [Quetzalcoat], Vintage International, 1992, originally published 1926
3. Lawrence, D. H., and Leonard Baskin. *The Man Who Died a Story*. Ecco, 1995.
4. D H Lawrence, The Sun, in The Collected Supernatural & Weird Fiction of DH Lawrence, Leonaur, 2009, p1 67ff. Originally published
5. D.H. Lawrence, Jimmy and the Desperate Woman, in The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories, IC Gtesling, no date, p111ff. Originally published
6. DH Lawrence, Apocalypse, The Cambridge Edition, ed Mara Kalnis, Intro by Melvyn Bragg, Granada, London, 1981, p 16
7. 8 DH Lawrence, Sons and Lovers, Barnes & Nobel Classics, 2003 (originally published 1913), p 349. See Exodus 13.21-22
8. Apocalypse, op cit p 135
9. Albert Einstein – source unknown
10. Apocalypse p 46
11. Ibid p 143
12. Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol I
13. Ibid p 173-4
14. D.H. Lawrence, “Studies in Classic American Literature”, p.50, Cambridge University Press, (2003).

Photo source:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/dhlawrence>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Board of Trustees.*

