

Fourth Thesis

I'm not sure about the concept of God as divine other.

I consider the possibility that God is somehow the Schleiermachean network of goodness that connects humankind but is greater than the sum of its parts – or perhaps there is some other concept of divinity that better describes God to us than the concept of God as something distant and apart from us?

I have had a difficult time figuring out how to approach this thesis. I suppose that must be obvious to both of the readers by how long it took me to continue this series. I think my difficulty and procrastination on this topic is indicative of the general difficulty with the contemplation of the nature of God. Humankind has made a vocation of reflecting on the existence and nature of the divine. Even the atheists among us, I think, probably spend at least some time considering the meaning of life. For theists, the existence of a divine being (or two) is linked to the quest for an understanding of life's meaning. For theists, our understandings of divinity inform and are informed by our beliefs about existential purpose. For this reason, among others perhaps, God is probably at least slightly different for each of us.

Augustine had a good illustration of this. Or I think it was Augustine. He posited that you could grasp the concept of individual perception of God combined with the unchanging nature of God by thinking of it as an orange suspended at the core of a circle of individuals. Each individual sees the orange from her own perspective. One individual may see where the stem was once attached. Another may see an oddity in the shape of the orange. Yet another might see a discoloration. And in spite of these different perspectives, the orange retains its unified nature. I think there's another Aesopian type tale of blind men encountering an elephant. You get the gist. Our perceptions of anything are filtered through our positions, our beliefs, our circumstances, in such a way that we know EVERYTHING in different ways. Two friends of the same person know different aspects of that person. Two people view a piece of fabric – one sees a shade of green while the other is sure it is a shade of blue. Two people can hear the same speech and yet receive entirely different meanings. You see, I trust, what I mean.

So how could any two people ever agree on what is the nature of God?

Is God somehow outside of creation? separate and apart? something "other"? It seems to me that even in the description of God given in Hebrew scripture – and especially the description given in Christian scripture – God is uniquely and inextricably tied together generally with creation and more particularly with humankind. All we can know about God is what has been filtered through human communication and experience. Now, I anticipate the argument from some non-existent reader that God is God quite separate and apart from any human being – or any other part of creation for that matter. That may well be. But that point is a purely philosophical point because even if it is true, it means nothing to us because the only things we can know about God are things taught to us by other human beings or that we experience directly ourselves. Our experience of God is still our experience of God – i.e., filtered through our own prejudices and subjective understandings.

Like our experience of other people, our experience of God is not pure. Even direct divine revelation can only be effective with us as subjected to our limitations. Let me try this illustration: if divinity expressed itself only through very high frequency sound waves, we wouldn't know anything about it. But we might theorize about divinity because of the occasional freneticism of our canine friends. No? Or better yet, people lose their ability to hear high pitched frequencies as they grow older. What if divinity made its direct revelations in a frequency that could only be heard by children 12 and younger? or... What if divinity were manifested in the human realm only as a piece of fabric that could be blue but might be more greenish? What about people who are color-blind? Hmmm.

There are folks out there in the world who know more about philosophy than I do (practically everyone, I suspect). I invite them to correct me. But I am suggesting that everything we do is limited by the limited ways we have to communicate. I hear people say that they want to hear someone preach the Bible like it was written, not a bunch of interpretation. But reading and writing are fraught with interpretation. They are, in fact, acts of interpretation. Read any poem. Much of the Bible began as a collection of tales told by firesides over centuries... maybe millennia. Those tales were finally written down, and then copied, and copied again, and again, like a four thousand year game of Gossip. Other books in the Bible were initially written as letters, and then copied and copied, and copied. None of it is a photocopier process where nothing changed from copy to copy. In addition, the books were edited over time. This is clear because we can find ancient copies and see what is different between those copies and later copies. We can clearly see that the process of translation affects the text of the Bible. And the process of reading it affects the meaning. Each person reads a different Bible because each of us understands the words in at least a slightly different way.

Am I getting across my belief that all of our experiences in life are filtered through our ability to perceive them? that, in fact, all of our experiences are experienced through physical senses? How do you write down the taste of chocolate? How do you speak the feel of the sun on your skin? How do you communicate to your beloved the view of the mist on the mountains? Artists probably come closest to breaking free from our dependence on words. They have a feeling and express it visually or musically (primarily). But then when someone else hears the music or sees the art, that person does not necessarily feel the same thing that the artist felt. A painting of the sun must surely have different meanings to persons who live in the Arctic and the Sudan. And while we can view a dance, we cannot feel the physical exertion the dance requires of the dancer.

We live in a culture where fathers are partners in a marriage (well, okay, mostly) or are completely absent. Calling God "Father" has different meanings in those two situations. In the first, calling God "Father" must beg the question of who is the mother? In the second, either a "father" is meaningless or God as "Father" is either a pining for something better or a guidebook for better fathering. But imagine a strongly patriarchal culture where fathers are responsible for the well-being of all those in their care (wives, children, slaves, other hangers-on). There is strong cultural/peer pressure for the father to perform those duties well. In that culture, the religion begins to refer to their God as "Father" and it has some pretty precise understandings among those who hear it. Almost like "Chieftain" would have to members of family clans in Celtic societies. Then let's suppose a prophet toddles onto the scene who refers to that Chieftain, Almighty Father not as "Father" – but as DADDY!?!

Now does that mean God had changed? Was God no longer the same God as the one the old folks liked to call “Father”? Was this young whippersnapper saying that God had mellowed out some? Heresy! Let’s say that a couple of thousand years later some folks are led by the Spirit (let’s just say) to start talking about God as “Mother” instead of or in addition to “Father”. Has God changed again? Do these people have to right to explore a new address for God? Are the sparse references in the Holy Bible to God as female only specific examples and not to be used generically?

What I’m trying to say is that human conceptions of divinity have evolved over time with the human race. Scary primal gods of thunder and rain became capricious gods of beauty and wisdom became an all powerful father chieftain who became a warm and loving daddy god who ran down the driveway to meet his returning prodigal son, who went back to being the stern FatherGod and who may start sharing the divine throne with a practical, wise mother god. Does that mean that divinity changed? I don’t know. All I can know about God is what makes it through my filters. Does it make sense to me that the one true God kept himself to himself until 4000-5000 years ago and then only showed up in Palestine? While millions of folks went to their eternal doom because they didn’t have a copy of the right book? I can’t say for sure. All I can say is that transgresses the boundaries of common sense for me.

So who or what is God? There are so many Christians who say that who God is is clearly described for us in Scripture. But that’s just silly. They have a formula, a lectionary if you will, that they read the Bible by and it leads them through a particular trail of passages that describe a god they are comfortable with. Then you have the iconoclasts who reject the popular view of God just because it is popular. You get many folks who say that they experience God personally but they poke all that experience into a box defined by what their churches tell them God is supposed to be.

I think even God gets tired of being told what she is supposed to be. I call to your attention the story in Acts about God telling Peter to eat from the sheet of food God lowered down from the heavenly cafeteria. Peter kept explaining to God that the food on the sheet wasn’t acceptable to God – it was clear in the Bible after all. And God kept telling Peter to eat it. “No, God.” Peter would respond. “The Bible tells me that you don’t want me to eat it.” Even for divinity, wouldn’t that have been an exercise in futility? And, for the Bible thumpers, isn’t that a clear expression of scripture that scripture isn’t always the final word?

Is God divine other? Maybe. But we won’t ever know that for sure in this life. God is who we experience God to be. The experience of others (including those recorded in the Bible) may inform how we interpret our experiences of God but it’s the experience, if any, that is definitive. Because experience is key, any separateness or otherness of God is something we can never perceive, either through normal human interactions or through paranormal experience. Even paranormal experience can only be interpreted using the perceptive language of individuals. We can’t perceive – or even conceive of – infinitude. We can’t conceive of anything outside of time or space. We can’t comprehend anything that exists outside of creation itself. So if God is outside of creation, then we can only speculate about what that means, but we can’t really perceive it.

I'm sure that what I've written here is jumbled and garbled and probably barely sensible. I'm sure that both of my readers are confused by that since my thoughts are usually so well organized and concise. Let me try to sum up by saying what little I think I can say about who or what God is.

God is the person who allows us to wet her shoulder when we are incapacitated by grief. God is the intimate partner who rides with us on wild trips of physical ecstasy. God is music (whether Bach or Freddy Mercury or Dolly Parton). God is Pollack. God is the hot chocolate they sell in Fiesole, Italy. God is the grandparent's eyes watching that toddling boy in the playground. God is the silence between best friends. God is the Christian Danes who hid the Jewish Danes. God is the beautiful young man who flirts just because he knows it makes the older person feel good. God is Faulkner and Welty. God is penicillin and sulfur drugs. God is the parent who says "I love you" to their child as the police lead the child away in handcuffs. God is a donated kidney. God is the spouse who forgives a one-off betrayal in exchange for coffee. God is the sight of a bluebird or a cardinal and the sound of the nightingale. God is the break of the wave and the crest of the mountain and how it feels to mount either. God is even hearing the words of the Song of Solomon or the Sermon on the Mount. God is the good among and between us that is more than the sum of us and beyond our personal avarice and selfishness. God is probably even other.

[There will be a separate thread on the discussion forum for sharing your thoughts on this Fourth Thesis. Please feel free to share your own understandings, etc., there.]