

TALKING ABOUT GOD

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The First Epistle of St John warns us that we can't say we love the God we cannot see, if we do not love the brother or sister whom we do see (4:20). Even so we can still wonder how the 'seen' is connected to the 'unseen', and how we can even talk about the 'unseen' at all. In our empirically-minded age, anything 'unseen' is a conundrum and tends to slip out of language altogether.

Thomas Aquinas thought that after we have eliminated non-applicable words, such as big or bad, we could rely on our belief in God as the cause of all things to provide sufficient connection for at least some of our words, such as 'good' and 'just', to be extended to say something true about God—he believed effects do somehow reflect their causes, creation does reflect the Creator.¹ Still, the manner of that 'reflection' is not immediately obvious—how do we reach our conclusions?

The major difficulty is, however, the jump from the finite into the infinite. The idea of 'cause' seems to have slipped in by sleight-of-hand: God is not a 'cause' as we know causes. The idea of 'cause' seems well and truly trapped in the finite, unable to escape into the infinite and carry our reflection with it. Quantum Mechanics has muddled our thinking about causes even further by jumbling the 'connections' and 'sequences' that we previously thought of as 'causes'. Whatever about medieval times, in our times 'causality' will no longer easily do the theological work it is required to do.

Mystical writers, such as Meister Eckhart, more or less a contemporary of St Thomas and a fellow Dominican, realized that the issue was insurmountable. They thought that all our knowledge and all our words had to be transmuted somehow into ignorance and

silence. According to Eckhart all images of God had to be swept aside so that faith may attain God 'naked', not clothed in our words and images:

Since it is God's nature not to be *like* anyone, we have to come to the state of being *nothing* in order to enter into the same nature that He is. So, when I am able to establish myself in Nothing and Nothing in myself, uprooting and casting out what is in me, then I can pass into the naked being of God... All that smacks of likeness must be ousted that I may be transplanted into God and become one with Him...²

For Eckhart, the intellect's task is to strip God 'of goodness and being and of all names' and thereby reach God because God truly is beyond all human concepts and images.³

But again, there is a problem: if all our words and images must go, what is left? Are we giving up on saying anything about God at all? Mystical writers might answer that it is not the endpoint only that matters, the meaning is in the route taken. Again, though, how do we know whether we have lost our way or not? We seem to be back in our original dilemma: we want our words to say something about God, even if the way God is 'good' and merciful ultimately escapes us, as it did Job when God asks out of the whirlwind 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' (38:4). But if we do believe at least some of our everyday words apply directly to God, has God ceased to be God and then been made over into our own image and likeness? Imprisoned in our own words?

Down through the ages, philosophical discussion about God seems to have tied itself in knots: follow one strand such as 'omnipotence' and you get tangled in

questions like 'Can God create a stone he cannot lift?' Human beings can, why can't God? God is omnibenevolent, why then is there so much suffering in the world? If God is omnipotent, why doesn't God eliminate or reduce suffering? If God can, but doesn't want to, how is he omnibenevolent? The New Atheists make great sport of these difficulties:

If God is omniscient, he can predict everything, including his own future acts. But if God is omnipotent, he can overrule everything, thus making all predictions about the future, including predictions about his own behavior, uncertain. So the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience are inconsistent.⁴

Trying to untangle these logical knots ties you up more and more in qualifications and contradictions with the result that God either becomes unrecognizable or disappears in a mental haze. One source of this fog is that God is bound up in abstract definitions of supposed attributes: 'omnipotence', for example, understood as including all possible actions and excluding all possible limitations (except the illogical) or 'omniscience' understood as knowledge of all and only truths. The omni prefix projects each of these attributes into infinity, and, in the process, into incompatibility and confusion.

For people of faith, God is personal, which at the very least, means that such attributes must converge in a unified way, each attribute qualifying and being qualified by the others. The problem still remains, however, how do our words say anything about God at all?

Renewed interest in how language works enables us to identify a few distinctive features of religious language:

- * religious language has its own distinct context and purposes, different from technological and scientific language, to which it has often been disparagingly compared and confused—religious language primarily belongs to the



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practice of worship, prayer and faith reflection and takes its meaning from that context;

- * religious language belongs to the realm of the personal and gives expression to the deepest commitments and connections that give our lives meaning and value and thereby has its own criteria of success and failure, different, for example, from the verification or falsification criteria of science;
- * religious language in its disclosure and evocation of God's presence employs, besides literal language, metaphor, narrative, sign and symbol, poetry, and any other literary resources that will enable it to reach out to the higher levels of meaning and value involved in talking to and about God.⁵

American theologian, Dan Striver, maintains that 'recent philosophy of language breaks down entirely the categories in which the traditional philosophy of religious language has been formulated'.⁶ He concludes:

The kind of paradigm that emerges is something like the idea of language as a coloured or translucent window, not a transparent one. Language is one of the frames, perhaps the central one, through which we encounter and understand our world. The fact that we cannot get outside of this frame does not in and of itself mean the window is opaque. It means that human forms of life will always shape and colour what is seen. It likely means that broad agreement upon descriptions will be hard to come by. Yet communities will still accredit and take for granted certain meanings and usages.⁷

Looking at religious language from

outside then, as philosophy does, you will see the architecture, but will only ever be able to see the stained glass windows without the light shining through. From the inside of faith, however, that same stained glass is going to reveal a different world and it is within that coloured world that our religious language aspires to say something to and about God.

For those who belong to the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, the name 'God' is a relational term, something like our use of 'I' and 'you' in conversation, terms that focus our words and actions on each other. Who I am and who you think I am and who you are and who I think you are emerges within our relationship. Similarly, with God, who, as Subject, emerges in our life and worship as our faith relationship develops.

God as Subject, however, remains beyond all that we can imagine: How, then, can we speak of this experience? The mystics are right—this 'otherness' is essential to our understanding of God, otherwise we have something less than God. Something similar is true of our use of 'I' and 'you' in our daily lives—the moment we settle on some category we have lost the point of reference to a subject, and substituted an object of our own devising instead. To be in any sense adequate, therefore, our understanding of God has to be kept open-ended, yet somehow without losing our point of reference and ending up saying nothing at all or just talking to ourselves.

We speak of God's attributes, such as love, mercy and justice, using terms we believe can be projected to God, but it is doubtful that we have any notions, such as Aquinas' 'causality' that we can rely on to reach all the way to God and provide the basis for analogy. Such terms may be better understood as metaphors with a special role in religious language, perhaps also in so doing safeguarding the element of 'mystery' that can be lost when seeing them as analogous, which somehow seems to enclose them within our

own concepts of 'goodness', 'wisdom', 'compassion' and mercy.

Metaphors have a special ability to open up our everyday literal language to a further range of meanings we want to explore. Metaphors can become so settled, perhaps like God is good, God is love, that they lose some of this power, and so need to be awakened: How is God good? Loving? Just?

The Psalms abound in metaphors that aim to arouse reflection and wonder: 'The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer' (18:2); 'Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel' (80:1); and 'Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations' (90:1). Or as in the First Epistle of St John, 'God is light' (1:5). Such metaphors destabilize our settled thinking and stretch our concepts almost to breaking point and hold them open because we are never able to exhaust their meaning.

The more 'alive' metaphors are, the greater space for reflection and wonder they keep open: such as, God's 'way is in whirlwind and storm' (Nah 1:3) or 'God will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival' (Zeph 3:17). Our concepts are exploded and the aftershocks continue to reverberate in our reflection and wonder. We can't let go of the terms, however, otherwise the meaning will disappear—that meaning is not in the terms themselves but in the tension or space created between the terms. God's transcendence is safeguarded not in a single word, such as 'good' or 'just', but by what the words hold open in the relationship of faith where God is present Subject to subject.

Religious language exploits all the available resources it can lay hold of. Whereas metaphors push us to seek something we can glimpse and say of who God is, *similes* attempt to disrupt our settled notions of identity, so that we are pushed to explore further. Jesus' parables rely on simile:

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep

the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost' (Lk 15:8-9).

The friends and neighbours would most likely have thought she had taken leave of her senses, was totally obsessive, and was inevitably inviting ridicule by expecting people to party over her finding a small coin. Yet Jesus likens God to her, so attempting to shatter our conventional notions of God.

A reader of modern translations of the Scriptures would immediately notice how much is presented as poetry, that in earlier versions was mistakenly given as prose. Poetry, as the Scriptural authors realized, makes words and images 'sing' and 'dance' together, allowing what is conjured between them to resonate, evoke, express and point towards the mystery of God's presence in the world", making words do together, what they were unable to do alone:

O Lord my God...
 You are clothed with honor and majesty,
 wrapped in light as with a
 garment.
 You stretch out the heavens like a
 tent
 You set the beams of your chambers
 on the waters,
 You make the clouds your chariot,
 You ride on the wings of the wind,
 You make the winds your messengers,
 fire and flame your ministers
 (Ps 104:1-4).

Narrative is, however, also important in the Scriptures. Narrative figures and refigures experience to discover pattern, value and meaning, with the potential for others to inhabit the world as perceived in the story. Scriptural narratives emerge out of the events where God's identity is disclosed and a people's life transformed.

Today we are confronted ceaselessly by unconnected narratives, mostly with simplified storylines, stock characters, Hollywood

endings, coded value messages, incitements to buy whatever is being sold, and images tending to replace words in the telling of stories—the surreal replacing the real.

The Scriptures, on the other hand, consist of countless narratives held together by an emerging Presence, each providing a partial glimpse of the unfolding mystery. These narratives are of real people and events, times of prosperity and the extremities of violence and tragedy, human strengths and frailty in all its forms, which culminate for Christians in the ultimate meaning and value discovered in the violent death of Jesus on the cross, a meaning and value, however, which can't be separated from all the other narratives it is bound with. In this way scriptural narrative is something like metaphor, it is not one single narrative, verse, or book that reveals God, but God's presence is met at the myriad points where the narratives meet, each one a glimpse only, and all together preserving and pointing to the Mystery of who God is.

These narratives show that any talk about God is always also a conjugation of human life and meaning. For Christians, the cross is the portal through which all the violence and chaos of the world enters, preventing any closure of religious language in the present and keeping it open to the unknown future of God. Such talk about God has its ultimate sense, not in ritual alone, but also in the community's living out of Christ's mission of forgiveness and reconciliation, outreach to the poor and oppressed, and his teaching on wealth, non-violence, love and compassion. The 'Do this in memory of me' of the Eucharistic celebration refers especially to Christ's giving his body and pouring out his blood for the many. The memory becomes reality when we follow Jesus' example in our own lives.

The 'present' in whatever age or culture it is experienced is always a bubble enclosing set ways of thinking and acting, and our own Western bubble of affluence is no exception. Any talk about God that

remains within such a bubble falls far short of an awareness of the transcendence of God. Only genuine faith practice is able to burst that bubble to allow the truth of God to be glimpsed. The British philosopher (and atheist), Terry Eagleton reminds us how deeply Christ's death penetrates to the dark heart of the world: 'His death and descent into hell is a voyage into madness, terror, absurdity, and self-dispossession, since only a revolution that cuts deep can answer our dismal condition.'⁸

Our experience of the resurrection of Jesus is inseparable from this immersion into the reality of our world. It is God present within destruction and death, when things appear hopeless, when violence seems overwhelming. It is there in our hope in God's promises that our religious language attains its truest reference to God.

Judge Holden, the prophet of arbitrary violence and atrocity in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *Blood Meridian*, states: 'War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.' Only a little knowledge of history is needed to show how much such an assertion seems true of

our world. Yet, it is not the answer of the Scriptures—that 'God is love' the First Epistle of St John asserts, is the final word of the Scriptures. God's attributes, then, for believers, are not logical puzzles, but glimpses forged in the fire of human life and history and looking in hope to God's future.

We can talk about God in the third person, but then much is lost, the words lose their vital connectedness and seem always to fall short. In their true context of first and second person, however, it is the relationship with God, with all its narrative history, its striking images, words working their wonders, and living practice, that allows the Presence of God to be a living presence, as it is when we are closest to those we love and with whom we share our deepest thoughts and hopes.

Our words never encompass God. When we think they do, we have in fact fashioned an idol for ourselves. But our words and actions, in worship, prayer and works of charity, do hold our minds and hearts open to the God who is beyond anything we can ever know or say, but who nonetheless is Present to us.

NOTES

1. S Th 1.13.5

2. Meister Eckhart: *Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M.O'C. Walshe (Longmead: Element Books, 1987) Vol 1, 66.

3. *ibid.*, Vol 2, 153.

4. Kerry Walters, *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2010) 79: see also Colin Howson, *Objecting to God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 45-62, 194-208.

5. For a good account of recent developments in the discussion of religious language see Dan R. Striver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 72-86; 112-133.

6. *ibid.*, 195.

7. *ibid.*, 204.

8. *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009) 23.

9. *Blood Meridian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 261.