The Many Faces of God

1. Drama and Dialogue: The God of Scriptural narrative

What might God be like? I don’t mean, primarily, what sort of character God does God have? Is God loving or judgemental? I mean what sort of reality is God: a person, spirit, substance? What do we mean by God?

Some people think we shouldn’t even try to ask such questions. For at least two good reasons. The first is simply because it’s impossible. Rabbinic traditions like to tell the story of the visit of an Emperor to a distinguished Rabbi. ‘I should like to see thy God’, said the Emperor. ‘Impossible’, said the Rabbi. But I will see Him!’ insisted the Emperor. So the Rabbi led him out into the bright sunshine and pointed upwards. The Emperor tried to look into the sun but could not. Its brightness blinded him and he bowed his head.

The point is obvious. If God is an absolute, transcendent, eternal reality, God will be in a different category to anything visible we know in the world, which is all relative, limited, transient. God by definition will be as impossible to grasp fully with human thought as the sun is impossible to see directly with human eyes. And so our all attempts to imagine or talk about God are bound to fail. They will reduce God, scale him down to our size, make Him simply more like one of us (something we regularly do in our prayers: ‘Oh dear God would you mind just doing something for me today?’, or words to that effect). Or, to try to retain the mystery of God, our attempts to describe will instead wrap God in riddles of technical language (something much theology does in its talk of God’s transcendence: ‘the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit incomprehensible’ as the Athanasian creed has it). The intention is to pay God some sort of metaphysical compliment, but the effect is merely to address God as a meaningless abstraction. Or else our words and thoughts will fail simply by slipping into vacuous generalities and we dissolve God into just a spiritual ether of the universe, everywhere in general, nowhere and nothing in particular (something much contemporary spirituality does when it describes feelings of God but with no specific form or content).

In short, try to look into God directly and we shall end up either being too naive, too abstract, or too vague. So, better we may think not to try at all. And I understand that. Silence has its place. Nonetheless I shall try to describe God. Why? Because there is experience of God: there is revelation which does seem to have positive content. And this compels us at least to try.

The second reason some think we should not try to describe God is that it begs a prior question - whether God exists at all. Why struggle to understand what God is like when it is by no means settled whether there is a God? And I understand that too. I understand that God’s existence is by no means settled for everyone, nor perhaps for anyone. I have staked the whole direction and occupation of my life on God’s existence, yet that doesn’t mean that I find it settled. I too still find it a consuming and real question. The recent public debates about so-called new atheism, though now sounding tired in the particular form they took, have demonstrated just how seriously debatable God’s existence still is for so many. Not least because there is not even any
settled trajectory to the debate. On the one hand each successive advance of science in cosmology, biology, and now in neuro-science, may seem increasingly successful in mapping and explaining our experience without needing God at all, rendering God at least less probable, even if not strictly disproved. But on the other hand, certainly in philosophy, the whole question of what sort of thing can wholly explain any other sort of thing is actually becoming more mysterious, not less. Purely natural, physicalist descriptions of events like big bangs, evolution, and electrical impulses in the brain, now seem less able to explain all we now know about the universe, the emergence of life, or human consciousness. The atheist editor of a major academic philosophy journal has recently admitted this in print: ‘naturalism’ as a complete explanation, he wrote, is actually losing the current argument even in secular philosophy departments¹. That doesn’t mean God is now back in favour as the only alternative explanation after all. But it does at least mean that all possibilities are now on. And that’s the point. Real debate about the existence of God continues, certainly in philosophical terms. So - shouldn’t we concentrate on that first?

Well we could, and sometimes should. But again, this is not going to deter me from concentrating instead on this other sort of question: what kind of God is believed. Why? Partly because I think, the reason why some believe, and some do not, actually depends a good deal on what kind of God is under discussion. But also because I believe those of us with definite faith also need to consider it. What kind of reality do we who already believe in God really believe in? At least some of the images of God we’ve received through liturgy and teaching have given us residual concepts of a very anthropomorphic God who is in fact quite incredible: God as something like a big man or spirit hovering over our world, and only occasionally intervening by strange supernatural means. Do we really think of God like that? Probably not. But then if God is not like that, what is God like? How do we imagine or think of God credibly? The Honest to God debate back begun with John Robinson’s book exactly 50 years ago in was fired by exactly that sort of question. And I think it needs constantly re-asking. It’s an issue we too often tend to displace by pragmatism: we talk much about the sorts of things we believe God wants us to do, or be, or what the church should do and be. But should we not at least sometimes face the question of what God is like in Himself, Herself? - even if it is like looking into the sun? For the sake of integrity, I think we should at least try.

How then to proceed?

It is tempting to cast the net widely. We could examine all the world faiths. Keith Ward, former Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, does it very well in his book ‘God: A Guide for the Perplexed’. He culls images for God from a wide-ranging quest through many religious traditions, poetry and philosophy. And they are alluring. His chapter headings give a flavour. God is ‘the love that moves the sun’, ‘the poet of the world’, ‘the darkness between stars’. All resonant images to pursue, and I certainly don’t want to deny their value.

¹ Quentin Smith ‘The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism’ Philo 4:1
Nonetheless, I will drill deeply instead only into one tradition, the tradition of this place: I will look just at Christian concepts of God. Why? Partly because of my limitations - I can’t do those other faiths full justice. But also because of the conviction that even within this one tradition there are vast untapped reservoirs we need to explore. There are many faces of God just within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. And so I shall look at them: this week by concentrating on the images of God we get particularly through the drama and dialogue of the biblical narratives; next week, by looking at the more reflective images we get through christian philosophical tradition, concepts of God as absolute power and absolute perfection.; and in the last lecture by exploring the images generated in the interplay between these two - images of what I call the God of play and mysticism. This is not meant as a story of historical progression, as if I’m beginning with the ancient biblical world, moving to the more reflective Christianity of the Medieval and modern world, and ending with the post-modern, with each one displacing the other for something better or truer. I see it more as a spiral of insights in which all these images can co-exist, and so all can continue to feed our soul and our minds.

So that’s how I will proceed. Now to begin. What do we have presented in scriptural narrative?

We first have to accept that in one sense God is not pictured at all, not directly. One of the most fatuous myths and misunderstandings about the bible is that it is always presenting us with very definite images for God, and these are crude, incredible, anthropomorphic, pictures of God: something like an old man hovering over us, preferably with a beard. This is precisely what the Hebrew Bible does not, deliberately refuses to do. Take for example the seminal self-revelation of God to Moses in the Old Testament (in Exodus 33). Moses twice asks God to show Himself and is refused. Instead Moses is put in cleft of a rock, his face is covered with God’s own hand, and all he is allowed as the glory of God passes by is a glimpse of the passing ‘backside’ of God. A wonderfully suggestive picture of how the full mystery of the being of God is actually, by its own intrinsic nature, by his own hand, hidden from our full grasp - and in that sense not so very different from what the Rabbi was trying to teach the Emperor. Yes, it is a revelation, and we may try to see it - but it is a revelation of a mystery, something obscured, at least in part. Even in the New Testament when God’s revelation is given in human form in the life and person of Christ, this too is qualified. Jesus Christ is described as a unique embodiment of God - but he is also described as a human ‘reflection’ of God’s glory, an ‘imprint’ of God’s being, an ‘image’ of God (Heb 1:3; Col 1:15). Each of those words is carefully chosen to describe how the human figure of Jesus Christ is the unique expression of God in human form but is not all there is of God. They point to God as a reality beyond, as well as in, Christ.

In short, scriptural narrative itself is clearly aware of the limits of its own words and images when it comes to describing God. And so scripture itself is actually expressing a metaphysical truth, even though it is not written as a book about metaphysics: namely, that whatever God is, God is not a reality we can see, study, or represent, in the same way that we can describe any
other object in the universe like the sea, the sun, sodium chloride, a symphony, or even a saint: God is never really like any of these - God is always 'other'. As the infinite ground of all things God cannot be exactly like any one thing - and that is why we must always be aware of the metaphorical nature of the language of scripture. It is, I think, important to see this is implicit in scripture itself, and not just the insight of later apparently more sophisticated theologians. Important also to see this sense of metaphysical mystery is actually more credible than a more direct description would be if we are truly thinking of God.

Yet - Scripture does purport to be revelatory. It does still try to convey a definite reality of God to us. How? Most characteristically by its dramatic form: by presenting God less in the form of isolated abstract propositions to describe Him or her, and more through the literary form of drama and dialogue, so that even though descriptions are offered in the drama, it is the drama and dialogue which controls the descriptions rather than the other way round. Look for a moment at a few examples of the dramatic character of some key moments from scripture describing encounter with God:

‘The man and woman heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him. ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself’. (Genesis 3:8-9)

‘The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him….’(Genesis 18:1,2)

‘And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there…and the Lord passed before him and proclaimed ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34: 5-7)

‘Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man: I will question you…. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?’ (Job 38: 1-4)

‘In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God…and the Word became flesh and lived among us… He was in the world - but the world did not know Him’ (John 1)

‘[Then] Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God saying “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near..repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:14-15)
'[Then] during supper Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to depart from this world….got up from the table…and began to wash his disciples feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him... ' (John 13)

‘Now as Saul was approaching Damascus suddenly a light flashed around him. He fell to the ground… He asked “Who are you Lord?”’. The reply came “I am Jesus…”' (Acts 9: 3-5)

These are just a tiny selection from very different sources compiled over a period of more than a thousand years: some from oral traditions of Israel’s deep past, relating to mythical timeless stories; some from documentary sources recounting experiences of particular historical events; some written up to help make sense of what was happening to them at times of national crisis like the Babylonian exile; some reflections from the early Christian community as it recalled the life of Christ - the figure who had so expanded and revolutionised their Jewish understanding of God. But out of that kaleidoscope of contexts there is this common texture: in all of these God is conveyed through dramatic interaction, and dialogue.

One thing this dramatic form does is to reinforce precisely the point I’ve already made: it conveys particularly well the obliqueness and mystery by which God must be described. They ‘do God’ mystery, not in clear detail. So there is a mysterious undescribed presence walking in the cool of the Garden; there is an unresolved mirage appearing in the shimmering heat of the day, of those three figures in one voice; there is a veiled appearance of God in cloud and whirlwind. There is an unseen act of creation (God is ‘the one who formed the earth’ but mysteriously, when we were not there: ‘where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?’). In the New Testament passages where God has ‘become flesh in Christ, and lived among us’, even then He was still not always clearly recognised: ‘He was in the world but the world did not know him’, just as Saul did not know him in his dramatic encounter. God is not even, in any case, revealed simply in ‘a’ person, but more allusively, in a ‘kingdom’: that is, in a set of relationships - unexpected relationships, in which God is revealed in acts not of power but of humility, service, forgiveness, washing feet. In short, all these interactions purport to show God, but none of them can really be pinned down to precise propositions about God. They remain allusive, under-defined.

Jewish philosopher and literary critic Erich Auerbach noted this in his celebrated book Mimesis - and made even more of it by contrasting the indirectness and obliqueness of the biblical dramas’ depictions of God with the depictions of the gods in fictional Greek Homeric story-telling. In the clearly fictional narratives of Homer, he says (I quote), ‘on occasions when gods appear…to help one of their favourites or to deceive or destroy some mortal whom they hate …their bodily forms, and usually the manner of their coming and going, are given in detail’. By contrast, in the Hebrew Bible, he says: ‘God appears without form…coming from some unspecified place...we
hear only his voice and that utters only a [nameless] name'. And this is just as true of the New Testament. Even when there does seem to be a bodily form of God in Christ, that body soon changes, then disappears altogether, as the dramas of Resurrection, Pentecost, and Ascension unfold, re-appearing only metaphorically in the collective body of his followers...it's all deliberately reticent, refusing the crudity of over-defined physical description. And one of Auberach's points in making this contrast, is that it is precisely this under-defined depiction of God in Biblical dramatic narrative which is more convincing, not only as a metaphysics of God but also as an account of peoples experiences of God: these oblique biblical descriptions are more like the textures of real historic experiences of God, meant to convey truth, as compared to the clearly invented detailed fiction of the Homeric style.

So- this dramatic form reinforces reticence in imagining God. But of course it does also convey something positive:

First - these dramas all convey an uncompromising sense that God is a personal presence: a personal reality who communicates with us. The experience of personal presence, and a communicating presence are inseparable. The defining mark of what Martin Buber, another Jewish philosopher, called an 'I-thou' relationship, as distinct from 'I-it' relationship is precisely that we feel personally addressed and related to whenever we are in the presence of another person - in a way we do not in the presence of an inert object like a brick or a stone. And that is the experience of God being conveyed again and again in these biblical dramas: it is that unique pull of personal communication which we receive in the presence of another person. ‘And the Lord God called to the man, and spoke to him.’ When Saul fell to the ground he asked not what is this but ‘who are you, Lord?’

This doesn’t mean we must conceive God literally as a bodily person just like any other. Nor does it mean we hear God speak as a literal auditory phenomenon as other people speak. The whole point of the obliqueness and mystery of these representations is to forbid that sort of over literal, crude interpretation. But the heart of an experience of personal presence doesn’t need that crude dress for it to be recognizable and authentic. Have we not all felt at some time personally addressed, without seeing any specific person or hearing specific words? There is a multitude of ways it can happen. A former Bishop of Winchester (John Taylor) movingly describes a moment in a railway journey when he felt uniquely addressed through a flaming English sunset. It was the experience which gave birth to his great book on the Holy Spirit, ‘The Go-between God’. A birth, or death, an act of compassion, music, a burning bush or just a flowering bush, almost any sensory experience, can do this: it can mediate an experience in which we sense a personal pull on us – which comes not exactly from these human or natural things but also through them, and which relates us to something or someone beyond. It is the experience of a personal presence of ‘the Lord God who called to the man...’

2 Erich Auerbach, Mimesis p 8 (citing Hermes visit to Calypso, contrasting with God in the Abraham and Isaac story of they Bible)
A second feature of God presented in these dramas is simply the moral nature of this personal presence and call. This experience of being addressed by God is not just a perception of some general shapeless spiritual reality lying behind this world: it is always the perception of a personal presence with a determinate nature: with a mind and will with particular views about things, who wills one thing and not another (this is what I mean by ‘moral’). So in that garden experience Adam is reacting to God not just as the general ground of his being but as one who has given him a sense of value and specific moral choice; Moses is being shown a specific moral character of God passing before him out of the cloud: a God of steadfast love and faithfulness; and in the drama of Christ’s life, the God being made known is precisely in that kingdom of relationships - that particular moral way of living together which he both lived and taught in the parables of the Kingdom, as hospitality, justice, and forgiveness.

This doesn’t mean that every particular part of biblical narrative which appears to convey a sense of God’s definite will must be taken in itself as Gospel. If we take some individual subplots in isolation, especially in the Old Testament, they are, to say the least, problematic. They portray God as vengeful or hell-bent on ethnic cleansing. Instead we have to understand God’s moral nature not in isolated tropes but through the structure of the drama as a whole: we need to place these sub-narratives in an overall trajectory, which has its defining moment in that kingdom of Christ, which is the final interpreter of everything else. Nonetheless, what even those apparently immoral sub-episodes do portray is at least that definite nature of God: that is, the fact that we are not being summoned by a formless, mindless, spirit, but one with specific character.

This isn’t the same, however, as saying God that meets us in a specific moral code or detailed set of moral rules. Of course the biblical texts do describe how particular cultures and individuals formulated specific codes in response to God, more or less usefully depending on time and context (and some like the 10 commandments have been especially enduring and authoritative). But that’s not the heart of what’s being conveyed. In meeting God we are meeting something much more fundamental than a contingent set of rules: we are meeting the very source of all specific value, the very meaning of goodness itself. God is the ultimate reason why *anything* has real and ultimate value and meaning - not just the value of utility, of what provides pleasure or security or survival, but the sense of objective *moral* value of things and people. God is the reality whose creation of things makes things matter morally - and that is part of the very meaning of ‘God’. So in the Genesis story we see God creating the world and thereby enabling it to be seen as ‘good’; we see God putting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden symbolically to show this: i.e. to show that He is this ultimate source of all goodness, value, and the moral choices which must then follow……

It is a unique experience, this sense of meeting ultimate value and goodness. But just about anyone may experience it, even if not everyone calls it God. Everyone, except the pathologically a-moral, has some sense of the ultimate value in some things (even though we may never all exactly agree on what
things!). Some call it conscience. The philosopher Immanuel Kant recognised it in what he called the *a priori* moral sense, and the categorical imperative which arises from it. It is the sense of rightness and goodness about some things which pulls on us and exerts a claim on us in a way which is just like meeting the pull of a strong and attractive person’s will. Even the contemporary moral and political philosopher Simon Critchley, who is an atheist, has conceded the wonder and the mystery of it and the way it seems to evokes a personal presence. In his own words, the sense of moral imperative to do justice, and to love, has a ‘god-like’ quality, even though he denies that it is God. We may try to explain it away as only some other purely natural sublimated instinct, but in fact we are actually meeting God in it. So if we deny it or hide from it if we don’t like its implications, we are actually hiding from God - just as Adam and Eve did, representing us all, in the drama of the Garden of Eden story…

The third feature of God in these dramas I want to suggest follows: this personal, communicating, moral presence, also *makes things happen*. God is shown having causal power: He is not just a personal presence but a personal agent; a reality who *does* things. God is not just represented as an ultimate origin of things and their value, but as a mover of things. God brings people out of one place into another: from the garden to the desert to Gethsemane; He forgives, washes feet, transforms, makes things happen. It follows, of course, because it’s part of the normal definition of a personal reality to act, not just to be.

But how? How is God an agent? In the biblical dramas, primarily by the power of communicating. Being addressed by God, a sense of God’s speaking, has in itself some causal power: it can make things happen. God acts in some measure just by making his mind and will known. We can think about this by simple analogy. When even you or I communicate our mind and will we add information into the world, and that information is never neutral: it has an effect, it changes things, at the very least in the way other people act. Share your thoughts (perhaps just an opinion about a friend) with someone else and they will react in some way, however imperceptibly. Quantum mechanics also now tells us that at a sub-atomic level just the mind’s observation acts as an input of information which can bring about change (and not just in other minds, but in physical phenomena too).

But we do not have understand quantum mechanics to see the more general point. Move from the sub-atomic level to the larger field of human history, and one 20th century historian, commenting on Hitler’s Germany, offers a fascinating if chilling example. He points out that much of the collective action of the third Reich came about simply because Hitler made his mind and will known. He didn’t do much directly: he didn’t even always make his mind known in pro-active ways by giving specific orders. On the contrary, Hitler often only made his mind known in general ways. But that was enough. Just that input of information from his mind was enough for his henchman to

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3 Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*
4 Ian Kershaw
pursue their policies, because they felt they were (in the historian’s sinister phrase) ‘working towards the Fuhrer’, working towards the mind of Hitler. Now - replace a malign human dictator’s mind with a moral divine mind, and we have an analogy of one way in which the God of these biblical narratives acts, makes things happen. In many and varied ways, especially in Christ but also through other human and natural events, God makes his mind known. And as a consequence the characters of the Bible from Abraham to Moses to Jesus’ disciples, and all others who experience this mind of God addressing them, they (we) then all ‘work towards God’s mind’ - and so the Kingdom of God is unfolded. Divine causal power has been exercised.

God also seems to be represented acting in other ways. Look at those snapshots of drama and we find not just verbs of speech but of more direct action. God ‘walks’ as well as ‘talks’. God ‘comes, passes by, lays the foundations of the world’, ‘became flesh and lived among us’, during which time he seems to have healed the sick, even stilled storms. Metaphorical language perhaps, but metaphors which seem to convey more than just a divine action of dialogue, the action of mind to mind: they also seem to portray divine interaction more directly within the very structures of the physical world.

This doesn’t have to be understood as some sort of supernatural intervention, as though some divine cause replaces natural causes to make something happen. That may be possible - who knows? - but it could not really be a normative understanding of how God acts: it begs some obvious and unanswerable questions - if that is how God acts why aren’t the natural causes which bring cancer and earthquake more often replaced? And in any case, to imagine God acting in the physical world like that would reduce God’s causality to the same sort of thing as any other natural cause. That in turn would make God incredible on scientific grounds. It is also the very thing that we have already said scripture refuses to do on theological grounds, in the sense that it has insisted God cannot be pictured like any other object in the universe - otherwise God would not be God, a truly transcendent reality. To imagine God making things happen within the physical world must surely be, therefore, to imagine a different kind of causation altogether, one which works patiently and invisibly, steering events through the natural web of things, rather than by replacing them.

That is not impossible to imagine, and more of that next week, when we turn to God in more philosophical traditions of theology. For now, however, I simply want to register that this is generally the way God is presented in these biblical dramas: namely, as a causal power, a personal agent in this world, not just as a general principle lying behind it. The moment God is grasped as personal at all, how could it be otherwise? As I’ve indicated, any definition of personhood implies an active reality, not just inert being. Anything less, any theology (such as I hear much of today) which suggests God does not really do anything, would reduce God to something sub-personal and therefore even less than humanity. This fact that God is presented as personally active also makes sense, of course, of so much else conveyed in these dramas: that most basic sense we are not the only agents in this world, so it’s not all ‘down to us’; in short, it makes sense of humility, grace - and hope.
What sort of reality is God, then, in the foundations of our faith, in the drama of Hebrew-Christian scriptures? No crude supernatural being hovering over us and occasionally intervening. Instead, a more much more mysterious, metaphysically transcendent, reality who can only be described metaphorically. Yet also a God positively experienced as a personal, communicating, relational presence; a moral reality whose creation of things and relationships gives value to them, makes them matter; and a personal agent: a causal reality who really makes things happen.

Does all this make for a unique view of God, this view from the Judaeo-Christian scriptures? Not necessarily. As I said at the outset, I cannot enter the world of comparative religion in detail, but I am prepared to say that all these ingredients probably do also exist somewhere in other religions. Yet I do nonetheless think the Christian tradition may be distinctive in its combination of all these things - a combination which comes about precisely through the dramatic form and dialogue in which God is presented. It is the combination of obliqueness and mystery with the immediacy of a personal, communicating acting presence which is so striking. So while many Eastern forms of religious imagining do convey the transcendent mystery of God, they do not so obviously have this combined with such a strong sense of specific personal moral address as well. Conversely, while Islam does have the strong sense of God’s specific moral character and communication, it doesn’t embody this in the opaque drama of an historical human life (it is more inclined to find God’s mind specified clearly in the over-defined set of verbal instructions of the Koran). It is, then, this unlikely combination of characteristics that the drama conveys which marks out the Judaeo-Christian concept of God. And, of course, it is marked out by its unique concentration of these characteristics in the narrative of Christ in particular…

It may well take more to imagine God credibly. We may well need more philosophical thinking and reflection on how this God compares to what we know of other kinds of reality. But that is for next week. And we may need, in the following week, more playful, poetic and mystical thinking. But I have no doubt that it is in these biblical dramas that we find a crucial foundation. As an Australian poet has put it, God is in the world ‘as poetry is in a poem’. But to know what sort of poetry it is we are hearing we shall always need the foundations of these specific biblical dramas and dialogues…

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