

Who or What is God?

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I appreciate the formulation of the question, ‘Who or what is God?’ It is admirably open to any response, including a refusal of the question. It does not (very much) presume any particular theology or culture from which to answer the question. The question is posed in English and in our Australian cultural context, but not coercively so. It provides a good basis for conversation where all voices can hope for a degree of respect. Personal testimony is encouraged but not overly privileged. It does not assume that there is only one idea of God to be considered or rejected. There is an implicit recognition that there are many traditional answers waiting in the wings, but a discouragement from assuming any one of them as a given point from which to start. With this question, we can hope for the enlightenment that should follow from philosophical rectitude.

Yet there is seriousness in the formulation of the question. We ask about God. Very few ideas of God (or god or the gods) are on our human level or below. Most propose something higher than the everyday human. Our highest ideals are perhaps best thought of as the deposit left by divine inspiration once the inspirational spark has moved on. Stories of the gods regularly indicate the powerlessness of humans before them. Perhaps most significantly, we wonder to what extent we ourselves are subject to divine inspiration as we live our lives. Do we encounter God or a god in certain intuitive promptings? Does membership of a church imply a call from God? Is there a neutral place, as purportedly suggested above, from which we might launch an investigation into the divine?

When we ask, ‘Who or what is God?’, it is worth asking what sort of answer we want. Sharp-edged concepts are appropriate for gaining a better understanding of objects and processes in our world. They are not so helpful in the task of discerning dim shapes in chaotic and unclear situations. Investigating ideas of God must count as a project in the latter territory. How can our finite minds and finite experience provide an adequate basis for truthful and comprehensive (‘sharp-edged’) knowledge of God? Even if we do find specific experiences that are sufficiently revelatory to convince us, the knowledge contained must always be judged partial and potentially misleading if taken too confidently to represent the whole.

While it is sometimes helpful to latch onto one small feature of the chaos, tightly defined, and build a new frame around the recognition of what this small feature suggests, this is more often the path of narrow theological pseudo-certainty. A process of reviewing a range of ‘framing options’, all initially plausible, might be a better approach. Each of these possible framing pictures can be tentatively applied to the chaos and the varying results intuitively accepted or rejected as ‘promising’ or ‘not promising’. The tight definition of one feature of the unclear situation makes it almost inevitable that distorting and incorrect assumptions will dominate the resulting picture unless we keep the fuzzy background firmly in mind. This fuzzy scenario-building approach is at home in many situations, for example, murder mysteries; it is particularly appropriate in theology, where discernment of ‘God’ is regularly contested. Theology needs to create a loose picture that can include as much as possible of the contradictions and exceptions that inhabit our human reality, not a prematurely definite one.

For any theology seeking to articulate Christian faith, the bible provides a given starting point in terms of ideas of God. God is a character - the sovereign Creator - in the unfolding drama of the history of the world and specifically of the people of Israel. God is also the loved and loving Father of Jesus of Nazareth, who is acknowledged as the Messiah or Christ of God, sent for the redemption and fulfilment of God’s covenant with Israel. The figure of God shifts in focus as we read the bible, changing from the creator of all that exists to a kind of semi-absentee landlord who can walk about the garden of Eden in the cool of the day, and then back into a transcendent mover and shaker, intervening in the affairs of nations and people, mysterious in nature and inescapable in power. The picture shifts again when Jesus declares an intimate relationship with the Father who has sent him on his redemptive mission, itself quite mysterious. Finally, we are left with the Risen Christ at the right hand of the Father in heaven and the Holy Spirit actively empowering and accompanying humans throughout our history. The biblical picture of God is fuzzy indeed.

This biblical set of images and stories requires interpretation as well as a degree of integration. Contemporary western culture can legitimately be called ‘post-Christian’ to the extent that it has turned away from interpreting and integrating the biblical images except in a materialist, common-sense fashion. The nineteenth century philosopher Ludwig

Feuerbach provided a critical account of biblical images as humanly desirable, this-worldly elements that are projected onto the transcendent (but empty) realm of heaven, where they are given an illusory authority as divine. The real engine of this process is only ourselves, both individually and collectively considered. Underpinning the resulting picture is a materialist metaphysic that declares, in the words of Bertrand Russell¹, 'atoms and the void' as the only fundamental realities.

Western atheism widely assumes a materialist metaphysic, yet we should pause before accepting Russell's reductionist account of 'atoms and the void'. Sub-atomic physics shows us puzzling aspects of the fields within which atoms exist, where 'action at a distance' seems real in some cases. The fundamental forces of nature remain opaque to our understanding, despite their power of explanation for everyday phenomena. I once heard a scientist explain that scientific method required reducing the world to the fewest possible unknowns, such as 'gravity' or 'force', while explaining everything else in terms of these few unknowns. Our concept of 'the void' should be open to the recognition that the apparently empty vastness of interstellar space is rich with energies such as beams of light and gravitational waves and 'dark matter' (whatever that might be) and who knows what else.

Martin Heidegger's discussion of nothingness provides a more subtle account of 'the void' than Russell envisages. Heidegger notes that 'nothing' can be read as 'no thing'. What is left when all objects of our world fall away? The real answer is that, in consciousness, we are still there, contemplating the absence of objects, but needing to acknowledge that we are a part of the picture. What is the reality of our consciousness, as it encounters the void? We rightly fear being swallowed up in any genuine encounter with the void - this way lies the strong possibility of true madness and suicidal despair - yet it is the testimony of mystics of many different kinds that this encounter can be revelatory.

Heidegger builds his world view around a concept of Being as 'Dasein' (Being-there) which reflects our own mysterious self as well as the objects of our familiar world. Partly taking off from Heidegger, Paul Tillich offers us an account of God in terms of 'Being-Itself'. This is attractive, though as an abstract notion, it requires us to fill it out for

¹ Russell, B. *Why I am not a Christian*. REF

ourselves. It is Tillich who has insisted that God cannot be a particular being alongside other beings. This is in part because this would make God into something much less than the exalted biblical presentation of God the Creator. It is also a recognition that the idea of God as Creator involves a necessary element of transcendence above our everyday world, particularly when we assert that God is One. Yet it is hard to escape from the conceptual objectification of this abstract notion. There is value in locating our ideas of God with respect to our ontological understanding (i.e., our picture of the structure and contents of reality); we feel more in control of our lives when we can find a location in our world view in which our idea of God can rest. The trouble with this approach is that much mental work is continually required in order to keep the various elements in our idea of God together, as ontology does not easily affirm a covenant-making power such as the biblical God.

Tillich himself shows some reserve about relying on the idea of 'Being-Itself' alone as the conceptual resting place for our idea of God. He sometimes prefers the expression 'the Power of Being' as an alternative. I find this to be an improvement, as it is not such a static concept and I like the reference to power, which takes us a step away from treating God as an object of our world, no matter how exalted or fundamental. Yet it is also an objectifying concept, prompting a search for signs of the activity of this power and an implicit promise that we might find God if only we could catch the power at work in some way. Understanding God as a power, or The Power, does lead to this kind of search, which is not without its validity. The chief defect of this result is that, at least in Christian perspective, it distorts the actual relationship that we can have with God. God's power is always prevenient, coming before our reception of it and our choices for co-operation or rejection. In Christian understanding, God calls and we respond.

Nevertheless, there is significant gain in understanding when we think of God in terms of power. This squares very well with biblical language in relation to God. God is regularly referred to as 'the Lord' (or 'the Lord God'). This was also a very early designation for the risen Christ by the Christian church; some scholars would suggest that the earliest Christian creed is 'Jesus is Lord'. The Holy Spirit empowers believers, as well as assisting discernment and recognition of our real situation. Other powers that we experience are referred to in the letters of Paul as the 'principalities

and powers that rule our lives', such as the state. Paul proclaims that these rulers and powers will be set under Christ in the coming kingdom of God.

The principalities and powers referred to by Paul can be recognised as occupying the same spiritual space as the gods of the Graeco-Roman world. I think we need to recover a sense of these deities in terms of the forms of life which they empower and, in a sense, rule. It is probably true that our acquiescence is required for the full efficacy of a deity to be on display, but there will also be some external reality to which we are invited to respond. For example, the goddess Artemis is associated with wild nature, so that an encounter with Artemis is always associated with untamed nature (often with disastrous human consequences).

While I am a fully signed up monotheist, I understand the need to recognise the reality of intermediate powers, such as the state, the family, sexuality, wild nature and human reason, that shape and sometimes dominate our experience. I do not take the subsequent step of seeking recognition of divinity for these intermediate powers, though I do believe that they participate in, and draw their own substance and authority from, the ultimate power of God, not always faithfully. This was to some extent the actual shape of ancient Greek polytheism, where the idea of Zeus as ruler of the Gods shows awareness of the need for bringing the competing divine powers into the one reality of our world and its history. It is perhaps not a large step from recognising Zeus (Life) as the latest in a string of divine principles of co-ordination, following on from Time (Chronos) and Space (Ouranos, Heaven), to the idea of the one eternal God of Judaeo-Christian faith. Of course there are massive differences here as well, but there is a structural similarity that it seems important to note.

This analysis points us to a fundamental orientation on God when we seek to understand what is going on in our world. Whatever the dominant concerns and power structures that we encounter, we can recognize that all such powers are created by God for good purpose; but that in a world subject to a separation from easy harmony (a fallen world, in traditional terminology), these powers are to be tested for their real goodness and opposed where they fall short. It is our real idea of God that should guide us in this testing. This is where I believe that the traditional, biblical idea of God stands up quite well. God is for loving and self-sacrificing behaviour towards others and ultimately, towards all that exists. Many powers that we experience are not so oriented, even when they may have some

contribution to 'fullness of life'. Violence is a sign of the absence of God, and violent powers are, at best, an instrument that may have a backhanded and ambiguous contribution to the fulfilment of God's purposes. This is not to affirm that non-violent powers are exonerated from the charge of failing to fulfil their divinely given purposes, as all powers seem vulnerable to a wide variety of corruptions and distortions.

My atheist friends are happy to dismiss all this as purely speculative and unsubstantiated verbiage. Can any of this survive the acid test of real experience? A few years back, I wrote a book investigating experiences in consciousness which focused on reports of spiritual experiences in shamanic communities². Whatever else these reported experiences show, they give solid grounds for rejecting an easy assumption that the common sense western materialist view of the world is the only possible picture of reality. This is borne out by the widespread modern psychological recognition that our human mental processes are mostly unconscious, with sometimes troubling consequences. I conclude that there is value in the testimony of the spiritual traditions of humanity, which invite further exploration of our own nature and of our wider reality.

One surprising application of this set of reflections is to see the Christian Church as itself a power, in the biblical sense. It is called into conscious being by God for the purpose of promoting the rule of God in all aspects of life. Yet, filled as it is by diverse human beings, there is constant slippage from this central purpose and *raison d'être* in the life of the church. Even where notorious wrongdoing such as the sexual abuse of members young and old by clergy and other powerful individuals is avoided, churches can settle down into practices of self-preservation that frustrate the real work of the church. Recognising the foundational importance of the call of God in the very being of the church is an antidote to such unfaithfulness.

One of the hopes that I have for the ASCM is that it can keep the door open for not only responsible social and political action, but also for dialogue about our different takes on reality. I therefore look forward to engaging in further discussion!

² Yule, S. *The Burning Mirror: A Christian Encounter with Shamanism*. Delhi: Indian SPCK, 2005.