

Part Two:

Probing Key

Theological Topics

5. Knowing the Unknown God

John Cobb, one of the most renowned of living Protestant theologians, wrote me a kind and helpful letter in response to a book proposal I was sharing with him. And I appreciate his frankness in saying, “Thanks for sharing your work with me. I like it very much even though your perspective is quite different from mine. ... Probably our deepest difference is our thinking of God. You understand God as the actor in all that happens. I understand God’s work as explanatory of only certain features of what happens. That leads me to a more personal view of God, a quite different view of grace, and a variety of other different conclusions.”

Cobb’s response to me illustrates two very important issues in our quest for a viable resurgence of vital Christian practice: (1) In any attempt to understand the Christian breakthrough, everything depends on what we are pointing to with the word “God,” and (2) Even the most knowledgeable scholars of the Bible and Christian heritage are finding the topic of “God” the most challenging of all the components of the Christian heritage.

In the book of Acts, we find a story about the apostle Paul in which Paul is arguing with passers-by in the open market place of Athens. Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers come across him and take him to the court of Areopagus where, so the story goes, Paul says,

“People of Athens, my own eyes tell me that you are in all respects an extremely religious people. For as I made my way here and looked at your shrines I noticed one altar on which were inscribed the words, GOD THE UNKNOWN. It is this God whom you are worshipping in ignorance that I am here to proclaim to you!” (Acts 17:22-23, Phillips translation)

“GOD THE UNKNOWN,” taken with deep seriousness, is a clue to what Paul or any other biblical writer was pointing to with the word “God.” In solving algebraic equations, we often use the symbol “X” for the unknown. I am going to continue quoting from the speech that the author of Acts (Luke) says that Paul gave to these curiosity-seekers of Athens. Where the word “God” appears in this text I will insert the symbol “X.”

X who made the world and all that is in it, being Lord (*supreme ruler*) of both heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by human hands, nor is X ministered to by human hands, as though X had need of anything--seeing that X is the one who gives to all humans life and breath and everything else. (Acts 17:24-25)

What is X pointing to in our actual experience? Luke and Paul were both clear that X is an experience that all human beings have. So let us continue this quest to understand what biblical authors meant by this UNKNOWN GOD by placing X’s in the following passage from the letter of Paul to the Romans.

It is not that they [*speaking of those who render truth inoperative*] do not know the truth about X; indeed X has made it quite plain to them. For from the beginning of the world the invisible attributes of X, e.g. X’s eternal power and divinity [*i.e. awesomeness*], have been plainly discernible through the things which X has made and which are commonly seen and known, thus leaving [*human beings*] without a rag of excuse. They knew all the time that there is X, yet they refused to acknowledge X as such, or to thank X for what X is or does. Thus they became fatuous in their argumentations, and plunged their silly minds still further into the dark. Behind a facade of “wisdom” they became just fools, fools who would exchange the glory [*i.e. awesomeness*] of the immortal X for an imitation image of mortal humans or of creatures that run or fly or crawl. They gave up X, and therefore X gave them up--to be the playthings of their own foul desires in dishonoring their own

bodies. These humans deliberately forfeited the truth of X and accepted a lie, paying homage and giving service to the creature instead of the Creator (X), who alone is worthy to be worshiped for ever and ever. (Romans 1:19-25)

So what is X in the experience of these biblical writers and in our own experience? This is the question that matters. Clearly, “God” to these writers meant something more than a mere idea in human heads. “God,” for them, was not a hypothesis that was used to make sense of things. “God” for them, pointed to an experience that all human beings are having every day of their lives unless they are exchanging the truth for a lie.

Luke and Paul do, of course, use ideas to say what they are saying, but it is not their ideas that interest them; they are concerned with a PRESENCE in human experience which they are pointing to with their ideas. One of the ideas they use is the idea of a Creator in heaven and a creation which that Creator has created. This scheme of thinking is an idea, a poem if you like, in their human heads. But they are not worshiping a scheme of thinking; they are worshiping that PRESENCE to which this scheme of thinking is pointing.

In our times, we use, most of the time, different schemes of thinking than Paul and Luke. We find it a strain, if we are honest, to think of a place called heaven where a Creator dwells. We sort of know that this is poetry, even if we are inclined not to admit we know this. We certainly know that heaven is not a literal place that we have already visited. We even know that heaven is not a scientific hypothesis that is needed in order to make sense of some aspect of our lives. We know that heaven is poetry. So we also know that a “Creator” living in “heaven” creating all these finite processes that might be called “the creation” is likewise poetry. Most of us use different poetry than this to talk about our actual lives. But even if we feel that “Creator and creation” is very obsolete poetry, we can still ask this question: what PRESENCE in their own experience were Paul and Luke pointing to when they used this poetry?

If we could answer that question, then we could perhaps talk about that same PRESENCE in our own experience using up-to-date poetry. No poetry is eternal; poetry, all poetry, is a human invention. Poetry is one of those finite processes that the biblical poetry calls “the creation.” So again we face my basic question: what does the poetry of Creator and creation point to? Or, what is X as a PRESENCE in the experience of Paul and Luke and of you and me?

Paul claims that we have already experienced this PRESENCE, and that those of us who claim we have not are lying to ourselves and to one another. Let me make these assertions plain by sharing some more biblical poetry, some very plain poetry from the 90th Psalm. Again I will use the “X” device.

X turns human beings back into dust.
“Turn back,” says X, “you offspring of humanity.”
For in the perspective of X, a thousand years are as yesterday,
but a night watch passes and X has cut off human life.
Humans are like a dream at daybreak;
they fade like grass which springs up with the morning
but when evening comes is parched and withered.

Oh X, we are brought to an end by your negation
and silenced by your fury.
Our illusions are laid bare;
our lusts exposed.
Our days pass by under the shadow of your fury;
our years die away like a murmur.

Seventy years is the span of our life,
eighty if our strength holds.
The hurrying years are labor and sorrow;
so quickly they pass and are forgotten.

Who, Oh X, feels the power of your negation?
Who feels your fury like those who revere you?
Teach us to count our days carefully
that we may enter the gate of wisdom.

(Psalm 90:3-12--slight rewording of the New English Translation)

Please note that the author of this Psalm is sober but not gloomy. This Psalm writer even exudes a sort of delight in being wise, and in being open to still further wisdom about these sober topics. One of the proverbs in the book of Proverbs says that the dread of X is the beginning of wisdom. So if we are in dread of whatever it is that is limiting and finally extinguishing our lives, we are beginning to be wise. And if we are clear that the biblical writers worshiped this PRESENCE, we are beginning to be wise about the fundamental witness of the Bible.

Why have we become so confused about this? In the modern world, we have been conditioned to worship (I am using the word “worship” broadly) human capacities and human constructions. So we may find it nearly impossible to believe that the Bible is recommending for our object of worship a REALITY that is limiting and finally killing all human capacities and all human constructions. And it does not seem to help our disbelief to be assured that the Bible is also saying that this same REALITY is also giving us all our human capacities and enabling us to build all our human constructions. Why, we often ask, should we worship THAT which both gives all and takes all away? Surely, it would be better to worship something that gives us what we want and never takes it away. This human-centered (i.e. anthropocentric) way of thinking about all meanings and values is a major opponent of what I insist is the biblical perspective.

It is also the biblical perspective that worshipping this dreadful REALITY is what humanity was “created” to be and do. Such worship is good for humanity. Once found, this worship fulfills our deepest longings to fully be the human beings we are. Worshipping this PRESENCE is synonymous with dedicating ourselves to being our authentic beings.

With this view of the biblical God in mind, let us return to John Cobb’s responses to my thinking on the God topic: “You understand God as the actor in all that happens. I understand God’s work as explanatory of only certain features of what happens.” This understanding of my perspective is not quite accurate. I do not understand God as the actor in all that happens; rather, I understand all that happens as the action toward me of what I mean by the term “God.” This is very different. In the first way of saying it, God is assumed to be something existing somewhere and then acting in all that happens. In the second way of saying it, God is UNKNOWN; God is only a PRESENCE about which I know nothing whatsoever. All I know directly is all those finite processes that are happening to me. I was born. I am growing older. I am going to die. Through such direct experiences, I know indirectly the fury of that PRESENCE that is, poetically speaking, saying to me “Turn back to the dust.”

Cobb says, “I understand God’s work as explanatory of only certain features of what happens.” Note that word “explanatory.” For Cobb “God’s work” is some sort of hypothesis that explains certain features of what happens. Any hypothesis, any explanation whatsoever is a human creation. For me and, I insist, for the biblical writers, God is not an explanation of anything. God is not a idea. God is not a hypothesis. God is just a word, a marker, an X that points to a PRESENCE that is UNKNOWN. God, as this PRESENCE, is not a human creation.

“Creator and creation” is a myth created by human beings, but what that myth was used by the biblical writers to point to was not created by human beings. Perhaps, in order to say this well, we have to create some contemporary myths, some new stories, some new poetry to express what the biblical writers were struggling to say with their poetry about a Creator and a creation.

I have attempted to create such poetry using the cosmology of modern physics; I picture myself on a journey of imagination back through time to the great flaring forth which physicists have called “the Big Bang.” I picture my always curious human mind asking this question, “Well, what existed before the Big Bang? What existed before space and time? What existed before there was a before? What existed before existence existed?” Clearly, these are paradoxical questions. They are unanswerable questions. Nevertheless, to continue my wild poetry, I picture myself listening, listening for an answer to these questions about what was before the Big Bang. And here is the answer that I, poetically speaking, hear: there was only Infinite Silence. Before all the noises, vibrations, and voices of finite beings there was just Infinite Silence.

And furthermore, this Infinite Silence has not gone away. It is a PRESENCE which every human being can be attuned to “hear” or can clearly “see” (Or shall I say “smell”--- what poetry do you like?) in the comings and goings of all finite things. The Infinite Silence is a PRESENCE. Here is my short poem about the contemporaneity of this PRESENCE.

The Infinite Silence Speaks
through every rustle of tree leaves, through every singing bird,
through every sound of any kind,
and through the silent spaces between the sounds.

The Infinite Silence is Void and Darkness
but also Fullness, a dazzling backlight that shines through
every gleaming tree, every shimmering squirrel
and surrounds every human being
with a halo.

Perhaps the term “Infinite Silence” does not impress you as a very “personal image” for the God you want to worship. Cobb calls for “a more personal view of God.” What do we mean by “personal” in this discussion? In what way, we might ask Cobb and many other theologians, is this PRESENCE of the Infinite Silence not personal enough? Each of us certainly has a personal relationship with this unavoidable PRESENCE.

On his web site, John Cobb has a three-page response to the question “Is God Personal?” Reading his discussion of this topic makes clear to me that even asking this question is misleading, for the question presupposes that God is an entity. Cobb inquires whether this entity may or may not share characteristics with the human person. But, as I have been at pains to point out, the biblical writers were not using the word “God” to point to an entity. Rather the the word “God” was used to point to the other-than-human MYSTERY from which all entities flow. So understood, God is not a physical entity, nor a non-physical entity, nor a rational entity created by the human mind.

What Cobb and many other theologians mean by a personal view of God boils down to what I would call “creating God in our own image.” Using this manner of thinking, we project a picture of a human-like entity into the realm of final meanings. And then we forget that the realm of final meanings is a human creation and that this picture of a human-like entity is also a

human creation and that we are, therefore, the inventors of what we are calling “God.” This understanding of “God” is, I believe, a modern form of what Paul was condemning when he said, “Behind a facade of ‘wisdom’ they became just fools, fools who would exchange the glory [i.e. awesomeness] of the immortal X for an imitation image of mortal humans or of creatures that run or fly or crawl.”

When Paul speaks to God personally or speaks about God in personal terms, he is using poetry to talk about this UNKNOWN X that everyone confronts. Surely if “God” is to be understood as more than just another finite being, then God cannot be contained within human language whether that language is personal or non-personal. Literally speaking, the UNKNOWN INFINITE X is not personal nor impersonal, not male nor female, not animal nor human, not inanimate nor living. Nevertheless, all of these finite qualities can and have been used as symbols for speaking of God and to God. If we are completely clear that we humans are creating the personal symbols, then we can use personal symbols to talk about God, or to speak to God and envision God speaking to us.

We can even talk meaningfully about “being created in God’s image.” This phrase can mean something different from “creating God in our own image.” “Being created in God’s image” can mean being in our essential humanness a mirror that reflects the Unknown Infinite Silence to one another in the human community. The human is that species of life that has a consciousness of being conscious and is thereby capable of being conscious of this relationship with the unavoidable Infinite Silence. My cat has no such consciousness. I mirror God, but my cat does not. My cat is as much a creature of this Mighty PRESENCE as I am, but my cat does not know the UNKNOWN or even quest to do so. My cat just receives her life and her food from God without awareness of this Mystery. My cat will enter into death without awareness of this Mystery. But I, I grip the sides of my death bed and stare Mystery in the face, so to speak. I view my physical birth and my conscious awakening as another encounter with this same Mystery. I, unlike my cat, know that I come from a dark abyss and that I will end in a dark abyss. (Thank you Nikos Kazantzakis for this poetry). I, not my cat, call the luminous interval between birth and death, “life.” I know that I live my life in the PRESENCE of and at the disposal of this MYSTERY. If I am able and willing to trust this MYSTERY, then I am entitled to call that UNKNOWN UNKNOWN “God,” my God, my personal God. I am entitled to hear my God speaking to me and to talk back. I am entitled to ask with my freedom for the life I desire, and then to receive whatever is given as a blessing (rather than a curse) from this Infinite Dialogue Partner.

God, so envisioned, may be seen as a THOU in a very personal dialogue. Obeying this God can be my righteousness. Being loyal to this God can be my Truth. Recommending to others the life I live with this REALITY for my God can be my evangelism. Surely, one cannot be more “personal” than this in one’s vision of God. Furthermore, I am entirely convinced that this is the way in which the biblical writers were personal in their vision of God. They may have been less lucid than we about symbols and the difference between symbols and literal scientific truth. Nevertheless, without qualms, they used the poetry of religious symbols to talk about their lives. If this connection between the biblical writers’ use of symbols and their living experience is not assumed, then the vitality which the biblical literature has manifested throughout its long history becomes inexplicable.

With this context in mind, let us recall that Jesus called God “abba” or “father.” There is some evidence that the term “abba” has great similarity with the terms “dada” or “mama.” It is an infant’s wordless address to the cosmos. Parents interpret the infant as speaking to them, but perhaps the infant is more or less speaking to the “I don’t know what.” However that may be, Jesus apparently chose such a word to use for expressing his relationship with God. If the dread

of God is the beginning of wisdom, then we might say that addressing God as “dada” or “mama” is the fullness of wisdom. When we trust the UNKNOWN UNKNOWN INFINITE SILENCE with the openness of an infant, we are manifesting the faith of Jesus.

Calling the UNKNOWN “abba” is something different than assuming the “existence” of a BIG PERSON in the meta-realm, the “before” realm, the “beyond” realm. We humans, including Jesus, have no actual experience of a “beyond” realm. We certainly have not looked “there” to see if some BIG PERSON lives “there.” Both “there” and “BIG PERSON” are metaphors. The whole realm is a human construction, a metaphor of the human mind. Similarly, FINAL PURPOSE or FINAL DESIGN are metaphors. Scientific knowledge has no knowledge of FINAL PURPOSE or FINAL DESIGN. As hypotheses FINAL DESIGN and FINAL PURPOSE cannot be tested. Scientific knowledge is limited to hypothesizing about and testing hypotheses about finite things. All a good scientist or an honest scientific philosopher can say about THE OVERALL is “I don't know.” The argument for purpose or design is projecting human notions into an imaginary realm of final meanings. This projection is no different in kind from envisioning that this realm of final meanings is occupied by a person-like dynamic. Purpose or design are no less metaphysical metaphors than person, will, mind, hand, arm, face, wrath, grace, forbearance, pursuit, judgment, calling, speech, etc.

There is no scientific knowledge of God. Scientific knowledge can move our minds out to the “place” of final questions, but it cannot test answers at that “place.” In truth, at that “place” there are no answers in an objective sense. There is just SILENCE. The notion of revelation is a complete paradox: THE SILENCE SPEAKS. And this SPEECH OF THE SILENCE is only heard by the person of bet-your-life faith. In fact, the person of faith actually creates this SPEECH and then bets his or her life upon it. This is the testing process of Spirit-level knowledge: you guess what the SILENCE IS SAYING and then you bet your one life on this WORD. You live this WORD by listening some more for any indication from the ABSOLUTE SILENCE as to whether or not your bet is winning. Indeed, you listen to the INFINITE SILENCE to understand what winning actually is. And if you are fortunate, it dawns upon you that living this strange faith is itself the winning you have been seeking. The beauty of this trust in the benevolence of the INFINITE SILENCE is that no scientific knowledge can contradict it. As Martin Luther said of this faith, it is unconquerable.

Perhaps this essay has no good ending place, but I will end it with the following poem.

The Reappearance of God

Some time last century, or was it the century before,
all Supreme Beings died.
The whole realm of super-ordinary goings-on died.
Only the ordinary lived on.

But human beings,
uncomfortable with changes of this magnitude,
reinvented Supreme Beings,
knowing that they did so,
knowing that Supreme Beings were a human invention.

Unconsciously, as unconsciously as possible,
human beings knew they were worshiping their own
inventions,
but they did not care.
Human beings wanted to worship themselves anyhow.

Meanwhile, GOD, who is not a Supreme Being,
who is not a human invention,
who is not human in any way whatsoever,
who is not even known or knowable by human beings.
became known again by human beings,
known as the unknown,
the real unknown,
the UNKNOWN, UNKNOWN.

GOD, not standing above, but shining through
every natural being,
every space-time event,
every cosmological transformation,
every personal transformation,
every social transformation,
GOD became visible once again.

Visible but not known.
Seen but not understood.
Present but not controlled.
Unavoidable but not named.

Humanity, those who faced this fully,
found themselves affirmed by this,
ennobled by this,
healed by this,
refreshed by this,
enabled to be themselves by this.

Humanity was
Oh Yes,
brought down
 but brought down from an uncomfortable
 high horse
 brought down
 to be a completely ordinary organism--
 vulnerable, dependent, passing--
and yet,
nevertheless,
being conscious
of the SHINING THROUGH
of GOD.