

WHAT, THEN, OF GOD?
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May 4, 2008

Reading: *The Bhagavad-Gita 9:4-10, 17-19*

**I permeate all the universe
in my unmanifest form.
All beings exist within me,
yet I am so inconceivably**

**vast, so beyond existence,
that through they are brought forth
and sustained by my limitless power,
I am not confined in them.**

**Just as the all-moving wind,
wherever it goes, always
remains in the vastness of space,
all beings remain within me.**

**They are gathered into my womb
at the end of the cosmic cycle -
a hundred fifty thousand
billion of your earthly years -**

**and as a new cycle begins
I send them forth once again,
pouring from my abundance
the myriad forms of life.**

**These actions do not bind me, Arjuna.
I stand apart from them all,
indifferent to their outcome,
unattached, serene.**

**Under my guidance, Nature
Brings forth all beings, all things
Animate or inanimate,
And sets the whole universe in motion...**

**I am father of the universe
and its mother, essence and goal
of all knowledge, the refiner, the sacred
Om, and the threefold Vedas.**

**I am the beginning and the end,
origin and dissolution,
refuge, home, true lover,
womb and imperishable seed.**

**I am the heat of the sun.
I hold back the rain and release it;
I am death, and the deathless,
all that is or is not.¹**

How shall we talk about God in the 21st Century? What new ways can we speak about God in a post-Copernican, post-Darwinian, and post-Newtonian world? Indeed, how can we talk about God in a post-Christian world?

Christian theism is the dominant theology that shaped Western Christian culture, church dogmatics, ecclesiastical and personal beliefs. Theism stresses the unity and singularity of God and understands that God is distinct from the creation but has an active role in human history. Consider the following description:

“The core of Christian theism views God as an imperishable, ultimate reality who is not derived from other beings. God is omniscient (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful), completely good, and the source of all existence. As a spiritual being, God is

¹ Stephen Mitchell, *Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000), 114-117.

nonphysical and yet everywhere present in the cosmos by virtue of God's knowledge and power, including God's creatively conserving in existence each part of the cosmos. Christian theists also believe that God has revealed Godself in human history, including the incarnation of God in Christ."²

This is, of course, a broad definition and it does not tell us the many variations of meaning that theism hosts, not only academically but also in terms of personal faith. But I think generally speaking the common man or woman of faith understands God in terms of "supernatural theism." That is, a supernatural God who is out there somewhere in the ether, and who occasionally intervenes in the natural and human world. The theistic God created the world in the distant past and incarnated Godself in human flesh as Jesus who became the Christ. The primary purpose of the ministry of Jesus was to die on the cross as ransom for the sins of humanity. Jesus now resides with God in heaven, waiting for the end of time and history for the purpose of bringing judgment upon the world. If persons have sufficient faith and God is so inclined, diseases can be cured, natural disasters averted, and all pathos made into bliss. Supernatural theism is immutable and God does not change. Perhaps you recall the old pietistic catch phrase, "The same God, yesterday, today, and forever."

Now it is not my purpose to dissuade the millions of people who share a belief in supernatural theism. It has sustained many people through the varied

² Charles Taliaferro, "Theism," *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon: 1992), 477-478.

crises of faith and life. I can only share with you why supernatural theism does not work for me. To begin with, I do not understand the universe as a tiered universe. That is to say, I do not think the cosmos is heaven, earth, and hell. That is not only beyond all astrological evidence, it hardly works as a metaphor in my way of thinking. So the very idea that God is in God's heaven looking down on the world strikes me as nonsensical. In an essay by Alan MacRobert, senior editor of *Sky and Telescope* magazine we are challenged by the author to place God in the vast cosmos that is either extremely cold or blazing hot. Wrote MacRobert:

“Space is beautiful but hostile. It is almost always unimaginably cold, empty, and changelessly dull - or unimaginably hot and violent. Whole galaxies are sterilized by x-rays blazing from their cores where stars happen to fall together - without regard for any living things that may be in the galaxy - blind, uncaring, ignorant. The outer heavens, so beautiful and inspiring from a distance, have zero moral content. This certainly seems like no seat of a caring God.”³

Furthermore, the remoteness of such a God who occasionally intervenes in history or nature, for reasons that are not entirely clear and may even be whimsical, is preposterous. For example, why would God steer a hurricane away from the United States as Pat Robertson once declared, but allow hurricane Katrina and dozens of others bring death and destruction to thousands of people? Some evangelicals have also declared that the disaster of September 11, 2001 was a result

³ Alan MacRobert, “Outer Space,” *Sky and Telescope*, as quoted in *Quest*, Vol. LXIII, No. 5, May 2008, p. 8.

of the immorality and apostasy of the American culture. This is God's judgment on our society. If that is true, why had not God acted sooner? And does anyone mean to suggest that terrorists who bring such death are the agent's of God's will? Why has not God brought such judgment on priests and ministers who are abusing altar boys? Such a theology is so inconsistent that God appears fickle and the worst possible communicator of God's will for human society. So the very idea that God exists on another plane of existence and interferes with human history from time to time for reasons and purposes that are inconsistent simply does not work for me. And please do not tell me that all of this is the mystery of God that I am not meant to comprehend or that my faith is weak and if I was a true believer I would come to know God's purposes. Well, let me tell you this. My faith in a supernatural God is not weak. I have no faith in a supernatural God whatsoever. I believe in mystery but my appreciation for mystery is not founded on my ignorance. It is profoundly rooted in the awe and wonder of life that I experience every day.

Supernatural theism posits God as fixed and immutable. Do you mean to tell me that God is not fluid? Is that not another word for concrete or static? And is it not the case that when we mold something or fix something in wood or stone or belief that it is lifeless? Is it not a statue, an icon, or - dare I say it - an idol?

My faith requires that I explore a new way of talking about God - the God beyond theism; the God beyond church dogma; the God beyond human projection

who surely looks so much like the angry father who has lost control of his children. My hope is that finding a new way of talking about God is clearly distinct from a calcified talk about God. It may be impossible but a way of talking is a process, an ongoing conversation that does not solidify into some pretense of finality or conclusion. Indeed, I think it is more important to talk about themes than articles of faith. It is more important to talk about the movement of God than it is to profile God or define God. A God that can be defined is not a God worthy of our worship!

My experience with God has been found in relationship with three major realities in my life. Now please do not categorize these as a new trinitarian formula. There are other themes that move in and out of these relationships and various expressions of these relationships and I am hoping we do not freeze them into sound bytes.

My experience with God is in my relationship with Creation. I dare say, I experience God as Creation. Notice that I have not said Creator as if to mean a persona who made the world. I experience Creation as a continuous generative movement of material and spirit and I am but a singular expression of life in relationship with every other form of life. Creation is not complete, but continues to unfold with the explosion of new stars in the distant galaxies, or spermatozoa in search for eggs, or the flash of an idea in a composer's mind, or the splash of paint on the artist's canvass. To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, I am part and parcel

of an unfolding creation that is sacred in its own being and those universal currents flow through me. Did you not hear the very rhythm of God in the Boys and Girls Club Samba Band? Did you not see God's face in theirs? Did you not witness God's movement in their dance? One day when my turn on this mortal coil is ended all of the power of life that is in me and I in it will be released back into the great ocean of being. My life will flow on in an endless song of light and energy and laughter. I would change that great hymn, "How Great Thou Art," with these words: "Oh Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands are making."

My relationship with Creation is not merely poetic. It is real. It is solid. It is the food I eat, the air I breathe, the water I drink and bathe in. Creation is life sustaining as we move in, with and through God on the endless spiral of birth and death. Everything in my life happens on this planet, the only remotely friendly sphere in the entire galaxy that is capable of giving and nurturing life. There is no other place where I can have life and life abundantly.

My relationship with Creation is a moral one, for like every relationship in life, if the relationship is not founded on respect and responsibility both creature and Creation suffer. If I abuse and neglect the Creation God is diminished as is my life. It is entirely possible that human beings can so desecrate the Creation that both human life and God will be dead. I believe that as Creation suffers so God suffers. I cannot distinguish God from the Creation.

I also cannot distinguish God from humanity. The Jesus story is the Christian story of God with us. But the story does not end with the life of just one man. I do not think that I can know God apart from human beings. Sometimes I wish I could. But I know that if God is real God is found in the reality of the human condition. Quoting Alan MacRobert again, “If anywhere in the universe you want to find such things as values, compassion, direction, purpose, a sign of anything higher, you have to look to people. There is no other place you will find them.”⁴ And that pushes me to the reality that God is with us, through the advent of birthing a child, the throes of unemployment or divorce, in the mighty struggles against diseases when the prognosis is terminal, and in the weary days of bereavement. I know there are some people who pray that God will pluck them out of the pain of life. Some believe that God is a prophylactic against the germs and viruses of life; or a spinal block for the pain of living. That has never been my experience as a man or a minister. I have experienced God at the hands of caring physicians and nurses who gave me the best medical care they could offer. I have experienced God when I have made colossal stupid decisions and found forgiveness from my family and friends. I have known God when tender hearts wept on my shoulder because innocence had been shattered, or beauty besotted, or trust betrayed. I have known God when best friends came to me in moments of deep despair and took me into the hearts. I have known God in the voices of those

⁴ Ibid.

who told me to pick myself up, dust myself off and get back in the saddle. God speaks to me when she tells me that she loves me even in my weakness and believes in my life even when it is directionless. In every one of these situations and thousands more, the voice or hand of God was on the tip of a human tongue or the end of a human arm.

My experience with God is the experience of wisdom. The Greek word is *Sophia*, and she is the movement of grace and compassion, justice and peace. Wisdom is the discernment of Creation and humanity and the fragile interdependent web so necessary for our mutual existence. Wisdom is expressed sometimes in the simple laws of Nature that the Taoist called “the way” and Buddhists call “the suchness of things.” Wisdom commands deep respect for the nature of Creation and the laws which govern all of our lives. Wisdom also discerns the reality that the laws of nature are neither personal or impersonal. If I choose to violate the law of gravity and step off the roof of my house and break my leg, such a reality is not a personal vendetta perpetrated against me by Mother Nature.

Wisdom also teaches me the law of human relationships. Sometimes it is the obvious truth that when we steal, or lie, or covet, or murder another human being the whole social fabric is torn and justice must find a way for restitution or reconciliation. Sometimes the dynamics of human relationships are more complicated and require more sophisticated models of moral reasoning. Was the

stealing necessary to provide food or medicine for loved ones? Was the taking of a life necessary for the protection of self or others? Wisdom in such cases is not cold law adjudicated by the clear cut definitions of right relationships. Wisdom then must be dynamic and fluid if justice is to serve the people.

We live in a time when we need the wind of wisdom to blow fresh light onto the major religions of the world. The respect and trust that is necessary for the diversity of religious communities to live in harmony with one another will not come from the defense of differing scriptures, old wounds to revenge, traditional or ancient boundaries to reclaim. Religion always becomes dangerous when she abandons Wisdom for the primacy of creed. When we put our religion over the lives of others we have lost our minds and the purpose of God's will for us as a human family.

I experience Wisdom when men and women of different faiths, political ideologies, class, and cultural heritage can see beyond all of these and defend human life and freedom. Wisdom is the spirit of community, a community of human beings within the Creation. Wisdom sees the life destroying practices that kill people and destroy the planet. Wisdom makes the right choices to protect and sustain life. Wisdom rises above ego and greed to secure the future.

Creation, humanity, and wisdom are the expressions and experiences of God in my life. They are the community that is God. I experience the communion of God in personal ways, but I know that it is not about me. God do not have an

impact on my life. God is my life. I believe this to be true of every human being, regardless of what anyone thinks God to be. And in my way of thinking, this communion of sacred relationships is of the highest order. It can be identified but never completely quantified. It is unique but ultimately indistinct. It is not just more than the sum of their parts, for God transcends all summation.

Now someone will be quick to say, but Gary, are you saying that when the Creation is dead God is dead? When human beings have breathed their last breath God is dead? When Wisdom has shed her last light God is dead? On one level the answer is yes. The God that I experience will be dead. I cannot conceive of any other way of knowing God. I am, after all, a child of this God in this creation, in human relationships, struggling to gain wisdom. My challenge is not to defend a world I cannot know, a God I cannot experience. My challenge is to live faithfully in this world, with these people, with the best wisdom to be found amongst us. My challenge is to be faithful to the God who is with us, not a God who might be.

Remember, this is just a conversation about new ways of talking about God. Lighten up. We'll talk some more.

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