

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

Dialogue 1

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"¹

By J. M. Beach

I would like to open my discussion of “God” with a discussion of the mystically oriented depth psychologist C. G. Jung. This supposed man of science actually broke with his early scientific practices, and his association with Sigmund Freud, evolving into a liberal Christian apologist and an eclectic mystic. Late in life Jung began a dialogue with the Jewish theologian and mystic Martin Buber. Buber had criticized Jung and other Western philosophers, most notably in *The Eclipse of God* (1952), for denying the ultimate reality of the “absolute essence,” which Buber called “God.” In his famous theological devotion *Ich Bin Du* (1923), usually translated as I and Thou, but perhaps more appropriately translated as I and You, Martin Buber posited the undeniable existence of God, but described knowledge of God in terms of a subjective relationship between two persons. Jung, however, had problems with this subjective foundation of God's existence. One of Jung's replies to Buber is as follows:

It should not be overlooked that I deal with those psychic phenomena which prove empirically to be the bases of metaphysical concepts, and that when I say, for example, “God,” I can refer to nothing other than demonstrable psychic patterns which are indeed shockingly real...It is certainly not the task of an empirical science to determine the extent to which such psychic contents are influenced and determined by the presence of a metaphysical God-head...I do not doubt his [Buber's] conviction of his living relationships to a divine Thou, but I am, as always, of the opinion that *this relationship first of all goes to an autonomous psychic content which is defined one way by him [Buber] and otherwise by the Pope* [emphasis added].²

¹ This essay is based on J. M. Beach, "The Idea of God," in *Studies in Ideology: Essays on Culture and Subjectivity* (Lanham, 2005).

² Gerhard Wehr, "C. G. Jung in Dialogue and Dispute," *Jung: A Biography*, Trans. David M. Weeks (Boston: Shambhala, 1988).

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Jung, in all his sympathy with the religious object of "God," found it possible to discuss only what could be empirically verified, what he called "demonstrable psychic patterns," which due to the diversity of human subjectivity, left the notion of God fractured between numerous definitions. Jung was wont to emphasize that the human "soul" could only be seen through the human mind. Thus, the only empirical verification of God's existence was trapped in subjective experience.

Every individual psychic consciousness experiences the idea or object of God differently. Thus, not only do all the world's religions vary in their definition of God, but within each religion, every individual sees God and experiences God somewhat differently, due to the very nature of subjective human experience. Jung always believed in the object and human experience of God. He was most assuredly a "spiritual" person. But he could not discount two important dilemmas. First, the existence of "God" as an objective reality is obscured through all of the various historical individual and cultural ideas of God. Second, because there is no verifiable and objective evidence to prove God's existence (outside of the experience and communication of individual human beings), the very idea of "God" is completely dependent upon human subjectivity: "God" can be experienced and known *only* through the epistemological limitations of individual human experience.

I want to go back in time to selectively explore the root issue involved in the dispute between Jung and Buber. In 1807 the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel published his experiential philosophical treatise, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It was Hegel's earliest and most radical attempt to formulate his idealist philosophy, which was to become a systematic attempt to explain the eternal "*geist*" ("spirit" or "God") as it manifested itself in history. Specifically, Hegel was focused on how God revealed itself in individual human beings through subjective

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consciousness, i.e. God as a human phenomenon, or mental experience. Early in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel wrote, "The word 'God' [by] itself is a meaningless sound, a mere name; it is only the predicate that says *what God is*, gives Him content and meaning."³ Thus, Hegel went on to argue, if one wants to know the metaphysical *object, reality* or *being* behind the empty word "God" then one must empirically examine the physical manifestations of God through the linguistic predicates defining the particular characteristic or action of God. This basically means that if one wants to say "God is self-consciousness," as Hegel believed, then one would define "self-consciousness," trace its psychological and physical properties, and thereby, come to an empirically verifiable knowledge of what God is like through a knowledge and experience of those psychological and physical characteristics: the metaphysical idea of "God" gets meaning through the verbal and physical instances of its manifestation. Taken to its logical conclusion, Hegel is saying that "God" could be defined as "love" and then identified in a specific act of "love." Or "God" could be defined as justice and then identified in a specific act of "justice."

Hegel wanted to move away from purely metaphysical speculation in order to empirically verify the existence of "God" through a systematic exploration of how God *actually existed* in the physical world through physical history and subjective human consciousness. Hegel believed this would give theology a concrete objectivity, as well as a subjective human meaning. Hegel considered himself deeply spiritual and an advocate of Christianity, and he wanted a simplified, rational, and material conception for the basis of his faith. Hegel knew that all notions of God were rationally hard to explain and ultimately beyond conscious human experience and, by extension, human language. One can't really know or express into words the *all-encompassing totality of ultimate and eternal being*, which has been a basic Judeo-Christian

³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

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conception of "God." To theorize "God" as human consciousness and human action, Hegel thought he was simplifying theology so as to give God a concrete, physical presence in people's lives and, thereby, a new significance.

And in effect he was. But Hegel also opened up several avenues that could be exploited in unforeseen ways, as the radical group of Young Hegelians exemplified in their religious and political criticisms. First, by acknowledging that "God" was but an empty word signifying the *grand totality and ultimate reality of being that was completely beyond human comprehension*, Hegel seemed to be saying that humans can never really *know* "God," and thereby, never *prove* "God's" existence, which in effect could be used to defend agnosticism or atheism. Second, if the ultimate reality of "God" is beyond human comprehension then all religious expressions of "God" would seem to be only approximate and humanly fallible, thus, all religions would be human approximations of the reality of "God" and would be, thereby, equally imperfect and inadequate: "God" is beyond any human conception so no one religion can accurately convey the reality of "God."

Third, these conclusions lead to an agnostic stance, which recognizes that "God" cannot be proven to exist objectively. Thus, there are only two options. On the one hand, a person can choose faith, seeking confirmation of "God" through select, personal experiences taken to be manifestations of the holy. This was what Hegel, Buber, and Jung did. Or conversely, one can deny the existence of "God," deny faith, as the young Hegelian Karl Marx did, and focus exclusively on the material ground and phenomenal value of experience. Thus, the empty verbal idea of "God" could be rejected in favor of the predicates of *actual* experience - the ideas that can be confirmed through life, like consciousness, love or justice, because these ideas are full of practical value and power for human beings trying to live human lives. Hence, instead of saying,

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God is love and there is love, therefore, God is there. One can instead say, there is love and focus just on the particular human idea or value being enacted.

And while the concepts of love, truth, justice, and equality have all been articulated as metaphysical absolutes, they can also be apprehended and worked towards as psychological and cultural "Ideals" that can be imperfectly realized in particular applications. Thus, in exchanging the unknowable "God" for comprehensible "Ideals," human beings could begin to glean a sense of freedom and power with which to actualize the idealized predicates of "God" into actions that could make ideas come to life in concrete material purposes. Marx and other humanists have argued that the idea of "God" can radically re-defined as "human potential." The idea of human potential then becomes a possible, but not necessarily probable, reality that can inspire human agency and action. We aspire for love, justice, and truth, not because they are divine, but because they are deemed worthy human goals that make human life better.

One of the most convincing and original exponents of this humanistic philosophy of "God" was Benedict de Spinoza. In the 17th century Spinoza wrote, "The only end I strive to attain is to be able to taste union with God, produce true ideas in myself, and make all these things known to my fellow men."⁴ Spinoza argued quite convincingly, although for his time heretically, that "men judge things according to the disposition of their brain, and imagine, rather than understand them."⁵ The power of religious iconography in theology, art, and philosophy are all human products of "vivid imagination." Thus, Spinoza argued, so called "divine" revelations, the basis of most religions and religious experiences, are nothing more than products of the powerful faculty of human "imagination."⁶ Spinoza went on to write, when humans disagree

⁴ Benedict de Spinoza, "A Non-Geometric Draft of *The Ethics*," *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, Trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁵ Spinoza, *The Ethics*. Ibid.

⁶ Spinoza, "A Critique of Traditional Religion," Ibid.

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over differing religions or religious experiences they are not arguing about “God” or “the Holy Spirit,” they are just arguing about the products of “human invention,” which “they shield under the false name of divine zeal and passionate enthusiasm” in order to “propagate the most bitter hatred.”⁷ The point, Spinoza argued, was that even if "God" existed, which Spinoza thought it did, every human being would still have a different experience and interpretation of God. This would mean that "God" would be talked about and put into practice differently in various individual lives and diverse societies. This was a simple fact of human existence. Thus, tolerance should be the prime moral directive governing not only religious experience, but political organization, as no one individual or social group had the exclusive, *infallible* interpretation of “God.” Judging, censoring, and killing in the name of “God” seemed to Spinoza the height of human impiety and stupidity.

I would like to stop at this point and combine my brief introduction to Hegel, the radical critiques of Hegel made by Marx, and my short discussion of Spinoza. I would like to turn these diverse ideas into a single theological position, which will serve as my basic theological world-view. Let us call my theory the Agnostic-Humanistic Theological Position. This position can be broken down into seven parts. First, “God” is the *utterly unknowable all-encompassing totality of ultimate and eternal being*. Second, human beings try to explain “God” based on human experience and human language. Third, these linguistic explanations are derivative of the human brain and are, therefore, not divine revelations, but products of human reason and imagination. Fourth, all religions and religious experiences are highly subjective and purely *human* interpretations of the unknowable. Fifth, Because “God” is unknowable and can only be experienced through subjective human experience then all religions and religious experiences are *equally valid* as personal experience, but have *no claim* to total knowledge or objective proof of

⁷ Ibid.

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the “divine,” and thus, no one religion or religious experience is *THE* exceptional description or way to “God.” Sixth, human beings exist on a material earth and live in earth-bound societies and are, thereby, constrained by the natural laws of science and the human laws of particular societies, which means all value and meaning bear direct relation to the material conditions of existence. And finally, whatever the existence of some ultimate being, humans *create all value and meaning* relatively for different human societies, although some values, like altruism and love, are based on our biological nature. But regardless, all concepts of value and meaning are only applicable to the particular socio-legal environment of particular human beings living in historically conditioned societies on the planet earth. This means, as history demonstrates without a doubt, that humans have the ability to destroy, revise, or create new values, meanings, and social structures based on revised criteria of what is good, true, beautiful, etc.

This theological position has been more or less articulated in many diverse forms throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and it opened the way for early human psychologists to talk about human nature and belief, like William James, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and later psychologists like Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow, and Eric Fromm. These psychologists all scientifically explained the human religious impulse primarily as a highly subjective, mental experience. Both Nietzsche and Freud thought the religious impulse to be an “escape” from reality, thereby, an illusion that masks empirical reality, which can become a “delusion” denying reality altogether. James thought the religious impulse a more positive expression of human nature than Nietzsche or Freud could admit, but James still considered religion to be a highly subjective, “human” experience based on “passion,” “wants,” “susceptibilities,” and “capacities.” James described religion as an “enchantment.”⁸

⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

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In 1957, the European philosopher Mircea Eliade surpassed James' positive appraisal and argued for an even more sympathetic explanation of religion. Eliade described religion as a human "construction," a "mental universe," an "orientation," that created a "sacred" understanding of the multifarious material universe into an ordered "cosmos" ("the universe that man constructs for himself"), which serves as the basis for understanding reality and as a guide for living. Eliade described religion as an affirming, willful, and creative act, although hints of Freud's original pronouncement of "world denying" are still traceable: "religious man wishes to be other than he is on the plane of his profane experience. Religious man is not given; he makes himself."⁹

Gordon Allport discussed religion in terms of "sentiment" or personal "interest-systems" by which he meant an individual's ideology, and thus, Allport argued that religious experiences are as numerous as individuals. Allport argued that a religious orientation integrates experience and provides meaning and motives, and further, the imaginative illusions of the human mind generate the energy required for humans to become "agents." Thereby, human can create the conditions necessary for successful action in the midst of a determining environment. Allport explained, "beliefs" generate "energy," and "faith" becomes simply a belief based on "probability." Likewise, Abraham Maslow defined "God" as human possibility known through "peak experiences" that create ideals or goals, which people aspire to. These ideals or goals create meaning and value, which motivate people to act, develop their full potential, and create a full life: in Maslow's words, "full humanness" is the actualization of "the spiritual life" within "our biological life." Finally, Eric Fromm reached the same conclusions. Fromm believed there is "no spiritual realm outside of man" and that the religious impulse is about human beings

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, Trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1987).

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actualizing their “inherent potentialities,” attaining freedom and consciousness. “God,” Fromm argued, is but a symbol of human capability, an expression of idealized human potential, which provides a “powerful source of energy.” “God is I, inasmuch as I am human.”¹⁰

William James and the philosopher John Dewey were careful to separate between the “personal” and the “institutional” aspects of religion, which later psychologists like Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow and Eric Fromm theorized in more detail. Basically, as Eric Fromm related (via the philosophies of Karl Marx and Freud), individual humans create their own religious universe, which becomes an objective reality transcending its human origins, and thereby, it begins to have a life of its own. Thus, *subjective, personal ideas of “God,” which are fluid and imaginative become fixed, canonized idols worshiped as reality, enshrined in dogmatic rituals and texts, and these give rise to powerful institutions that often limit human freedom in the name of sublimated motives determined by doctrinal or ecclesiastical authority.* The personal religious experiences of truly exceptional human beings like Socrates, the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad all become transformed into institutionalized dogma (often in open defiance of the teacher’s original message) and become vehicles of thought control, indoctrination, and mass disillusion - almost always towards the end of a consolidated secular political power. In every case, institutionalized religion detaches itself from the ever-changing material world and solidifies a rigid, conservative world-view with which to interpret reality. And it is these highly partisan and rigid ideological platforms that have given rise to various criticisms of religion as “delusion” or “detachment from reality.”

To end this discussion of “God” I would like to turn to one more philosopher: Immanuel Kant. In the 18th century amidst rising doubts, Kant wanted to affirm religion, but he made an

¹⁰ Andrew R. Fuller, *Psychology and Religion: Eight Points of View*, 3rd Ed (Lanham: Littlefield Adams Quality Paperbacks, 1994).

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important distinction in his skeptically rational philosophy. He knew that no one could ever prove the existence of "God," thus, there never would be any justification for claiming one religion as the *only way* to experience "God." So Kant separated the physical and the metaphysical realms. For metaphysical questions, Kant argued for "faith" in "God:" humans must act *as if* "God" existed. For physical questions, Kant argued for "faith" in reason: humans must act *as if* they were free to rationally determine their own life. Kant took this dual position of "faith" because he believed that both "God" and the absolute ideal of "freedom" *must exist* for morality and progress to exist. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James noted Kant's position and wrote that even though words and theories about "God" are really empty approximations based on subjective human experience, religiously motivated humans act *as if* "God" existed, and thereby, order their lives according to this assumption in positive ways. James was puzzled, but decided to give religion the benefit of his doubt: religion could be an illusion, but the overwhelming majority of human beings seemed to have some religious position. Could all these people be deluded, James asked? Likewise, James pressed, human reason and science could answer a lot of important questions that religion could not and did conclusively debunk a lot of religious fantasy that has done harm to many individuals and societies. So what place does reason have in religion?

In these questions James set the tone for a century of religiously sympathetic, scientifically literate scholars who asked: Mustn't there be some ultimate truth, some ultimate reality behind all these religious experiences and world religions? Science can explain much, but it cannot explain everything? Science can also be short-sided or overly reductionist, so isn't it possible that the deeper, more complicated recesses of reality lay beyond science's reach? These scholars posit a basic presupposition that says, "yes, 'God' must exist" (for varied reasons) and

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then they theorize and act *as if* "God" in fact existed. Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (1976) is a classic example of this line of thought and it is a commendable book.

But to return to my position: where am I, the agnostic or "atheist," in all of this? Well I'll balk in discussions of "God." In different company I take different stances because I believe "God" to be only an idea, the reality of which (if there is a reality behind this concept) is completely beyond the human faculty to understand. The intellectually honest position is to say, no one can (or perhaps ever will be able to) prove beyond a doubt that "God" exists or does not exist. I can admit this basic point and I am pleased when others do as well. Personally, I have chosen against all theological forms or explanations of "God" because I find it unnecessary for morality and motivation, and potentially damaging when organized into orthodoxy. This has lead me to the Agnostic-Humanistic Theological Position, as noted above, which is infused with psychological explanations of the idea of "God" directed towards human ends.

Based on the evidence that I have collected of human beings acting in history, and based on my own personal experience, I have decided to take the flip side of the Pascalian/Kantian wager and live *as if* "God" did not exist. This makes me, under strict definitions, an "atheist" – one whose life is not centered on a "God." I am more concerned with the profane world than with the sacred. I have devoted my life to teaching and guiding students through this life, facing very real and terrible worldly problems, and trying to make a positive difference on this troubled earth.