

THE CHRISTLIKE GOD. John V Taylor. (SCM 1992)

First question is not 'does God exist?' but 'What do we mean by God?'

Notions of superbeing or superforce – but God is not to be one being among many.

Notion of transcendence – it came to me, not I came upon it. Barbara Hepworth said: 'Vitality is not a physical, organic attribute of sculpture: it is a spiritual inner life.'

Ninian Smart: 'numinous' is experienced as exterior to self; 'mystical' is looking inward to find oneness of self with universal Self.

Transfigurations. Something mysterious in human perception ~ of a curve of a wave, line of hills. We glimpse the world ablaze with glory and yet Being itself is not to be seen. The 'more' than meets the eye adds no measurable extension to them. Whatever it is makes its presence felt and challenge our previous framework of mind. It (Bach Picasso) leaves us with conviction, yet cannot be substantiated.

The coherence of everything is so ordinary we take it for granted – but!!!

When we experience intuition of meaning of life we sense personal identification with the underlying unity. We speak of God in terms of Relationship.

Some sense a release from self as a 'rescue'. Now able to rely on ultimate goodness of others and what is about us. USA and UK research shows as well-balanced those who speak of such experiences. (God of Bible is a saving/rescuing God)

Miracles should draw attention from 'miracle' to their cause.

Early rabbis referred to God as Place (Context) in which all things come to pass but never itself perceived.

This impact of 'God' includes an 'ought' since to 'know' God is to experience one's freedom to accept or reject love.

These experiences have to be reflected upon by ourselves but also in light of what others have experienced before – but never to rely upon other's experience as substitute for our own – tradition rather than personal encounter.

Chapter Three: Ultimate Experience in other cultures.

Paul opens Romans by saying God has been experienced by all if they but look around. 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' ~ Gerard Manley Hopkins. We can only interpret in terms of our existing culture. From animism related to particular places or things a short step to see in forces of nature greater deity. The unification of the All seen in Vedas even before Aryans brought animism again. External rituals overcame the numinous experience in Hinduism but then reaction and reclamation of Unity. There are not many but ONE ~ the Atman and so began

introspective religion. This Ad-vaita non-dualism led to Buddhism later seeking to attain it without an existent Godhead.

Greek culture held Beauty and the Good to be but one (cf Greek art). They held that the One was susceptible to physical Laws and looked for underlying principal ~ fire, water, air, mind. Heraclitus ~ Flux; Parmenides ~ Permanence, Plato arguing that only the changeless was real and this must reside outside world of things. Aristotle introduced a middle way between Heraclitus and Parmenides by arguing for Becoming ~ the presence of Potential. It was a teleological concept of causation understanding First Mover as a magnet attracting towards blessedness, not a first nudge into existence, but a supreme Mind drawing all intelligence towards itself.

The absolute otherness of God made god rather aloof, only relating to creation via either emanations or a second-level god, the Demiurge (sometimes Logos or Mind). Judaism picked up on Yahweh as Wisdom or Word much influenced by Hellenism (typically Philo).

Chapter 4: God with us.

Exodus, rescue, deliverance, is essential Jewish story, not experience of numinous. Probably many escapes were built into a greater myth of Moses' Exodus plus new genre of 'homiletical recapitulation of history', using great events didactically. The Tanakh is shot through with this genre.

It does not seek to argue for God's existence so much as excite experience: "My father was a wandering Aramaean", etc. Many statements about abiding presence of YHWH too. The name YHWH relating to Ginomai = to be, to come about – not abstractly but 'being present'. This presence provokes fear in primitive people 'do not come near'.

In response to this presence YHWH demands. 'No other God before me.' Monotheism. Eventually provokes promise too ~ past remembering and future promise.

The Impact of Jesus. Beyond at the heart of all things mediated through human personality – the ultimate/supreme instance of all time. 'jesus' is 'Yeshua – YHWH is rescue.' Begins after John's arrest but dissociates from hysteria of expectations and left his followers to reach own insights. Direct and intimate – Abba. Baptism presented as moment of inner conviction for him. Prefers ambiguous title of Son of Man. Early Church searched Tanakh for what it told about Christ but Jesus spoke from 'own authority'. So the figure of the Crucified explains itself to humanity. After resurrection they knew him alive as never before. Thinking of God and thinking of Jesus became inseparable.

Chapter 5: Xn Experience & European Philosophy

1. The Inaccessible God.

Plato proposes a divine sub-being so God remains distant. Aristotle has God in still centre towards which everything has potential to be drawn and absorbed. Kant proposed that human mind interprets phenomena in its own terms – so God cannot be 'seen' according to our ways of knowing. Cf. Cloud of Unknowing (14thC)

But Bible recognised God as direct creator, imminent in history, taking our nature upon him, not so wholly Other as to be non-communicative. 'God is meaning beyond

Mystery' ~ Rabbi Heschel. Early Xns assumed therefore emanations (incl Logos) so Father is only comprehensible through Logos/Son (Origen). This was a two-tier notion of God.

Aquinas posited that God is knowable by humankind. Because we share: 1 Freedom, or 2 Rationality, or 3 Self-awareness ~ which allows our memory to transcend time, and generalities to be inducted from particular.

The Absolute can only transcend itself by giving itself away – and we may share that capacity through grace. So God involves self in the world.

2. God is only One and cannot be three.

Humans only exist in dynamic of relationship, and God surely does not 'lack' this joy. We can only perceive one aspect of God at one time – the generosity, the obedience, or the fulfilment. (Augustine: a lover, a beloved, and love)

3. God is unchangeable.

Change implies something previously lacking. Which God is not. But this is only thinkable before discovery of evolution! We know universe as continuous give and take. Also generalities cannot exist without particulars – so Jesus is not a generality – or an Idea – but Jesus is human being having a self which is body and soul – no sema/soma conflict!

Stability is maintained not by stasis but development. Being present means being affected by. God does not change if he chooses to express his being in new ways. God is forever newly potential and shows his self by eternally giving himself away – going out of himself.

4. The unaffected God.

But is God morally indifferent, captive within his own bliss? Stoics and Epicureans were followed by ascetics in enduring untouched.

5. God cannot be limited

We can say God is free to do as he wills but only according to his own nature. He is limited by what he is, which is self-giving.

Revelation of unguessable

When this self-giving is disclosed by Jesus, Peter says, God forbid! So how can Jesus be divine with such ideas? Virgin birth invented to overcome the divide and reinforced by virginal conception of BVM. It showed that Jesus is not human so anything he says as Jesus a man is not the same as what lies within the divine. He could after the cross throw off his disguise and resume heaven.

But Jesus is in fact a radical redefinition of the sovereignty of God. Chose the foolish, the weak, the poor in the eyes of the world. Not so with you, etc.

Doxa is outward shining of innermost nature. So in John the cross glorifies the Father. Unless a grain of wheat dies – this is the ongoing nature of Godhead.

Chapter Six: Christlike God in the OT.

All this is so new and yet, 'I did not come to abolish the Torah but..' The new wine is 'drawn from' the old water jars. We can see the seeds of the fundamental novelty of Jesus' conception of God in the Tanakh.

God of Tanakh is always ahead of Israel – in the cloud and pillar of fire from the first. It was not derived from numinous experience but from rescue from slavery. They had then to adjust life to conform to the moral character of God. To have no images meant they were not allowed to conceive descriptions or limitation. They were elected to be archetype of humanity vis a vis God.

God was also a covenant/berith God. The blood sharing united the parties forever. Hesed is usually translated as 'loving-kindness' but better – 'constancy', 'faithfulness' – to covenant. Whatever Israel does to its God, God bears it and loves ~so also Jesus.

God's utter determination to keep this relationship open is thwarted, which we 'feel' as Divine Wrath. Like wrath of good teacher. Love endures all things. 'My people what have I done to you?' – Tanakh accepts *God's hurt* & suffering that we disobey.

OT shows that punishment does not move us, but to see suffering of teacher/God does. And so we see how Jesus does indeed 'fulfil' the Torah.

Chapter Seven: The cost of creation.

What scientific research teaches us gives us even greater grounds to wonder at God at the heart of all these things – delighting in them. God is Being itself, and gives being so each distinct existent can possess it in its own way. It is a love-gift. With appreciation that creation is through development/process (Genesis 1) in evolution, we now see that God does not determine the outcome of the process. So God does not control but although not therefore all-powerful, is inexhaustible. When we thought God had created a 'finished' state, that notion of control was more logical. Instead we see God as interactive, not determining but being the fountainhead of possibility through offering 'potential'. Aristotle saw how potential draws existents towards itself, but does not determine what already has freedom. Each creature is thereby allowed to be itself.

The 'anthropic principle': Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time* says within the first hundredth of a second after the big bang the ratio of nuclear particles to photons, electrons and neutrons was precisely right for emergence of life. The earth orbits helpfully (not elliptically) so our temperature does not vary too much for life. We might presume to say this was 'an adventure with a purpose'.

'The rules of the game', once established are then free – and this is the great risk of letting go. God's letting go entails a degree of pain.

God 'makes room' for world of beings by withdrawing. Yet, like a mother and embryo, the surrendered space is within God's Being not outside it. The Adam and Eve story is not the 'Fall' but the result of God's self-limiting. Creation is abdication of power for the sake of communion with the other.

Christ walking on the water is the nature of God: his divine precariousness, offering us the gift of freedom so that we may love, for Love means giving significance from oneself to another. God is limitless self-giving love.

God on the Cross willingly shares the consequences of choosing to make the world by letting it make itself. It's the only way to let emerge willingly, but God knows the pain of it and indeed shares it.

The problem of evil then,

But it is a monstrous price: to see millions suffer in the process of becoming. Pain is one of the most creative forces. Pain can give a strange joy but can the end ever justify the means? But we can turn away from what God seeks by offering potential. Some have deliberate intention of turning away and being only half alive, throwing the plan into reverse. We turn from the pain and joy of relationship and often now use IT to escape from I-Thou into I-It as a substitute. To avoid pain becomes the predominant impulse. Human rapaciousness causes more suffering than 'natural' causes. But God is the one most injured and therefore is the only one who can really forgive. 'Why does God allow this?' – is answered best by 'why do we allow this?'

Chapter 8: The Problem of Providence

Does God then intervene in some way or let the creation go its own way?

God does not let us see his face but only his back – so we only see God's actions in retrospect but not before or during, as if God says, 'what can I make of this situation?' and draws history but does not steer it. God relies on human agents. So the Tanakh stories are of men and women whom God is using. God uses interplay and reciprocity. 'I am *with* you'. It can therefore be interpreted as God acting alone or Man acting alone – but its reality may be different altogether, the contingency being the human agents preparedness – 'be it as you will'. 'he could do no miracle there..'

Also we see that tyranny over-reaches itself and has a time-limit before its crash. As if there is a built-in autopilot or providence to keep a self-generating universe on course despite its unpredictability.

Divine intervention fails because it implies God is not always there, and God's trademark is nature so how would he contradict his own brand? God sees the intricacy of the cosmos and recognises its network of influences.

1. Good teacher's stimulation to child to learn
2. Antecedent causality, although it can be countermanded
3. Evil being disarmed by realising that we are infinitely loved.
4. Actors find inner-meaning of play and work with it (or not)
5. We are author's creatures but not puppets – we are let be to become
6. Best author does not rig the plot

God does not intervene since this already the play: David Garrick gave Hamlet happy ending to 'improve it'. The miracle is the cosmos, not a contradiction of it! 'Let this cup pass from me' would have ruined the Christ Event.

Rewards and Punishments?

When it was found this was not God's way, it was assumed it would occur in hereafter or in the third generation. But if it pays to be good, that would denude the action of its goodness – it would be selfish.

Job had unconditional trust – accepting from God whatever comes – but three tempters asked 'why?' This undermined him but he came through after a numinous experience of presence. So Providence is Emmanuel.

Chapter 9: In-dwelling.

Agape is total reciprocity brought awareness in Jesus of Nazareth.

So God is not so much Ground as a flow and counterflow [fountainhead?] Everyone's existence begins in another (mother) and we seek to create through sex – the interflow of creatures. We need each other to be human. So Jesus needed the village rabbi of his childhood, his parents, neighbours etc. Martin Buber rightly observed that: I experience everything as 'It'; I only relate to anything as 'Thou'. The supreme dogma of Xnity is *not* the individual but interchange – but we certainly fear mutual responsibility, preferring to see ourselves as self-made. 'Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relation with other persons' Buber. This is what Church seeks to be, limbs one of another – the nature of God as Trinity. 'Abide in me and I in you' is the ultimate expression of doctrine of exchange (another is in me). But this is not just us and God it is the pivotal moment of the cosmos. (relationship) We must live it out.

Chapter 10: Whom I Serve. Power and Prayer

Whatever God is, God is Christlike. Can even see this in other faiths. But most religions like militarism, not weakness and self-giving. So we must affirm Zeitgeist and challenge it simultaneously as God seeks to reconcile world to himself.

We all have power, the ticket-collector or king, Power's antidote being Prayer for there we see true self.

Desert Temptations of Power:

1. Power of provider ~ 'I know what's best for you,' as opposed to 'how many loaves have you got?' My blood shed for you.
2. Power of possessor ~ The grasp of predator on others or, 'I choose to give all my employees same as you.' Not playing God.
3. Power or Performer ~ to win love. Or to use gifts of good teacher?

We look to the power of weakness.

God of unceasing opportunism ~ 'what shall we make of this?' for God knows every possible permutation.

But God who lets all things be, not *laissez-faire*. Tells Peter the Church will be founded on Rock, but then 'Get behind me Satan', the cock will crow.

But even so, God is patient, his hands tied by love, but waits for the response which will offer the opening to God's purpose – always living and working 'in others'.

In Prayer:

1. God gives inner resources and steadfastness.
2. God gives new insight into situation
3. Opens us to God's gift to creation of self-healing
4. Allows God's suffering to absorb the evil
5. Prayer offers us the honour of sharing burden of waiting and sorrow.
6. Prayer protests against world's quick fix. Prayer is 'stilling'.

Taylor offers his experience of Africa:

Adult or child comes and sits silently near while we get on, and later leaves saying only 'I have seen you.'

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