The One God

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HOLY, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of thy glory,” the Church sings with joy at the moment of the Sanctus and thus gracefully spans the two Testaments. Echoed in Latin, in Greek or Slavonic, in Syriac or Armenian, the triple kadosh of the seraphim in the inaugural vision of Isaiah, calling him to prophetic service, lives each hour around the globe. God's transcendent majesty inspires men and angels to cry out with wonder that He is most holy, all pure, other than His creatures, infinitely higher than they. Though Synagogue and Church repeat in different tongues the angelic words Isaiah heard, they do so with the same awe, for one and the same is the God of both Testaments.

This assertion is not a contemporary emphasis motivated by conciliatory, irenic desires. Rather is it a matter of perennial Christian attitude, plainly evident from the historical record. As early as the middle second century the Church, through her uncompromising champions Irenaeus and Tertullian, fought Marcion's contrary thesis. According to him, it was a lie to speak of two Covenants, since the Old and New Testaments could never be reconciled; the God of Israel could never be the Father whom Jesus preached, for the one was harsh and demanding, the "Just God," while the other was gracious and merciful, the "Good God."

Against this, the Church could not be silent, for the true God is justice and pity, demands and gives, sternness and love. Unwaveringly she spoke out, one of her early canons excommunicating those who accept or assert Marcion's doctrine: "If anyone says or believes that one is the God of the Ancient Law and another the God of the Gospels, let him be anathema" (Denziger, Enchiridion Symbolorum, 28). And to this day every bishop, before his consecration, solemnly declares his belief that God, the almighty Lord, is the one Author of
Old and New Testaments, no less of the Law and of the Prophets than of the Apostolic Writings.

Marcion's threat struck at the roots of the Christian faith, which knows itself to be the flowering and fruit of the tree God planned in the days of the patriarchs and watched over and watered through the centuries that followed them. Forever, then, will the Church proclaim that the promises no less than the fulfillment are His gifts, gifts of the one God; forever will she proclaim that the God of Abraham is the Father of the Lord Jesus. But no error is so great, so ugly, that it does not have its source, or rather, one of its sources, in a real problem. The problem seized on by Marcion has been sensed by many an Old Testament reader since: those passages which speak of God or make Him speak in a way that bears the impress of passionate, impetuous men.

The Old Testament, particularly its more ancient parts, uses language of God which is highly anthropomorphic. True, the language of the New Testament is also anthropomorphic. The language of man must ever be so when it speaks of God. But there is a vast difference between the anthropomorphisms of Paul, who speaks of the “wrath of God,” and those of Moses, who sings: “The Lord is a warrior ... Pharaoh’s chariots and army he hurled into the sea” (Ex 15:3-4), as there is a difference between the first chapter of Genesis and the second. The second chapter, which embodies the story of man’s creation in its earlier form, portrays God in a markedly anthropomorphic and rather homely style, as molding like a potter and breathing like a man, while the first is more elevated, limning the Creator’s majesty.

Two facts of critical significance are implied by these comparisons, namely, that there is progressive revelation about God in the Old Testament, reaching a climax in the New, and that language is intimately related to the intellectual world be it of a man or of a people. Thus, generally speaking, language will be more anthropomorphic, even naive, when man lives in an earlier age. It will be less so when his idea of God is refined and enriched by revelation, and when his thoughts and words have grown more mature by reflection and have been deepened by inner experience.

What Marcion missed, then—if he really wished to see the truth—is that the problem of the Old Testament is not with its God but with its men. The mind of God does not need time, but the human mind does. Revelation is conditioned not by its Giver, but by its receiver, man in his finitude. Divine wisdom is confined to this human, variable world, and its growth is conditioned by the growth of the human mind. It is true that the Church of Christ, in all of history the church most thoroughly and truly revised and corrected. It is never without its lapses. It becomes ensnared in the worship of a new idol, permitted it to even the last is the way of God...
man in his finitude. When, as in revelation, eternity enters time, when
divine wisdom is communicated to a created intellect, the grasping of
it cannot be entire all at once.

Of the gradual and unflagging way in which God led the children of
Israel, and with them the world, Gregory Nazianzen has this to say:
"In all of history there have been two great life-shaping changes, two
revolutions if you will, which are called the two Testaments. One went
from the worship of idols to the Law, the other from the Law to the
Gospel... The two are alike in this, that their changes did not come
about unexpectedly, at the first sudden thrust. Why so? So that—and
this is worth the effort of knowing—we may not be dragged [to God]
by force but may be led by persuasion. For what is not done freely will
not last... but what is done willingly carries with it the seed of long
life and firmness. What is done under coercion, is really the work of
him who coerces us, while what is done of our own will is our own.
This last is the way of divine goodness, the first of tyranny..."

"Just so," St. Gregory continues, "when God set aside some ancestral
rites and permitted others, He acted like an educator, or like a physi-
cian... in order to administer his medicines, will often allow
his patient something sweet, well timed and artfully flavored. Again,
it is not easy to move from what has long been held in honor and es-
tem to things new. Hence the first Testament, having done away with
idols, permitted [bloody] sacrifices; the second ended the sacrifices, but
at least did not prohibit circumcision. Men could bear with a certain
equanimity, therefore, the taking away and, in the end, give up even
what had been conceded them, that is, first the sacrifices, later circumci-
sion. And so pagans were made Jews, and Jews Christians, and [the
world] was led step by step—by stealth, as it were—to the gospel" (PG
36:160-161).

Such is the "unhurrying, unperturbed pace" of God. St. Gregory has
only outlined His way to man through biblical times. Much research,
much critical work, is needed to show in detail how Israel's understand-
ing of God's nature heightened; how the knowledge of His will and
design grew; how His universal kingship, how redemption from evil,
the true sacrifice, and all the dominant themes of the Bible, unfolded
before Abraham's children; how revelation moved forward from Abra-
ham to Moses, then down the line of the writing prophets, from Amos
to Malachi.
With burning tongue and exalted speech, the prophets depicted the ethical heart of God. Their zeal flamed out alike against the inhumanity of man and Israel's lapses into idolatry. Loving their people, martyrs in the cause of holiness, they were supereminent men of God. There was more of the experience of the Lord in them and less of the language of men, as was fitting in the forerunners of "the Prophet who was to come, who would not only receive God's word but would be the Word of God.

What we have said so far should not be taken to mean that every kind of anthropomorphism is a sign of a primitive mentality. In the Bible, anthropomorphisms are, more often than not, the expression of the Hebrew mind with its love for the visible world, that is, for the goodness of all created things. To the Hebrew mind, the world of the senses was not evil, rather was it transparent to the glory of the Creator; matter was not an enemy, rather a servant of God and man. So unmistakably is this the outlook of the biblical Israel that it must point beyond itself: it is not chance or merely an imperfection, it has a significance in the divine economy.

When the Israelite spoke of God's arms or feet, of His countenance, His eyes, His mouth, or even His nostrils, he did not doubt for a moment that the Lord was spirit, that He could not be imagined, that He transcended all there is and all men could think. What he really tried to express in metaphors was that the Lord was not far and unapproachable but near—for the manner of the Bible is humble and impassioned. That God is jealous, that He loves and hates, that He deliberates, repents, and takes vengeance—words like these spell out that God is not just an idea but the living God, indeed they are a haunting promise of the Incarnation.

Marcion could not have been more wrong when he spoke of two Gods and declared war on the God of Israel. God is forever the same, whether He creates man, calls Abraham, appears to Moses, leads the Israelites out of Egypt, gives them the land of promise, sends them judges, kings, prophets, or, in the fullness of time, comes Himself to save—He draws "with bands of love" (Os 11:4). True—and this cannot be said too often—before God could be seen with eyes like Hosea's, centuries had to pass, for men are limited. He, however, is the same in all His dealings. "The God of the Old Testament, who is often regarded as a God to be dreaded," writes a modern exegete, "is in reality merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and truth; Ps 85:7-8; Is 55:3; Mic 7:18." O.P., The Mystery of God. It is in the name of the name of Jews and Christians. That the name of Christ, a name bridge, then, desires to make the name of God.

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merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness’ (Ex 34:6; Ps 85:7; 102:13; 144:8; Joel 2:13). These four attributes express the same notion: Yahwe is a God of love, whom St. John will call Charity, but who is defined more exactly here, through the mention of patience and mercy, as the God of all benignity’ (Ceslaus Spicq, O.P., The Mystery of Godliness, pp. 161-162).

It is in the name of the One God that THE BRIDGE seeks a meeting of Jews and Christians. This name, however, is for us ever wedded to the name of Christ, a name that keeps Christians and Jews apart. THE BRIDGE, then, desires to make understood Him who separates, and those whom He separates. For as prejudice feeds on ignorance, love requires understanding and understanding knowledge. In speaking of Christ and Christians, of Jews and Judaism, we hope to spread knowledge and create understanding, an intellectual and spiritual climate consonant with the unsearchable ways of God (Rom 11:33).

Happily, there is a notable scholarly renaissance in our times among Jews as well as among Catholics. Both are eagerly exploring their traditions, and both are making them available to English readers. Witness recent English editions of the Fathers and of the Talmud. There is no gainsaying the fact of a reviving religious interest at the intellectual level. Catholic scholars are investigating the rabbinical background of the Gospels; Jewish thinkers like Joseph Klausner and Martin Buber and literary figures like Franz Werfel and Sholem Asch have shown an awareness of Christian themes. To broaden this reciprocal knowledge, to sift it and thus to serve truth, is the task of THE BRIDGE.

May He who is the God of both Testaments be with us, for unless the Lord build the bridge, they labor in vain who build.

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