

## **‘True, but not Truth-full’: Talking God**

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### **Getting Started**

A few years ago, I picked up an anthology of contemporary Christian philosophers discoursing about truth. In one chapter, I chanced upon this statement: ‘We can make true statements but they may not be truth-full’ (slight paraphrase). This has become my litmus test in every discourse I engage in about truth, especially truth about God. This statement serves as a lens through which I view God and is the guiding premise of this essay.

Humans have always felt compelled to converse about the divine, about God. Talking God has birthed the great religions of the world. Whichever side of the religious spectrum we stand (or think we stand), sooner or later we will say things about God and propose ideas about him. This seems inevitable and comprises the most elemental feature of human enterprise.

It is fairly apparent as we travel around the world that religion has served as the fulcrum of human activities—worship, art and even architecture. Invariably, all the great art and architecture of past civilisations has centred on human discourse and belief about God. The forms may differ; the intent is very much the same. From the Incas to the Mayans, from the Khmers to the Chinese, from the Greeks to the Romans, the compulsion to honour God has been pre-eminent.

Great temples and mausoleums dot the landscape of every continent as humans paid tribute to their idea of God. The Greeks built the magnificent Parthenon. The ancient Khmers built a Wat (Temple) in every block of their magnificent city Ang Kor. The Burmese built an entire field of Pagodas (stupas) at Bagan, Myanmar. Islam has its great mosques and Christians their basilicas and cathedrals. Every religion has engaged in this enterprise at great expense, but also left behind world heritage sites that we are learning to value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, such a journey also unveils the reality that there are various ways of talking God. I examine these various forms of conversations about God in this essay. In the subsequent essay I explore the biblical discussion of such matters.

### **God within**

One of the oldest and most prevalent discussions of God is often labelled as ‘pantheism’. This idea was, and still is, prevalent in every tribal group or pre-literate society. Such societies did not produce organised religion as we know it, but they did engage in talking God. They developed distinctive views of the divine and left their taboos and traditions for us to study.

Common to all these primal faiths is the idea that the divine pervades the world of nature. Literally, God is in everything, even within us. They revered and worshipped the forces of nature and paid homage to various living things. This was done with the underlying belief that God is everywhere and in everything. While most primal faiths had some understanding of a great cosmic presence who/which created all things, they mostly relied on systems of divine presence. As a result, rivers, trees, thunder, sun, moon and other natural realities were viewed as manifestations of God.

In this paradigm, it is a short step to believing that God is within us. This led to reverence of ‘holy’ men, sadhus, shamans, druids and the like because they were also seen as divine manifestations or

at least conduits of the divine. In today's world, these beliefs have been resurrected in various New Age movements which carry the basic idea of God within.

## **God is many**

A major paradigm of talking God is termed 'polytheism'. This is the belief system that God is multiple—there are many gods. However, we should recognise that polytheism exhibits itself in different ways. Here, I explain the two most common forms of polytheism.

### *Hierarchy of gods*

Among the ancient Canaanites, Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans, and to a great extent the religions of the Americas (Aztec, Mayan, Inca), God was presented as a hierarchy of divine beings who have specific lines of relationship and authority between them. Think of this as a pyramid with the chief God (often believed to be the 'Father God') and his consort at the top of the pyramid. As we progress downwards through the pyramid, we encounter a pantheon of gods and goddesses with specific roles and functions. The lower down the pyramid, the less important was the divine person.

The better known model (popularised by Hollywood) is the Greek version. In Greek mythology, Zeus was the 'Father God' at the top and all other 'gods and goddesses' were his descendants—children, grandchildren and so on. To the Greeks every aspect of life was connected to one of these beings who were all given names. Therefore, we hear of Hades the god of the underworld, Ares the god of war or Athena the goddess of wisdom.

In this model we also encounter demi-gods who bridge the worlds of gods and humans. These are sometimes referred to as titans or heroes who were part divine part human, such as Perseus. This was an attempt to balance the distance and indifference of the gods with some human qualities like compassion and courage.

### *Three Gods plus pantheon*

A more complex version of polytheism was developed in India and is known to the world as Hinduism. To be exact, Hinduism is not a singular religion but rather an amalgamation of religions forming a sort of rubric of common beliefs and traditions. The complexity of Hindu discourse about God is presented here in a somewhat simplified manner.

Hinduism teaches that there are three primary Gods who are supreme over the world but who are also distinct from each other in person and nature. The Sanskrit word 'Trimurti' describes this reality of three supreme Gods—Brahma the creator, Vishnu the redeemer and Shiva the destroyer-regenerator. Each is described as an individual God with his own specific role in the universe, yet the three are on par with each other and complement each other's roles. With regards to humans, Vishnu is the most actively involved and appears from time to time to assist humans through crises periods. These appearances are called 'avatars' and Vishnu has made nine appearances (in varying forms); the tenth appearance will usher in the end of the world. The Gods do have a direct impact on the world and human affairs.

Below the 'Trimurti' is a virtual pantheon of gods and goddesses and a devotee may worship as many as he or she desires. Inevitably, every Hindu worships at least one of the members of the 'Trimurti'. Unlike the Greek model, Hinduism does not view these divine persons as being in a state of conflict and humans can worship any or all of them. Essentially, this is a paradigm of options—the more the better.

## **Only ONE God**

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the idea that God is ONE, literally, spatially and in every other consideration. This view is called 'monotheism' and is subscribed to by Judaism and Islam. In this view, God is not only one, he is alone. He is transcendent over the created order (his work), stands outside of it but may be involved with it when necessary.

Considering the population size of Islam, we can consider Islamic thought as the representative of this model. In Islam, the statement of God's oneness and greatness, referred to as 'shahada', is the first duty of faith. The recitation that there is no God but Allah is the start of Muslim faith and the preface of every prayer or lesson. In Islamic teaching, God is so utterly one and alone that it is the greatest sin to even imagine an associate or equal to God. Sometimes this is referred to as absolute monotheism.

A somewhat softer version of monotheism is displayed in Judaism, largely driven by the 'Shema' (Deut 6:4-9). The 'Shema' is the virtual creed to Judaism and opens with these words: 'Hear (*sh'ma*), O Israel, Yahweh your God, Yahweh ONE'. This is followed by 'you shall love Yahweh with all your heart (mind), soul (being) and exceedingly (an adverb without qualifier)'. This God is not only ONE but demands absolute loyalty.

Monotheism (sometimes known as unitarianism to some Christians) is simple and straightforward; God is one and that is all there is (no hierarchy, no pantheon). This is a significant form of talking God.

## **Three but ONE**

When the Christian Church began, it realised that its understanding of God did not fit any of the preceding paradigms. This guided the Church to discussion and eventual coinage of a label to encapsulate its belief. In this way, Christians talking God resulted in a new model, 'trinitarianism'.

In this model, God cannot be adequately represented by either the prevailing polytheism of first century Greeks or the monotheistic view of the Jews. The Church had to chart its own course and develop its own language. The Christian understanding revolved around two basic theoretical premises. On the one hand, God is not a multiplicity of persons as we find in polytheism. On the other hand, God is far too complex to be singular. Christians began to use the term 'Trinity' or 'Godhead' to speak about God.

This idea is now known as trinitarianism and in this view God is one in being and nature but three in persons. In a nutshell, there are THREE persons in ONE God. This was not simply an average between polytheism and monotheism; it was a unique view with its own distinctive language. As difficult as trinitarianism is to explain, we do have to accept the historical fact that this is the orthodox Christian paradigm and arguably the most complex way of talking God.

For Christian talking God, there is Father, Son and Spirit—three separate persons yet one, undivided being. In the next article I will survey the basic Bible data to consider whether this Christian idea is truly biblical. I would urge readers to bear in mind my initial caveat, 'We can make true statements, but they may not be truth-full'. This is especially applicable to any discourse about God. Yet we will continue talking God; our faith demands it!

## **‘True, but not Truth-full’: Talking God Again**

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### **Recapitulation**

In the previous essay, we discovered certain ways of talking God. In pantheism, God is everywhere and in everything, including humans. In polytheism, God is many but there are different ways to conceive this multiplicity of God. Monotheism offers a singular idea of God as ONE and this is possibly the simplest way of talking God. Christian thought does not fit any of these models and instead introduced a different term with its own implications. Trinitarianism is the idea that God is ONE but made up of three distinct persons and is considered orthodox Christian theology.

Christians also maintain that this way of talking God is based on biblical teaching and it is this aspect of theology that I will now explore. However, at the very outset I would suggest that the label ‘Trinity’ is not only difficult to explain, it may actually make for opaque communication. Having worked most of my life as Bible teacher and pastor among non-Christians, I think the use of this label does not resonate with most people. It is difficult for those who did not grow up as Christians to comprehend the term ‘Trinity’. Perhaps we can communicate Bible talking God without any specific label. But, first things, first.

The question to ponder in this essay is, ‘What does the Bible really say about God?’ I pursue the answer through the lens I set up at the beginning: ‘We can make true statements but they may not be truth-full’. The statement may be more necessary as we begin talking God from the biblical perspective.

### **Hebrew Bible talking God**

Some Christians believe that the ‘Trinity’ option was part of Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible in this discourse) thought. As a person with some expertise on the Hebrew Bible (HB), I concur with the general scholarly consensus that the idea is foreign to HB. Nevertheless, I maintain that talking God in HB is more complex than is recognised.

While I cannot be overly detailed in this essay, I will explain some rather relevant passages. Perhaps doing this as an enumeration would make reading easier.

#### *God’s singularity*

There are two types of HB passages regarding the nature of God. The first group of texts focuses squarely on God’s singularity. Consider some sample verses (translations used are my own).

- Deuteronomy 6:4.  
This verse launches the ‘Shema’ passage and is a mainstay of Judaic monotheistic thought. A transliterated presentation may help decipher the verse: *‘sh’ma Yisrael Yaweh elohenu Yahweh ekhad’*. Literally translated, ‘Listen, Israel! Yahweh our God; Yahweh one’ (the use of nominal clauses makes translation notoriously tricky). The verse contains 3 elements—a command to pay attention to God (Listen, Israel!), a relational statement (Yahweh our God) and an assertion about God (Yahweh ONE). The singularity of God is the underlying idea of the third element.
- Exodus 3:14.

When God appeared to Moses and commissioned him for the deliverance of Israel, Moses raised a very pertinent question: 'What is your name?' God's response was, 'I am who I am' and declared that as his official name (a play on the same construction as Yahweh). In the phrase there is a singular personal pronoun. There is no intimation at this point that God is anything but one.

- Isaiah 45:5.  
This verse reads, 'I am Yahweh, there is no other, there is no God but me.' The passage seems self-explanatory and coupled with the use of a singular personal pronoun appears to establish the singularity of God. This type of phraseology is a dominant theme in the book of Isaiah who presents the most complete view of God. On numerous occasions Isaiah cites God using the self-predication 'I am Yahweh'.

At first glance, it appears that HB is solidly on the side of monotheistic thought. The verses surveyed above are merely samples of a larger collection. However, when we stop a little longer to consider HB statements we discover another reality.

### *God's multiplexity*

Less evident, but equally significant, is HB talking God in terms of multiplexity. While God may be seen as singular, it is not singularity as we think but more of a singular complexity. Allow me to elaborate with the help of certain sample texts.

- Genesis 1:1.  
This is one of the best known verses of HB and introduces God with the name 'Elohim'. Bible students know that Elohim is a plural noun and in some passages it may be translated as plural. In the majority of passages it is translated as singular 'God'. The question here is, 'What kind of plural noun is Elohim?' Some have suggested that this is the plural of majesty and reflects the greatness of God. I suggest that it also serves as a clue to the complexity or multiplexity of God. There is more to God than meets the eye.
- Genesis 1:26.  
When God stated his intention to create humans, he employed plural pronouns to do this. 'Let *us* make humans in *our* image' ('image' is singular). What is evident in the verse is a certain tension between singularity and multiplexity. The singular image reflects a multiplex reality.
- Genesis 1:27.  
The intention to create humans resulted in multiplex reality; not one human but an interlocking reality of two. The verse reads, 'God created human (the generic 'adam' is utilised) in his image, in God's likeness he created him // male and female he created them'. The parallelism here is significant: 'God's likeness' parallels 'male and female', while 'he created him' parallels 'he created them'. There is a clear movement between singular and plural, between singularity and multiplexity. We may tentatively conclude that if God's creation is singular yet multiplex, the same may be true and even more so of the creator.

While HB may not overtly teach 'trinitarian' ideas, it does present a complex view regarding God's nature. There is a tension between singularity and multiplexity—God embodies both realities. Perhaps this is why there are so many names, titles and appellatives for him.

### *God's mystery*

Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us of an important aspect of God for humans to keep in mind. Translated literally the verse reads, 'For not my thoughts your thoughts, not your ways my ways, (Yahweh's

declaration). For high the heavens from the earth, so high my ways from your ways, and my thoughts from your thoughts'. God is stating that there is a gulf as vast as the distance between heaven and earth between his ways and thought and human ways and thoughts.

The unit context of the Isaiah statement is highly suggestive. The chapter begins with an invitation to enter God's invaluable kingdom (vs 1) and includes a call to experience the immanence of God (vs 6). Shortly after the call to immanence is a statement about God's distance. The rest of the chapter is a short discourse on the mystery of God's ways. We are being reminded that talking God will always involve a mystery that our finite thoughts can never bridge.

### **Christian Scriptures talking God**

I am using the phrase Christian Scriptures (CS) as an alternative to New Testament simply to distinguish this part of the Bible from HB. The situation of CS vis-à-vis talking God takes on a different ambience from HB. Arguably, without CS, Trinitarian thought may not be possible. The question now is, 'How does CS conceive God?'

I examine some of the favoured verses of CS for this discovery. These are well-known passages and often employed as clear evidence of Trinitarian language.

#### *The Great Commission*

Matthew 28:18-20 contains the passage Christians have referred to as the 'Great Commission'. This passage presents the final job description Jesus gave his disciples in the gospel of Matthew. The Commission comprises one principal task—making disciples (this is the only imperative in the text). This task is then broken down into two components which use subordinate participial clauses—teaching everything Jesus taught and baptising in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

For our purposes, we consider the statement 'name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. This phrase asserts two things about God—'name' which is singular and three individual names or titles. What can we learn from these elements?

The singular 'name' reflects a clear Hebraic concept which is common in HB and appears in CS also. The use of a singular noun resonates with HB passages like the Shema and divine claims in Isaiah. To put this simply, CS does not move far from its HB roots. Conversely, the appearance of three separate titles may serve as a direct echo of HB idea of multiplexity. This pattern resembles HB pattern but with a slight variance; the use of discrete titles as if to point in another direction.

#### *Pauline Benediction*

An equally significant passage is Paul's often quoted benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:13 'the grace (*kharis*) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love (agape) of God and fellowship (koinonia) of the Holy Spirit with all of you'. The passage requires some explication to unveil what it is really saying.

First, there is no finite verb in the verse and it is made up of three parallel phrases. There is a faint echo here to the triad of essentials in 1 Corinthians 13:13. If faith, hope and love are the essentials of our relationship with God, then grace, love and fellowship reflect God's relationship with his people. However, this God is three separate individuals, Lord Jesus Christ, God and Holy Spirit (a similar list as in Matthew).

Second, and in contrast to the Great Commission, the verse appears to emphasise the multiplexity of God more than his singularity. At the very least we could suppose that Paul draws attention primarily to God's multiplexity.

### *John's Gospel*

When we study CS talking God, the most significant discussion comes from John's gospel. In chapters 14-17, John presents the teaching of Jesus on a variety of subjects but centred on the person of God. The entire sermon culminates in the great prayer of Jesus in chapter 17. Some sample statements from this sermon may open the door to Jesus' teaching and John's reflections.

- In chapter 14 we encounter discussion about the Father (14:7-11) and the Holy Spirit (14:19-26). The language of Jesus distinguishes Father and Holy Spirit from himself and from each other; a clear picture of multiplexity.
- In John 16:5-15, Jesus implies spatial, temporal, functional and commissional differences between Father, Jesus (Son) and Holy Spirit. He speaks of his separation from the Father and the commissioning of the Holy Spirit. He talks about how he was commissioned by the Father and then the Holy Spirit is commissioned. He refers to a difference of time between his ministry and the Holy Spirit's work. He also differentiates his task from that of the Holy Spirit's.
- In the climactic prayer, Jesus continues with the same themes of chapters 14 and 16 but repeatedly employs the motif of oneness between himself and the Father (17:5, 10, 11, 21, 22)—'we are one'.

This lengthy discourse highlights certain pertinent considerations. First, the three divine persons are clearly distinct from each other in spatial, temporal, functional and commissional aspects. Second, they are also 'one' as evidenced by the recurring 'we are one' motif in Jesus' prayer. Third, Jesus speaks to the Father as 'you are in me and I am in you'; underscoring the complex reality of God. While CS is more explicit concerning the multiplexity of God, it retains the tension between singularity and multiplexity. Through the use of titles, CS elaborates further on the singular complexity of God which is intimated in HB. The Bible presents a fairly consistent picture of God. Nevertheless, we must accept a degree of incredulity when talking God because 'we can make true statements but they may still not be truth-full'.

### **More talking God**

While I believe that labels do not always help, and the 'Trinity' label is no exception, talking God demands we attempt some explanation of God. I also believe that whatever we say about God must be tinged by the realisation that it will never be total; it is a logical fallacy to imagine we can actually conceptualise God. Furthermore, the Bible engages in talking God and I believe that allows us to do the same but with careful borders. Therefore, we should always engage in talking God for not to do so would mean we regress rather than progress. We must continue to seek God but to recognise it as a perpetual quest.

In closing, I contend that the Bible portrays God as ONE but also as extremely complex. To begin to understand God, we should recognise the tension between God's singularity and his multiplexity. The God of the Bible embodies both and that is the best we can say this side of eternity.