

Thinking about God Again

I. Part One: Two Ways of Thinking about God - the meaning (referent) of the word.

Both are ancient and biblical (and found in other religions as well). *Two "root concepts":*

1. Supernatural Theism. God as a supernatural being – a super-powerful authority figure separate from the universe. God created the universe “in the beginning” as something separate from God. God is “out there,” not “here.”

*Affirms only the *transcendence* of God – God as “beyond”

*This God relates to the world through *intervention* (the only way a being who is separate from the universe can relate to it)

*The most widespread form of Western theism; this is what most people think of when they think of the word “God,” whether or not they believe in God

2. Panentheism. God as *the encompassing Spirit in whom everything that is, is.*

Examples:

* God is “the one in whom we live and move and have our being”(Acts 17.28)

See also Psalm 139

*Irenaeus (2nd century): “God contains everything and is contained by nothing”

*Julian of Norwich (14th century): We are not simply made by God, but made of God.

And the deeper we move into our own being, the deeper we move into God.

*Affirms both the *transcendence* of God (the “moreness” of God) and the *immanence* of God (God is present everywhere). God is “right here” as well as “more” than right here.

*Does *not* affirm divine intervention, but divine *intention, interaction, and presence.*

Three Further Comments:

(1) The *language* of supernatural theism is *the language of personification: we speak of God as if God were a person.* This is the natural language of prayer, worship and devotion. Nothing wrong with personification as long as it is not taken literally. When it is, problems arise:

*Can make God remote and distant.

*Problems with the notion of intervention

*God’s reality becomes questionable. Much of atheism is rejection of *this* God (the current best-sellers). “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.”

(2) The “pluses” (value) of panentheism

*If supernatural theism gets in a person’s way, there is another option. Important for Christians and people in general to know this.

*Does not create the intellectual problems of supernatural theism

*Takes experiences of God/the sacred seriously

*It is orthodox Christianity: God is BOTH transcendent AND immanent...

(3) *If the word “God” is a problem.* There are other terms: “the sacred,” “Spirit,” “isness without limits” (Thomas Keating); “suchness,” “what is.” “Isness” is...

II. Part Two. Two Primary Ways of Thinking about God's Character and Passion

According to the Bible, God not only "is" but has **character** and **passion** (sometimes called the *nature* and *will* of God). **Character:** as when we think of a person's character, we think of what they are like at a deep level. What is God like? **Passion:** as when we ask of a person, "What is your passion in life?" What is God passionate about?

*The Questions Matter Greatly.

Illustration. Consider: *what is the character of your God? What is your God like? What do you think God is like?*

The two main options within Christianity for thinking of God's character – in the Bible and throughout Christian history:

- 1. God as Punitive.** God is a judge who punishes disobedience. Though God also loves us (and so sent Jesus to die for us and in our place), only some people will be saved. Some – perhaps many or most – will be punished because they didn't believe the right things and/or live the right way.
 - *This is the God of much of "common Christianity" with its emphasis on an afterlife in heaven or hell.
 - *This is also the violent God....
 - *Question: do you think God ever punishes anybody? An example? (do not confuse this with natural consequences)
- 2. God as Gracious/Compassionate.** God is life-giving, nourishing, and wills our well-being. God loves us and the whole of creation, and yearns that we *see* that – for if we do, our lives will change.
3. A third option, less common among Christians: God (or "reality") as indifferent/uninvolved. "Deism" (beginning in 18th century); and the primary modern secular view.

Back to the two ways of thinking about God's character. *Each produces a different kind of Christianity – so different they are almost two different religions*

- *The first produces fear-based Christianity: God is the one who's "gonna get us" if we don't get it right. Fear-based religion and a fear-based orientation toward life – including fear-based politics – commonly go together
- *The second produces a Christianity free from fear and thus free to be grateful, compassionate, life-giving, courageous....

So also: *what is the passion of your God?* What is your God passionate about?

*For Christians, the answer to the question is found in the Bible and Jesus, our two primary sources of revelation. Of these two, Jesus is the most important – this is what it means to say that he is "the Word of God" become flesh.

*According to the Bible and Jesus, God's passion is transformation – *the transformation of ourselves and the transformation of the world.*

The "kingdom of God" as "the dream of God" – God's dream for the earth.