

To talk about God

By Brand Smit

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Unfortunately, it cannot, for various reasons, work this way. The idea, as the title suggests, is that I should give my opinion about a certain phenomenon, namely the well-known desire to talk about God.

Let's start with the most basic question: Why do we want to talk about God (for the record, I am confining myself in this essay to the "God" of the Judeo-Christian tradition)? "We want to talk about God," many people will answer, "because God is important to us. God plays a pivotal role in our lives." ("The most important role," others will rush to correct them.) Other believers will add, "God is like a father to us, and as with our earthly fathers, we would like to have a relationship with our Heavenly Father." Is this not an inevitable result of calling God "Father"? And if you talk about a relationship, then it follows that you should know a few things about the person with whom you have this relationship, or with whom you would like to establish a relationship.

It's at this point that I want to explain the open space at the beginning of this piece. Whether you're an adherent of theism or atheism, if you talk about God, you don't talk about a building or a mountain, or your favourite type of flower. You talk about something that people believe in, not something they can physically touch, or that can be described in a manner that can easily be verified by a third party. But it goes beyond this: The words you choose when you talk about God are part of your understanding of God, or confirm your specific understanding of God. God as you write or speak about "him", becomes the god you believe in, that you expect others to believe in, even the god in which you may argue you do *not* believe in.

A historical fact: the idea of "God" (once again, as described in the Judeo-Christian tradition) is a key ingredient of a significant percentage of the world population's experience of reality, and has been a key ingredient of people's experience of reality for as long as anyone can remember, or as long as historical data has been recorded. God is not a "something" or a "someone" who made a first appearance during the past twelve months. (Although the concept of a metaphysical, cosmic entity is found in virtually all cultures, across continents and historical periods, I once again want to point out that I deliberately limit the scope of this essay to the concept as understood in Judeo-Christian monotheism.)

But what to do when one needs to talk *about* God? Human communication consists of sounds and symbols that refer to certain things. If you form a sound in your mouth that is audible as "tomato", all who are familiar with the set of sounds and symbols of the English language will know that you are referring to that red thing that can be

eaten, and that works well in salads and on sandwiches. But how do you talk about God? Some will say it's easy – you rely on texts written by people who came before you, who had claimed that they knew God and that they had received revelations from God. Others will add that they know God from personal experience and that they, too, have received revelations from God.

I can ask my question in a slightly differently way: How did people talk about God *before* they knew God, or *before* they had received revelations that gave them specific information about God? The problem I want to address in this piece is specifically concerned with this matter.

The French philosopher Voltaire said, “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” A clever play on words, as many theologians have complained since the eighteenth century. What Voltaire probably wanted to confirm with this statement, is that people need God, that people need to *know* that God exists.

If this belief that God exists was sufficient, there may have been a recipe for tomato stew on this particular page. But just to believe that God exists, is not enough for many people. They want to know more *about* God. God must have a name (or at least a title). God must have a personality. God must even have a gender. The reason for these human aspects of God is that according to the book of Genesis man was created in the “image of God”. And because a human being has a name, a personality, and is either male or female, it should also be possible to answer questions regarding these things about God, shouldn't it?

So God is a man? Or man is like God, but only able to sin? If God was a man, for what reason would this God-man not appear in this way to the migratory Israelites in the desert? Why did a cloud and fire indicate the presence of God? And why could no ordinary person see this man-God that apparently looked like any other man? Is the answer simply because this God-who-looked-like-a-human was holy and without sin, and because a face-to-face encounter between God and man-who-is-able-to-sin would have been unacceptable considering the holiness of God? Or is it because God is something else – a presence, not a flesh-and-bone human being like us?

However, the Israelites may have believed if they were able to see their God face to face they would have seen one who looked like them. Or, perhaps closer to the ethno-cultural reality of their time, they probably expected to see a face they would recognise as that of a

middle aged man of Middle Eastern descent. In short, imagine Moses, and you would see the “face” the people probably expected to see had they been allowed to climb up the mountain to meet their god face to face.

Is this a coincidence, this thing that the God of Israel was supposed to look like one of them? What about Oriental people, Polynesians, the Africans? Were they not also created in the image of the same god who was supposed to look like a middle-aged Israelite?

What are the implications of an anthropomorphic description of God? The moment we describe God to ourselves as one of us – only better, stronger, more honest, merciful, and without any sin, then, figuratively speaking, we look through the thick cloud in which God had appeared to the Israelites. We imagine ourselves as one of the “selected few of the children of Israel” who can tell the less fortunate amongst us, “I know what God looks like. He did not stretch out his hand to touch us, but we could see there were jewels under his feet ...”

What did the rest of the “Children of Israel” do while Moses was in the company of God? So much of an impression that God had made on them (Exodus 19:16, “thunders and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceedingly loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled”), they became restless when Moses lingered (Exodus 32:1: “this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what has become of him”). Soon after, their primordial need for a god who “goes out before them” found manifestation in a god they could see, before whom they could kneel down, made from the best gold the people could spare.

We see from the biblical text God was furious. “He” wanted to excuse himself from Moses’ company so that his “wrath may grow hot against them” and that “he” may “consume” them.

On the one hand, the Israelites had a god they could not see, who appeared to them in a cloud and in fire, and who held discussions on a mountain top which was banned territory to all humans (except one) as long as this god was present there. On the other hand, there was a statue of a calf, which Aaron cast and chiselled out of gold. An invisible god who uses clouds, fire and deafening sound as instruments of his presence, versus a visible god that everyone can see, that even a child can describe in passing to his cousin. (Apparently the latter could not command much of an arsenal in his defence. Moses took the calf off its altar without much fear or respect, chucked it in the fire, and grounded the cremated result into a fine dust.) In other

words, an invisible god versus a visible god that served the immediate god-needs of the people, who made them feel better when their leader lingered too long on a mountain top.

How does one talk about God? Through the use of sounds and symbols that are characteristic of a particular language. By speaking in a language people understand. Like the God of the Israelites communicated, according to tradition, through a spectacle of sound and light, so we talk about God in a way that we understand: God-as-human, God-as-almost-human, or then as many insist, God-as-one-of-the-men-of-our-nation.

Was the sound and light spectacle a full representation of God? Or was it simply a medium that allowed an invisible god to appear in a way that people could understand? Is the image of God we have as a Moses figure the full representation of God? Are the name, personality and history of the god we think we know the whole truth? Or is that the “cloud of God” – the means of communication by which God is clothed, so that people can have a way to communicate about this cosmic being for whom they have such a primordial need, so they can find it easier to enter into a relationship with this being – if that is what is required of them, or if that is what they need?

We are ultimately left with this question: At what point does the way-we-talk-about-God become our own version of the Golden Calf – the god that is easier to understand, before whom it is easier to bow down in worship; the clearer vision of what we have such a strong need for?

People are impatient beings. They tend to make a plan themselves if that upon which they wait, lingers somewhere, or if its form and detail aren't clear enough. And as is evident from the texts we so value for information about God, we occasionally replace the truth with a replica of hand-chiselled gold. Or as it may appear from further investigation, we replace the truth over the span of dozens of generations with something in which our own handiwork and creative genius are somewhat more obscure – a god made up of words.

Will we, if we look hard and honest enough, find something other than the “true God” we think we worship? Shall we find that we, like Aaron, cry out with full conviction in the face of our own manufactured idol, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD”?

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What is the alternative? What happens if we can't describe God in terms that we understand? What happens if we must accept that we cannot make God more easily understandable, or even that we're not supposed to do so. Are we not then left with a singular choice, namely to simply believe?

A belief, then, not based on so-called facts, but on pure choice. A choice to believe in a god about whom we might not be able to talk nearly as easily as we talk about a golden calf; a god we do not try to make more palpable because it would make it easier for us to believe.

Additional Note, 15 March 2011

Believe in what? Believe in whom? Is it inevitable that we must ultimately know?

The pastor tells the congregation: Just believe. Forget about knowing more about this. Don't ask unnecessary questions. Don't seek knowledge or detail regarding something that nobody *really* knows about, or about which detail can even be ungodly.

The congregation nods: Will do, Reverend.

The next morning one of the deacons is still pretty fired up about the sermon. He wants to persuade the guy next to him on the bus to join the community of believers. He tells him in broad terms what the preacher had said the previous day. "Just believe," he concludes.

"Believe in what?" the man politely asks.

"Believe in God," replies the deacon.

The deacon can see the man is thinking deeply. Then, after about a minute, comes the inevitable questions: "But what is God? In what do you want me to believe?"

This brings us back to square one. We cannot talk about God, or write about God, or even refer to God if we do not know what or whom we are talking or writing about. We use the word "god" and hope the other person knows what we mean. It has also become common practice to use the noun as name: God is our god. If people want to know more, we speak of Jesus. If they want to know more about the "Father" we refer them to the Old Testament, the God of Abraham and Moses and

David. If people want to know even more, we pull a theology book off the shelf and hope our eyes catch something useful, something we can easily quote, something that can put an end to the uncomfortable questions.

Did the ancient Israelites talk about their god all day long, in their chats with each other, in their encouragements, in their bits of moral advice about what to do and what not? As I understand it, God was not addressed as “god” – that is, the universal noun. This entity had a name, but as I understand it further, you were in deep trouble if you used this name in everyday conversation (that’s to say if the ordinary Israelite even knew the name).

What does this mean? That means it was highly unusual, punishable even, to speak about God.

“But that all changed with Jesus,” a modern choir of believers will reply.

Precise knowledge? Clearer knowledge? Knowledge about ... God? Name? Gender? Personality? Agenda? Preferences? Dislikes? Appearance, perhaps? Are we finally certain of what God is? Man? Flesh? Spirit? How many people can really explain what “spirit” means? Is it understood in the same way in all languages and by people from all cultures? What if the understanding of the concept “spirit” is radically different from one language to another? What about if matriarchal communities are comfortable with the idea of God as a woman? At what point should the modern believer start gathering rocks for a good stoning?

We – modern believers and the nearly hundred generations that have come before us since the beginning of the Christian era – have dug ourselves one hell of a trench. We want to know. We need to know. We want intimate details, because we desire an intimate relationship with our god.

And before we knew it, our way of talking about God, became God. Then my way of speaking about God is the right way to speak about God, and my god the “true god”. If your details differ from my details, or if it differs significantly enough from the declaration and summary of faith agreed upon by the Council of Nicaea in the year 325, then your way of speaking about God is wrong, and your god is a false god.

Can your sins be forgiven if you worship a false god? Certainly not.

Can you go to heaven if you worship a false god? How can you?

Can you expect mercy? Can you hope for comfort? Can you pray for your loved ones? Certainly not if your way of speaking about God is false! Certainly not if what you worship and believe in is a false god ...

I want to end this piece with a suggestion: Let's stop talking about God. Let us imagine ourselves as the old Israelites who would not have dared to stretch out their hands trying to touch God through the invisibility.

Certainly there are people who will have a problem with this proposal. Because if we don't talk about God, when we stop collecting bits of information about what we think God is and reciting this information over and over, how can we expect people to believe in God? The answer is simple and fairly obvious: We can't. We should stop talking about God, and we must refrain from insisting that people should believe in God.

With what does that leave us? It leaves us with existing and living as a community with certain values, rather than as a community of Believe in God (as we see God) or Accept the Punishment. This ultimately leaves us, so I believe, with the challenge of a life that would be characterised by peace, and joy, and patience, kindness, faithfulness, humility, a little more restraint, but above all, love.

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