

HYLOTHEISM – LIFE AS A SLIDE SHOW

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It is fair to state that religion and God do go together, although it has often been noted that of the major world religions Buddhists do not worship gods or a God and in Jainism there is no need for a creator God because the universe is believed to be eternal. While all religions do not have a clear concept of the divine or God, all beliefs in God are nestled in religion.

There is no doubt that the word “god” does exist. But does “God” exist is another question. Does the word “god” denote an object or being (realism) or is it a name for the highest values or dimensions of human existence (non-realism or anti-realism, e.g., Ludwig Feuerbach)? Traditional theology has been quite preoccupied with the attributes of God because God’s being, whatever it might be, was outside of human comprehension anyway.

The word “god,” in Wittgensteinian terms, is an open-ended term; it has no one particular meaning until it is specified in a clearly defined matrix. Thus the tetragrammaton, YHWH, is one of the religious theonyms used by the Israelites to describe the national God of Israel. In this matrix “God” has a particular meaning, although over time that meaning has changed considerably.

Hylotheism is a term used by Alvin J. Reines to describe his own understanding of “God.” While the term is used occasionally by others to denote various forms of pantheism and panentheism, Reines’ use of hylotheism has a very specific meaning.

First I wish to present a mental “God-map” to illustrate where hylotheism is placed in relation to other interpretations.

There are four categories under which historic expressions of the divine can be classified: theosupernaturalism, theopanism, theonaturalism and atheonomatism.

1. *Theosupernaturalism*

In theosupernaturalism God is generally conceived as a person, a self-conscious being separate from the universe, external to the creation. Because the creator God is not part of the creation, there is absolutely nothing positive we can ever know about this God. Everything that we know, including knowledge itself, ideas, imagination, fantasies, dreams are part of the universe or the totality of the creation. Therefore, by definition, any ideas that we may have about this God are

something other than the true, utterly unknowable creator God, who is outside of any human experience.

According to apophatic or negative theology the only things we know about God are descriptions of what God is not. We could, e.g., state that God is not not-wise, but we could not say that God is wise because we have no way of imagining what divine, external to the creation, wisdom might be. To say that a wall is blind is meaningless because walls do not have the potentiality of seeing anything. To say that God is wise would be analogous to saying that walls are blind. Logically this does not make much sense and therefore apophatic theology at times seems funny, which it is – but it is fun.

Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c. 800-c. 877) was much influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius of Areopagite (late 5th or early 6th century), a very influential theologian and philosopher, whom Thomas Aquinas alone reportedly quoted over 1700 times. Eriugena's translation of Dionysius' work, *Corpus Dionysii*, a gift given to Charles the Bald's father, Louis the Pious by Michael the Stammerer in 827, rekindled interest in apophatic theology in the Middle Ages. Dionysius' influence is clearly present in Eriugena's statement that summarizes apophatic theology succinctly: "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being."

Maimonides (1138-1204), arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher of the medieval period, concluded his own meditations on apophatic theology claiming that we have understood the term "God" properly if and when the word "God" is uttered, absolutely nothing comes to our mind. I prefer this theology because I have not been able to figure out on my own what the term God actually means. Perhaps, at least in the Maimonidean sense, I have come closer to understanding what the true "God" is truly like when I continue to become less and less knowledgeable about the true God. Lloyd Geering stated essentially the same thing: "The God that is known is an idol. The God who can be defined is no God."

Interestingly, God defined as totally separate from the universe, cannot exist, and cannot be by definition a being like we are. Existence is an attribute that can be predicated only of the creation, just as all beings are part of the creation. Thus God is not an existent being, but something utterly different. What some thinkers, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, have stated is that we cannot say that God exists but we can say, God is.

Apophatic theology has also gained meaningful popularity in postmodern theology. At least it gives the appearance of being sophisticated in

spite of the fact that we are attempting to describe the indescribable. It reminds me of talking about Kant's "das Ding an sich," the thing-in-itself that is unknowable. Should we take Wittgenstein seriously and conclude "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen?"¹

Theosupernaturalism among the Israelites started as polytheism, belief that there are many gods. Over time polytheism evolved into henotheism, admission that there are many gods but only one tribal god is considered to be supreme. The first commandment is an expression of this phase of the evolution in the understanding of the divine. Belief in one God, monotheism, developed during the postexilic period, during the time of the 2nd temple (538 BCE onwards). Monotheistic God is a person, a self-conscious being who performs miracles at will. Miracles can also be specifically requested by true believers. Using priests, saints or the Virgin Mary for this is believed to be advantageous.

Monotheism developed into theistic absolutism, i.e., God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. This is the concept that exposes itself to many problems.

The most challenging one is omnipotency. Can God create a rock that is so large that he cannot lift it up? Regardless how the question is answered, God of theistic absolutism is in trouble.

A second major challenge is the problem of theodicy: whatever happens must be good because God is omnibenevolent (all-good). Therefore, whatever God wills must be good, and because God is omnipotent, whatever happens must be good, and because God is omniscient, God is well aware of the goodness of what is willed. So all things that appear to us as evil must, in fact, be good.

If we were able to identify E.S. Brightman's *dysteleological surd*, something that is so inherently and intrinsically evil that absolutely no good can conceivably emerge out of it, then theistic absolutism would be refuted.

This view, theistic absolutism, is successfully challenged by the "four horsemen" of modern atheism: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. While they all do a great service to modern theology by debunking theistic absolutism, we must keep in mind that few, if any serious modern theologians have attempted to defend theistic absolutism as described by the four horseman, for the exact reasons they present.

¹ . Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, , #7.

2. *Theonaturalism*

God is conceived, as above, separate from the universe, as the creator of the natural universe or is an essential part of processes that bring the natural universe into existence.

While God can be conceived of as a person or impersonally, there are no miracles. Natural laws govern the universe without divine interruptions.

Certain forms of deism and hylotheism are examples of theonaturalism. Deism emerged during the Enlightenment as a more rational and more justifiable view of the divine than theistic absolutism. The leaders of both the French and American revolutions were influenced by this fashion philosophy of its own time.

According to deism God is a person who created the universe, set it in motion (as an Aristotelian prime mover), and subsequently left it alone; natural events occur naturally without divine intervention, there is no supernatural providence over the creation, nor is there any supernatural divine revelation. This concept avoids the pitfalls of theodicy; of course there is evil in the world because God is not present nor has anything to do with anything in the entire creation.

3. *Theopanism*

God is conceived not separate from the universe. Pantheism and panentheism are examples of theopanism. Giordano Bruno presented an idea about an infinite but immanent God. The Catholic Church preferred another view and burned him at stake in 1600. In 1675 Baruch Spinoza in his *Ethics* popularized pantheism.

Pantheism has been embraced by many thinkers and even American presidents. William Herndon, Abraham Lincoln's law partner wrote: *Mr. Lincoln's religion is too well known to me to allow of even a shadow of a doubt; he is or was a Theist & a Rationalist, denying all extraordinary – supernatural inspiration or revelation. At one time in his life, to say the least, he was an elevated Pantheist, doubting the immortality of the soul as the Christian world understands that term.*

Panentheism, the view that God includes the universe in God's being and that it extends beyond the universe, is embraced by many modern thinkers, notably Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg.

4. *Atheonomatism*

Atheonomatism is the view of the word God that has no meaning in reality; "God" does not refer to an actual being. In this regard some remarkable Christian theologians were atheonomatists, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, who argued that God has no body, God is nobody and thus not a being. Martin Luther argued similarly, writing in the explanation of the 1st commandment in his Large Catechism: "...Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God." Luther, along with many others, was a nominalist or non-realist. The word "God" does not refer to a real being but is a name for all that which is of highest value in our lives. In this sense both Aquinas and Luther were atheonomatists, in good company with atheists and agnostics.

HYLOTHEISM

According to Alvin J. Reines, the term "God," as it is commonly used, refers to that which brings into existence that which is. For both perceived, through our senses, and conceived, through our minds, world, whatever the reason is that produces or makes these experiences possible, is termed "God." God is the creator of our world experience.

Sensa and selfa

Our world is brought to us in part through our five senses, the world is perceived by us. What we experience as our world is a collection of individual *sensum*, in plural, *sensa* or *sense-data*. *Sensa* is a product transmitted to us through our five senses from the extramental world.² Propositions that carry information about the extramental world, *sensa*, are subject to verifiability. *Sensa* constitute evidence that is not-self.

Another part of our experienced world is intramental, i.e., all those world experiences that we did not receive as *sensa*, are called *selfum*, in plural *selfa*, or *self-data*. *Selfa* form the evidence that make up our intramental life, they occur in our psyche alone.

Experiences that occur in the psyche alone are not perceived, they are only conceived and are not subject to verifiability.

Both *sensa* and *selfa* exist only as long as they are present in our awareness, for as long as we are aware of them. The only entities that we experience are *sensa* and *selfa* and together they form what we call *being*.³ Therefore without *sensa* and *selfa*, i.e., even

² . Whether or not the extramental world exists apart from our experiencing it or not is irrelevant here. Whatever the causes for sensing the extramental world are, the important point is that we have that experience.

³ . George Berkeley: *Esse est percipi*, "to be is to be perceived." Reines would argue that "to be is to perceive and conceive."

if only one of them is experienced, there is no being. Perception and conception are a necessary matrix for being.

A misinterpreted selfum is a selfum that has been understood as a representation of the extramental world. The assessment of what selfa are misinterpreted is subjective, no objective evidence can be brought to support the claim a specific selfa is or is not provided from the extramental world. Thus I consider reports of mystical experiences of the divine or spirits of the dead as selfa and efforts to make them extramental are futile since I am not privy to any similar experiences. For me that would be a misinterpreted selfa. However, someone else who claims to have had mystical experiences may indeed consider them to be *sensa*. Arguments about these are generally spectacularly unproductive and one might be wise to stay away from arguing about someone else's selfa.

Hylotheism: God as the enduring possibility of being

The term *hylotheism* has occasionally been used to refer to forms of pantheism and panentheism, where God and the material universe are one. Here *hyle* is interpreted to mean "matter" or "corporeality" or even "extension." However, Alvin J. Reines uses the term *hyle* in Aristotelian sense of "potentiality" or "possibility of being." Two forms of existence can be distinguished: the possible and the actual. Thus, e.g., clay is matter but at the same time possesses the capacity of being formed into a bust. Clay possesses potentiality but lacks actuality, it is not-yet-bust. But clay has endurance far beyond a bust. So while a bust has actuality it lacks endurance. A hylotheistic deity, as defined by Reines, is the "enduring possibility of being" that has both endurance (possibility of existence endures) and actuality in any being (*sensa* and selfa). Possible existence endures, but suffers from lack of actuality. Being possesses actuality but does not endure. In the hylotheistic deity the two distinct forms of existence are combined.

For Reines, hylotheism must be chosen over other views of deity by Occam's razor; unnecessary assumptions should be eliminated and the simplest of competing views should be preferred over more complex ones. The only assumption in hylotheism is that it postulates that there is someone who is experiencing something and in that experience potentiality is actualized. Whenever a potentiality is actualized that is where hylotheistic deity occurs, and is therefore verified. In other words, whenever we either perceive or conceive the world the existence of hylotheistic deity shows up to provide the show.

Hylotheistic deity is obviously not a person, a self-conscious being but rather a pure process through and in which the world is experienced. Perhaps the easiest way to imagine hylotheism is to think of a slide projector. Every slide is a new possibility of existence. Once a particular slide is shown, it actualizes as a picture. As long as there are

slides the show will go on. One could imagine one's life as a very long slide show. The divine occurs in the process of slides moving from potentiality to actuality.

Challenges

Reines proposes that any concept of God should be subject to empirical evidence. He sees that hylotheism is based on empirical evidence, every actual moment confirms being, *sensa* or *selfa*. Reines points out repeatedly that hylotheism is his personal view, and it should not necessarily be anyone else's view. His major work in philosophy of religion is centered on the notion of *polydoxy*. According to this view everyone has the right to his or her own religious views and no one has the right to take that right away from anyone else. A person's religious freedom ends where another person's religious freedom begins. Reines hesitated to bring up his own God-view and he did that somewhat reluctantly at the repeated requests of his students.

One of the challenges is how should we understand *hyle* in hylotheism. What exactly is the "enduring possibility?" Do we even have to assume that there is nothing else but *sensa* and *selfa*, why should we assume that there is a possibility for them? We do have knowledge of *sensa* and *selfa*. That is what our "doing being" (or simply being alive) is all about.

Another challenge is Reines' requirement of having both *sensa* and *selfa* present to constitute "being." What if a person has lost all 5 senses and cannot even potentially experience *sensa*? That person would still be a person, a self-conscious being, albeit that existence is very difficult for us to imagine. Conceivably that person would have some *selfa*. However, given Reines' description of "being" that person would not be a being. What would this person then be? A half-being?

Thirdly, hylotheism is quite difficult to explain and understand. It requires philosophical knowledge that most people do not have. Also, many of the details are subject to challenges in addition to the aforementioned ones. Many of the challenges relate to epistemological questions. Some of these are stated by David Day Griffin in his article "Modern and Postmodern Liberal Theology: A Response to Alvin Reines."

In conclusion

Hylotheism is, in spite of the challenges, a concept of God that commands our attention. Alongside with some other views, modern versions of panentheism and even open theism, hylotheism is arguably one of the more solidly argued views.

I am deeply indebted to Alvin J. Reines', a one time student of Paul Tillich and Maimonides expert, teachings at Hebrew Union College, his many writings and personal friendship that started in 1978 and continued until his death in 2004. I had the fortune of being his teaching assistant and editor of some of his works. Not only did I

learn immensely from him about philosophy and Jewish philosophy in particular, but I learned how to argue vigorously, robustly and loudly. This kind of rabbinical tradition of, shall we say, creative learning was rather different from my pietistic Finnish Lutheran tradition, where solemn and pious silence was often preferred. It feels good to have recovered from my roots.

SOURCES

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Some of Alvin Reines' writings can be found in full text here:

<http://polydoxinstitute.org/>

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