

Many Names — One G-d

Attempting to Name the Infinite through Finite Language

Most of us have experienced the paltry nature of language when trying to describe the vast infinity of stars on a summer's night in the country, or the vastly sublime complexity that exists within a single acorn that it can contain everything that will eventually become an oak tree. This difficulty pales in comparison as we attempt to name towards the Infinite Divine. Most of us believe in G-d, many of us know, by experience, that such a consciousness exists, and yet finite language remains without the capacity for the infinite.¹ Therefore finite language must find a way to suffice that we may not be eternally separated from that which exists amongst us every single moment. It is by trying to define an infinite G-d with finite language that all pantheons have come into existence, for we must see G-d within a context and therefore must find finite ways of relating to Him, even if it is only to describe a single facet of an infinite diamond. Polytheism is not a sin against G-d but rather an attempt to explain the infinite within the confines of finite language and understanding.

No single name can encapsulate G-d, perhaps because G-d cannot even be narrowed down to a noun. The name Eheyeh (אֶהְיֶה) is often translated as "I AM" but the initiates have long considered it more active and translate it as "I Liveth". In both cases the word is a form of verb, an action either 'to be' or 'to live and grow'. A living G-d cannot be defined by names which indicate stasis. Just as no single name can be applied to G-d, no single attribute can be given to G-d. In chapter 12 of her book *She who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson discusses some of the difficulties inherent in trying to name and define the infinite with such language as we have available at this time.

¹ Karl Barth discusses the idea that the finite has no capacity for the infinite when analyzing *Paul's Epistle to the Romans*.

Johnson's view is to try and approach definitions of G-d through a sort of double-negative approach. For example, if we say "G-d is Love" we must also then say that "G-d is not-Love" for our concept of the attribute of Love cannot apply to an infinite being for G-d is above and beyond anything we can still conceptualize as Love. Therefore we then refuse the negative by saying that "G-d is not not-Love". Such a use of words is similar to the Qabalist who defines the very edge of creation by calling it No-Thing (אין) and thus beyond our capacity to understand as an object or concept. By doing this they then separate the infinite G-d into the knowable and unknowable. Although we could continually attempt to use Johnson's method we rapidly find that, rather than coming closer to G-d we build the wall of separation by convincing ourselves that there is no part of G-d whatever that we may approach.²

Any other approach, such as giving multiple names to G-d, assigning a variety of personalities to Him, even breaking from the basic Monotheistic naming conventions is thought of as flirting with Polytheism. And yet any quest to name towards G-d must result in a plethora of names and descriptions as we cannot encapsulate the infinite within a finite structure such as language. Johnson gives many different descriptions of attempts at naming towards G-d³ that she has found within the Monotheistic tradition,^[1] and yet none are any closer to encapsulating the Divine.

As such we may need to look at the problem from a slightly different perspective. Rather than trying to solve the large problem all at once we may find it easier to break the problem down into smaller pieces such as one does in mathematics. If we accept that the infinite Divine is beyond our ability to name or describe outright then it may be possible to name and describe pieces of it according to context. Again, one may fear that this is a road to sin, blasphemy and Polytheism but a simple example

² Both Karl Barth and Simone Weil may agree with the idea that we can approach no part of the Divine, but it is hard to see how such a theology can result in anything but self denial and a pointless perspective on existence.

³ Naming towards G-d is a common theme amongst theologians such as Barth, Weil and Johnson.

of a single individual may make the process clearer based upon the maxim of "That which is above is as that which is below" as we are taught by the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*.

Let us take a man named James. James is an average man with a wife, two children, and a small medical practice. Now this is a very flat description of James, and does not explore the variety of personae and names by which he interacts with the world. The man that his patients call 'Doctor' is not the same man that his amateur hockey team calls 'Sticks', and both are different from the man his children call 'Daddy' or his wife calls 'Hon' or his college buddies call 'Jimmy'. Each of these names are attached to a slightly different persona, for the caring doctor, loving husband and dedicated father is very different to the aggressive guy on the ice who is slamming someone into the boards or the person who goes drinking with his old friends. Each one is different and exists in a different context. His children may see him play hockey and say "that's Daddy" but James' interaction with the world at that moment does not resemble a paternal role in any way. And yet he is *always* James, never someone else and all we see are facets of his personality based on context.

If a human being can be so complex and contain so many micro-personae, so many facets of a single personality, then consider how much more so this must apply to an infinite G-d. Some may even seem at times contradictory, and yet it is still G-d.⁴ In the monotheistic faiths this usually translates into the concept of angels, separate personalities that 'serve' G-d. And yet, in Orthodox Jewish theology, angels and Archangels are not actually separate from G-d but rather personifications of the Divine by which He can interact with the world without roasting us alive.⁵ This theology is grounded in the very

⁴ The Christian interpretation of the Devil as an adversary of G-d does not exist in the Jewish teachings, rather, Rabbi Kaplan explained that the Devil is only the Angel of Death, something to be feared, certainly, but not unnecessary and not something that works against HaShem's plans. The Satan is an internal part of our personality associated with the Evil Inclination (Yetzer HaRa) which we must overcome ourselves. It exists out of necessity for without it 'Free Will' would be impossible We must choose between the Good and the Evil on our own.

⁵ Even when HaShem was willing to come before Moshe it was understood that the prophet could only view G-d from behind for to see G-d in all of His glory would have reduced the poor man to ashes.

names of the Archangels themselves. For example, Gabriel mean "The Love of God", Auriel means "The Light of God" and Raphael means "The Healing of God".⁶ And yet, to those who have written about these entities, they appear to have separate and distinct personalities. In fact, as far as we may define 'personality' they are quite distinct and well developed, at least as far as our limited understanding and language can define such a thing.

If we acknowledge that every person attempting to talk about infinite deity inherits the problem that Karl Barth attributes to Paul, being that the task is to articulate the 'unapproachably distant and unutterably strange'^[2] how is it that we, in our arrogance, point to previous attempts to articulate the Divine and call them heretic? It seems that Polytheism, rather than being a sin *against* G-d, is rather an attempt to name *towards* G-d knowing that the infinite can have no single name, personality or attributes. Just as our friend James spoken of above may seem like totally different people depending on the context in which you meet him, so too must the Infinite Divine appear vastly different based on context.

Now we know, just from a cursory reading of the *Bible* and theologians like Johnson, that we already place G-d into different contexts. In the *Torah* the name of the Creatrix of Genesis 1 (Elohim — אֱלֹהִים) is not the name of the paternal Father (HaShem — יְהוָה) or the Divine Administrator (Lord or Adonai — אֲדֹנָי) but all of these names are used in different contexts and in different relationships to the creation. Johnson even adds that texts like *The Book of Wisdom* refer to G-d as the feminine 'Sophia'. In Christian Theology where all of the names have been replaced by the title "God" the use of this 'Sophia' smacks of dualism (as she mentions early in her book) and yet the roots of the tradition recognize many names belonging to the One.

⁶ These are direct translations of the names, El (אֱל) being one of the names for G-d and as a suffix denoting 'of G-d'.

So what of a culture wherein maintaining a single Deity was not a priority, a culture that saw all of the different aspects of God but was not trying to make them fit a single mould? It would be like a patient and a hockey player both trying to describe James (as per our example above) and coming to the conclusion that they were discussing totally different people. So if we see G-d as the administrating Lord and Father then how is he intrinsically different from Odin or Zeus? Our descriptions, both in language and art, show more similarities than differences. The vengeful aspect of G-d which appears often in the Old Testament does not appear much different from Tyr or Mars or even Ra-Hoor-Kraat (Horus the Younger). And the loving parent the ‘Gabriel’ aspect corresponds well with Isis and Freya and all Mother Goddesses.

Such ‘Pagan’ cultures tended not to try and reconcile these separate personalities into a single form, into a single Deity, and yet most considered there to be something both older and greater than all of the Gods combined.⁷ By approaching the infinite in small pieces like this it became easy for them to conceptualize Deity in many more facets than modern Western culture is willing to attempt. In fact, since it is impossible to encapsulate an Infinite Deity into finite language then perhaps it is also impossible to be truly Polytheistic since any naming towards G-d must, ultimately, be as good or bad as any other. Whether we use the many names of the *Torah* or the company of Deities that inhabit Asgard we are still attempting to understand the nature of the Divine within the confines of our finite minds and words.

Theologians, like Barth, have suggested that every failed attempt to describe or understand G-d must be a form of Idolatry—for whatever we are worshipping is not G-d. If we define G-d as the Father and create a ‘father image’ to work with (either physical or mental) we are, therefore, worshipping an idol which is not G-d, for G-d is much more than just a Father. To a certain extent this is

⁷ Most pantheons have a creation story which includes the creation of the Gods and Goddesses themselves. It is for this reason that I have written elsewhere that the vast pantheons belong to the sphere of Briah and not Atziluth.

true, for the Father God is only part of G-d, and yet, perhaps, it is presumptuous of us to assume that G-d is so stupid as to not recognize our attempts to honour Him within the confines of the finite mind and language which He created for us.

The most common example of idolatry is the actual creation and worshipping of an idol. Yet when does an image become an idol, and when is an idol only an image? It depends on purpose more than anything. In the *Torah* (*Genesis* 31) Rachel steals Laban's idols and these are referred to not as sacred images, not as inspirational statuary but as gods⁸ in their own right. An idol which is thought to be the totality of a God in and of itself is truly an idol, but a sacred image, something that reminds one of their God or helps one to relate to their God is not an idol. It is the error of mistaking the image of the crucifixion with Christ himself.⁹ The one is only a pale reflection of the other, and G-d, being infinite, is no more diminished by a sacred image (either physical or mental) any more than a person is diminished by being talked to on the telephone. The image is a source of inspiration that causes an emotional response by which we can move closer to an aspect of Deity and, although we might be very sad if that object was stolen or broken, we would mourn it no more and no less than any other beautiful thing. The God/dess which it represents is not harmed in any way by damage to the thing any more than a person is diminished if something happens to his telephone connection.

We can begin to see why an infinite G-d almost demands a Polytheistic world view. We are no more capable of fitting the infinite G-d into a single concept, personality or name than we are capable of fitting the ocean into an hourglass. Whether we are using the many names of G-d found in the *Torah* or some of the different title-names mined from various texts by Johnson or a pantheon of names such as the Greek, Norse or Roman, it doesn't really matter as long as we love and honour these names, this

⁸ In this case god is a reference to an inanimate object does deserve a small 'g'.

⁹ Jews consider Christians (and Roman Catholics in particular) to be idol worshippers because they pray to such images as 'The Lamb of God', the Crucifix and various statues of saints, angels and, of course, Mary.

Deity, this Infinite G-d. If we ascribe faith to this at all it is that G-d knows our hearts and if we honour the Divine as Odin All-Father or as Isis Myrionymous that we are still honouring the ONE within a specific context, from a particular point of view. So we should not vilify those that came before us and created complex pantheons in order to relate to the infinite, rather we should celebrate their attempts to do what we, even today, can not manage—to relate to an infinite G-d through such a finite thing as human language and understanding.

[1] on page 119 of the previously mentioned text

[2] Barth 27