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Is Belief a Jewish Notion?

By GARY GUTTING

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The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

This is the fourth in a series of interviews about religion that I am conducting for The Stone. The interviewee for this installment is Howard Wettstein, a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Riverside, and the author of “The Significance of Religious Experience.”

Gary Gutting: You say you’re a naturalist and deny that there are any supernatural beings, yet you’re a practicing Jew and deny that you’re an atheist. What’s going on here? What’s a God that’s not a supernatural being?

Howard Wettstein: Let’s begin with a distinction between participation in a practice and the activity of theorizing, philosophically and otherwise, about the practice. Even an advanced and creative mathematician need not have views about, say, the metaphysical status of numbers. Richard Feynman, the great physicist, is rumored to have said that he lived among the numbers, that he was intimate with them. However, he had no views about their metaphysical status; he was highly skeptical about philosophers’ inquiries into such things. He had trouble, or so I imagine, understanding what was at stake in the question of whether the concept of existence had application to such abstractions. Feynman had no worries about whether he was really thinking about numbers. But “existence” was another thing.

It is this distinction between participation and theorizing that seems to me relevant to religious life.

G.G.: How so?

H.W.: I had a close friend in Jerusalem, the late Rabbi Mickey Rosen, whose relation to God was similarly intimate. To watch him pray was to have a glimpse of such intimacy. To pray with him was to taste it; God was almost tangible. As with Feynman, Mickey had no patience with the philosophers' questions. God's reality went without saying. God's existence as a supernatural being was quite another thing. "Belief," he once said to me, "is not a Jewish notion." That was perhaps a touch of hyperbole. The point, I think, was to emphasize that the propositions we assent to are hardly definitive of where we stand. He asked of his congregants only that they sing with him, song being somewhat closer to the soul than assent.

This brings to mind Buber's emphasis on the distinction between speaking to God, something that is readily available to all of us, and significant speech/thought about God, something that Buber took to be impossible.

G.G.: But you can't in fact speak to someone who doesn't exist — I can't speak to Emma Bovary, although I can pretend to or think I can. Further, why would you even want to pray to someone you didn't believe exists? On your account praying to God seems like playacting, not genuine religious commitment.

H.W.: Were I to suggest that God does not exist, that God fails to exist, then what you suggest would have real purchase. My thought is otherwise; it's rather that "existence" is, pro or con, the wrong idea for God.

My relation to God has come to be a pillar of my life, in prayer, in experience of the wonders and the awfulness of our world. And concepts like the supernatural and transcendence have application here. But (speaking in a theoretical mode) I understand such terms as directing attention to the sublime rather than referring to some nonphysical domain. To see God as existing in such a domain is to speak as if he had substance, just not a natural or physical substance. As if he were composed of the stuff of spirit, as are, perhaps, human souls. Such talk is unintelligible to me. I don't get it.

The theism-atheism-agnosticism trio presumes that the real question is whether God exists. I'm suggesting that the real question is otherwise and that I don't see my outlook in terms of that trio.

G.G.: So what is the real question?

H.W.: The real question is one's relation to God, the role God plays in one's life, the character of one's spiritual life.

Let me explain. Religious life, at least as it is for me, does not involve anything like a well-defined, or even something on the way to becoming a well-defined, concept of God, a concept of the kind that a philosopher could live with. What is fundamental is no such thing, but rather the experience of God, for example in prayer or in life's stunning moments. Prayer, when it works, yields an awe-infused sense of having made contact, or almost having done so. Having made contact, that is, concerning the things that matter most, whether the health and well-being of others, or of the community, or even my own; concerning justice and its frequent absence in our world; concerning my gratefulness to, or praise of, God. The experience of sharing commitments with a cosmic senior partner, sharing in the sense both of communicating and literally sharing, "dreaming in league with God," as A.J. Heschel puts it, is both heady and heartening. Even when that partner remains undefined and untheorized.

G.G.: How could you share commitments with someone — a "senior partner" no less — who wasn't a person?

H.W.: I have been speaking as if God were a person, and such is our experience. However, overlaying this is the sense, sometimes only a dim sense, that somehow God is beyond being a person, that we are over our heads in even raising the question. Do you sense a tension, one that, on the face of it, might make theorizing a tad difficult?

G.G.: I see a tension in religious practice itself. In prayer, you say, you have a sense of God as a person but at the same time a sense that God is perhaps not a person. It seems to me that, if God is not a person, then the religious practice of praying to God isn't what most religious people think it is. It may be edifying,

therapeutic, or whatever. But it's not, for example, expressing our thoughts to someone who understands and loves us.

H.W.: I wasn't speaking about what God is, nor do I know what he is. (Remember his enigmatic remark in Exodus 3:14, "I am what I am.") I was addressing my experience, with its strange duality: In prayer, we express our deepest selves to God who understands. I pray, and I mean it. But I am "blessed" with an additional sense that, in so supposing, I'm over my head; I don't know what I'm talking about. Both feelings are real and powerful.

These experiences are not theory-driven. The perceptions and understandings of the religious practitioner are more like the outpourings of a poet than they are like theoretical pronouncements. Moments of insight, illumination and edification do not necessarily respect one another; illuminating one aspect of a phenomenon may occlude others. Poetry, at its most profound, need not observe consistency.

G.G.: This sounds like Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself." Hardly a philosophical response.

H.W.: The philosophy of religion is, of course, another matter. My approach departs from the way the philosophy of religion has been and is still often pursued, largely as a treatment of the putative metaphysics of religion and then the epistemology needed to support such a metaphysics. For me, religious practice is primary; the philosophical project consists in an elucidation of the significance of that practice and of the religious life that embeds the practice.

G.G.: I agree that some questions philosophers of religion ask have purely theoretical significance. But here the question arises out of religious practice itself. Is there a person I'm praying to? How could that not matter to me, precisely as someone engaged in the practice of praying? Compare: I'm on the phone and suddenly get a sense that the responses I'm hearing are from an automated program, not a human being. That's a matter of practical importance. Why is the case of talking to God different?

H.W.: What I've been suggesting about God's personhood is a special case of the problem of anthropomorphism, the way we are drawn into and out of

anthropomorphic characterization of God. Such characterization of God is at the heart of religious life. “Taste and see God’s goodness.” (Psalms 34:8) And there is also a dark side of anthropomorphic depiction: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil.” (Isaiah 45:7) God’s goodness, nurture, and the like, but also his anger, his hiddenness, all of these are available to experience.

Yet religious anthropomorphism coexists with a sense that, while hardly universal even in my religious community, goes deep: in thinking about God, about what he is, about how he works in our world, we are over our heads. “How the hell do I know why there were Nazis?” protests one of Woody Allen’s characters, “I don’t even know how the can opener works.” And such an attitude reflects itself in the anti-anthropomorphist outlook that is an important if controversial stand in religious thought at least since medieval times. Maimonides’s attempt, in “Guide for the Perplexed” to explain away biblical anthropomorphism is a Jewish case in point.

G.G.: Well, personal experience can be hard to explicate. But as you’ve just said, the inclination to think of God in human terms also comes from the Bible, which certainly often talks of God as acting like a person: expressing love or anger, giving commands, making plans. In fact, much of the Hebrew Scriptures are a narrative with God as the major protagonist. Doesn’t accepting, as I suppose you do, this narrative of how God dealt with his people require thinking of God in human terms? How else can you make sense of God as an agent intervening in human history?

H.W.: For a philosophical anti-anthropomorphist like Maimonides, the Bible “speaks in the language of the folk.” Maimonides takes the phrase from the Talmud (but in quite another connection). It is a medieval theological counterpart to Bishop Berkeley’s advice that we ought to “think with the learned and speak with the vulgar.”

My own view is different. One way to put what I’ve been saying: The anthropomorphic is one mode of our access to God. I’m not sure that it’s the exclusive biblical mode, but it’s close to that. As religiously powerful as it is, the

anthropomorphized sense of the divine coexists with the humble sense that we are over our heads. This latter feeling can itself be infused with awe. It can have its own religious power.

At the end of your last question, you raise the difficult issue of God's intervention in human affairs. I can't tackle it here. But we should bear in mind that to speak of God as intervening in history, as with characterizing him as creating, planning, willing, and the like, these are all anthropomorphic.

G.G.: Coming back to the personal experiences that seem to be the core of your religious commitment, what's your response to suggestions that such experiences have some sort of entirely human psychological explanation? Doesn't that thought ever seem plausible to you?

H.W.: That one can explain love of our fellows in psychological terms does not suggest that there is something unreal about our fellows or about what we feel for them. The threat to religion is not from the psychological intelligibility of religious experience; it's from that intelligibility in the service of a reductive account. Freud argued persuasively, I think, for the psychological explicability of the religious impulse, and for the psychological needs to which the impulse is responsive. I'm sure something like that is right but, contrary to Freud's thinking, it doesn't threaten my own outlook or even the more usual supernaturalism. God's reality or existence is compatible with the putative needs.

What would it be like for love to be beyond the reach of psychology? Perhaps there are romantics who find such a scenario attractive or compelling. Perhaps this is due to the sense that a naturalistic explanation would render null and void the mysteries of love, and similarly, the magic of religious experience. For Einstein, though, the awe deepened with increased understanding.

G.G.: So then you can't argue for God's reality or existence as the best explanation of religious experience.

H.W.: That's one way to argue for the reality or existence of God, but it's not my way. Such an argument is subject to refutation by showing that naturalistically acceptable reasons can explain our experience, either in Freud's way or some

other. And given the propensity of the universe to disclose itself increasingly to scientific understanding, this argument seems, among other things, risky.

Nor do people who are blessed with religious experiences, even the intense ones of the mystic, uniformly suppose that their experiences are only explicable by reference to the truth of their religious beliefs. Rowan Williams points out that Teresa of Avila, a medieval saint and mystic whose life was punctuated by ecstatic experiences, never supposed that her uncanny experiences established the truth of religious claims.

G.G.: You seem to be saying that we'd have a complete explanation of religious experience, even assuming there's no God. Isn't this just the case that many naturalists make for atheism?

H.W.: I didn't say that we would have a complete explanation in psychological terms. I'm not easy with the idea of a "complete explanation." Say we had a really satisfying psychological account of, for example, what we experience in a moment of intense love. Say further that this was somehow perfectly correlated with a neurophysiological account. Would this be a complete explanation? Would there be no more questions — "why" questions — to ask about the experience? Couldn't we still be puzzled about the role that love plays in the human emotional economy? Wouldn't we want to know what it says about these creatures, their needs, their frustrations, the things that make life worthwhile for them? I'm not sure that we can ever close the book on our multiple explanatory projects.

The subject requires much more than can be said here. It's important to me, however, that my discomfort with the idea of a phenomenon receiving a once-and-for-all finished explanation is not only in the service of defending religion.

One of my complaints about the New Atheists, like Richard Dawkins, is their reductive tendency. I don't see why the psychological (or more generally naturalistic scientific) explicability of a phenomenon should suggest that questions associated with its meaning are put to rest. Indeed, were I a supernaturalist theist, I would feel no need to resist naturalistic explanation.

Earlier naturalistically inclined philosophers like Dewey and Santayana, by contrast with the New Atheists, appreciate the substantial power for good that religion exercises in people's lives. Needless to say, such appreciation is entirely consistent with a deep appreciation for the negative side of the impact of religion: wars, bigotry, narrow-mindedness and the rest. Such is the way with institutions of such power.

This interview was conducted by email and edited. Previous interviews in this series were with Alvin Plantinga, Louise Antony and John D. Caputo.

Gary Gutting is a professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, and an editor of Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews. He is the author of, most recently, "Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960" and writes regularly for The Stone.