

Excerpt

INTRODUCTION

From *The Divine Mind* by Michael Gellert

Whether true or not, men have always believed in “unscientific concepts,” and these beliefs often are the real “facts” which shape their destiny.

—Max I. Dimont

When I was a child, I was taught to worship the God of the Hebrew Bible. In Jewish school, I learned of his extraordinary feats in a three-volume set of books called *Children’s History of Israel*. With chapter titles such as “Israel Conquers!,” “Saul to the Rescue!,” “The Wonderful Prince,” “The Romance of Ruth,” “The Bravest Boy in Israel,” “The Battle with the Giant,” “Hunted!,” and “Treachery!,” I was rapt in awe. History was alive, and God was its powerful mover and shaker. He was a flawless, heroic superbeing who ended the sufferings of his enslaved people and championed them through arid years in the desert and against formidable enemies in the Promised Land of Canaan.

In later years, I discovered that this God wasn’t so one-sidedly wonderful. I saw the other side of something that glitters. Learning of my father’s experiences in the concentration camps of Hungary shook up my views not only of the world but of its maker. The so-called Holocaust theologians whom I then read raised the burning question: where was God when six million were gassed, executed in mass shootings, and killed in other horrific ways? The Bible itself confirmed God’s dark side through a multitude of condemning episodes. He meted out fatal punishments for trivial violations of his Law. His ferocious temper would erupt when his chosen people threatened his sovereignty over them by worshipping other gods. He was, by his own admission, a jealous God. To help them win the land he promised them, he literally went into battle with them as their commander-in-chief. He was, the Book of Exodus tells us, a “man of war.” He would spearhead military campaigns that would result in what today could only be described as wholesale genocides, and his inclination toward ethnic cleansing, one gathers, served the purpose of eliminating not only Israel’s enemies but the foreign gods he was in competition with. As the people continued to fall prey to idolatry and to violate his Law, he eventually resorted to apocalyptic measures, and not for the first time in his history, as Noah’s flood confirms. He inspired the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires to invade Israel, resulting in the Babylonian exile that deprived the land of its most prominent people. He was relentless in his ambition to get his way, whatever the cost. He was, at least in the early phase of his development, a primitive and psychologically *young* God, and not the omniscient, always loving, equanimous being many today look to in their faith.

However, I also discovered that he did not stay young forever. Centuries later, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystics, all sharing the same Abrahamic God, would

encounter him in a very different way and yet identically to each other. They would experience him very intimately but not as a kind of “superperson” the way scripture usually portrays him, with anthropomorphic features including a masculine gender (which incidentally is how we shall refer to “him,” since we will be dealing largely with scripture and tradition). Rather, they would understand him as a phenomenon that is infinite and not limited by form, present in all things, and ultimately changeless even though those things change. God would be revealed to them in his original condition before creation, before time and the universe existed. Their eyes would see through his eyes, and they would grasp his eternity as their own. They’d perceive him as a state of pure awareness identical to theirs, as beyond good and evil and all the other opposites that riddle human life, and as consisting of essentially nothing. To the mystics, this latter quality would imply a pregnant nothingness much like the emptiness or Void of the Buddhists, and not the static, nihilistic nothingness of existentialists like Sartre. One wonders, did God mature or did we—or both?

My discovery of the mystics went hand in hand with a few personal experiences, including one that occurred in 1973 and that I wrote about in a previous book, *Modern Mysticism*, an investigation of the role of the unconscious mind in religious experience. Another and more enveloping experience in 1982 deserves a few words here, since it had some role in the genesis of this book. Like the first episode, it also took place in the midst of difficult circumstances. I was suffering from a nasty intestinal condition that my doctors suspected might have been caused by an undetected parasite acquired from my travels through Asia and the Middle East; I was enrolled in a doctorate program in psychology that I found uninspiring and deadening; I was sharing an apartment with someone I did not get along with; and I could neither improve nor yet had the clarity to find my way out of an unsatisfying, painful relationship with a girlfriend. Nothing in my life seemed to be going well, and a heavy and pervasive sadness had crept up on me and swallowed me. In short, I was miserable, and at that point had been so for over a year. All I could do was work my suffering as if it were a meditation exercise—watching it gently without judging it as something “bad,” without taking it personally, as if God had specially selected me for it, and without getting bent out of shape by it. But I wasn’t cognizant of this until much later. It occurred subliminally and without conscious intent.

One afternoon, for no reason that I could put my finger on at the time, I was swept into an unusual state of mind. I was crossing a street on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where I lived, and the view of the cityscape and busy traffic for many blocks ahead somehow caught my eye in a penetrating, fresh way. Suddenly it became evident to me, on a crisp, perceptual level, that my depression was essentially sheer nothingness—as light as a feather if existent at all—and yet filled with a quiet, indescribable divine presence of a nonanthropomorphic sort. I also immediately realized that I had been in this state of mind throughout the entire duration of the depression but hadn’t been aware of it, if such a thing makes sense. As with the meditative attitude, and possibly in connection with it, this had been there subliminally all along, going on perhaps in the way that cosmologists speak about the ever-present background radiation of the universe. And *Boom!* One day, in a single moment while crossing 81st Street on First Avenue, the shell of my suffering cracked and the nothingness within broke out. My mind became like an open sky as I effortlessly grasped the perennial teaching of the mystics and sages of all the world’s major religions, that where there is nothing, there is everything. A heightened

awareness and an almost crazy-making ecstasy coupled with a sober peacefulness and appreciation of divine grace emerged. My sadness instantly evaporated. As this state lasted several days, and its embers weeks longer, each of my problems were addressed and, if not altogether resolved, managed with an attitude of lightness.

In the years since then, I developed a passionate interest in the implications of this experience—so resonant with that of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystics—for an understanding of the Abrahamic God. I studied the three Abrahamic traditions to see what I could learn about how this God unfolded from the one presented in scripture to the one the mystics proclaimed. Eventually it became evident that he was on a journey—a journey of consciousness, or what in mythology is described as the hero’s journey. This wasn’t, however, a typical hero’s journey, because the Abrahamic God is not human, even though he exhibited human characteristics up until the mystics. Nevertheless, his evolving consciousness as presented in our Abrahamic traditions shows him in a process of transformation through heroic trial and ordeal. It is no accident that experiences like mine, and like that of the mystics, were also fruits of trial and ordeal.

This book is about God’s journey from the Hebrew Bible (or what many call the Old Testament) to the mystics of the Middle Ages and onward to modern times. Following the tracks of God forward from his first encounters with humankind, it aims to show where he came from and where he went, as this journey is one thing that distinguishes him from other gods: he was going somewhere; he was on a mission. Of what value is it for us to retrace his steps? To begin, his journey is interesting. It is a historical, psychological, and spiritual adventure. By recounting it, we will be invited to peek into his inner transformation process. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, this process may be very similar to our own, and possibly God can teach us a few things by virtue of his own story. The exploration of matters of ultimate truth, in any case, deepens and prepares us for the challenges of our own journey. We may discover what is humanly possible. Finally, we currently live in a world where one of the three Abrahamic traditions—Islam—is undergoing, for lack of a better term, an identity crisis that is affecting all of us. It may be helpful to learn about the core identity of both Islam’s tradition and its God, who happens to also be the God of Judaism and Christianity. This may empower us to deal more authentically with our confusing, troubled times by giving us a larger religious or spiritual context to view them in.

Our approach to God’s journey will revolve around the principle that the statements humans make about him reflect their *experience* of him, experience that, history reveals, changes over the course of time and tends to become psychologically more sophisticated. In telling his tale, I wish to preserve the magical way the biblical authors experienced him—namely, as an omnipotent, miraculous being, albeit one plagued with anxiety and dark moods that he acts out on. At the same time, I want to convey the gravitas of God as he evolves in the other Abrahamic scriptures and sacred writings that followed the Hebrew Bible. The profound intellect and wise heart of the mystics in particular give the impression that they pierced into his true nature. However, all statements about God must in the end be treated as expressions only of the human experience of him, since this is all we can truly know about him. As Jung was repeatedly compelled to say, the experience of God is a psychological fact regardless of whether or not he exists. Neither scripture nor mysticism provides irrefutable proof of the existence or nature of God; they only prove our experience of *something* we call “God.” Our

inquiry will thus be concerned only with what we can verify about him, and that indeed is only our experiences.

God mirrors the psyche that experiences him, another psychological fact worth mentioning. For example, both the biblical God and the ancient Israelites were tribal in their thinking and values, and not particularly philosophical. Both were fierce, brutal, and barbaric. This raises the question, who was created in the image of whom? It is apparent that Yahweh—God’s name in ancient Hebrew, meaning “I Am Who I Am” and sometimes mispronounced as “Jehovah”—was pictured with anthropomorphic imagery. (This was not only in the visual sense of sometimes having a human form but with respect to his other human traits too.) This is to be expected given the common view that the only way we can begin to comprehend the unknown is by proceeding from the known (and the Hebrew Bible marks the beginning of the Abrahamic quest to know the unknown, and hence is God presented in a way that is knowable). The psychological term for this, of course, is projection.

By contrast, the mystics advocate that God can be perceived only by altogether jumping off the cliff of the known and free-falling into the divine abyss of the unknown. Our images and ideas of God must more or less be sacrificed—our projections withdrawn—until nothing remains, and our self-image as other than God must also be extinguished. Only then can divine nothingness be grasped. However, this is not to say that the mystics had no religious imagination at all. The religious imagination is not to be equated with “fiction,” “illusion,” or “make-believe.” It is the human faculty that attempts to make the unknown knowable through images, ideas, myths, stories, and other forms of symbolic thought. As a psychic realm full of magical and mystical possibilities, it is also the source of many varieties of religious experience. The mystics employed the religious imagination to explain the metaphysics of creation and the psychology of the mind. But with regard to God, they were expressly interested in liberating him from the limitations of *any* kind of imagination or imaginal qualities. They wanted to taste, as Kant would say, the thing-in-itself.

This psychological factor of the religious imagination offers us a lens to view not only the God of scripture but the wider statements the Abrahamic religions make. Some still insist on a literal approach to questions like “Were the Israelites really slaves in Egypt?” or “Did Moses really receive the Ten Commandments and other Mosaic laws directly from God?” In fact, there is very little historical evidence for the events of the Exodus (and the ancient Egyptians were excellent record-keepers). As for the Mosaic Code, we know that it was predated by the Code of Hammurabi—the Amorite, Semitic king of Sumer who ruled the first Babylonian Empire in the eighteenth century BCE—and that the content, terminology, and even arrangement of the two codes bear a striking resemblance to each other. The Bible itself informs us that, around that time, Abraham, the patriarch upon whose covenant with God all the Abrahamic religions are founded, came to Canaan from Ur of the Chaldeans, which was in Babylonia. Is this the historical origin of the Mosaic Code, or at least an influence upon it?

What is important for our inquiry is not the factual history of the Abrahamic religions, but rather what they *say* is their history. One can approach the events they describe—whether the Exodus, the Resurrection of Jesus, or the angel Gabriel’s revelations to Muhammad—as history or myth or a blend of the two. For our purposes, the issue of whether they actually occurred or were instead dramatic inventions of the

religious imagination is an unnecessary dichotomy. From a psychological viewpoint, even if they happened only in the religious imagination, they nonetheless happened. Whether literally or symbolically, they tell the story of the human experience of God. By the same token, this book is both a history of God's inner development and *our* history of his development, not necessarily *his*. After all, who can truly fathom the mystery of God's inner workings, thoughts, and feelings?

In another matter that speaks to the anomalies of the Hebrew Bible, we can observe toward its end the occurrence of something unique in the history of religion: Yahweh participates in his own transformation to become a more viable God, if not yet a mystical one. He is subtly portrayed, again in the spirit of the hero's journey, as seeking greater consciousness. It would be one thing if the primitive biblical God just died off as he evolved into a more sophisticated God, but instead he suffers his own inner conflict with himself in service to his evolution. He demonstrates an urge toward self-realization. I know of no other god who does this. Perhaps here he again mirrors the psychic disposition of the Israelites. The historical moment at which he displays this is around the same time the Israelites become known as the Jews, the time of the Babylonian exile and the return from exile. They go through a tremendous paradigm shift, as does he.

God's journey has three stages that correspond to the history of the Abrahamic experience of him, and with this we may turn to how we will proceed. These three stages also correspond to the book's three parts. We will begin with (1) the Hebrew Bible (all or almost all of which is accepted by all three Abrahamic religions). We will then progress to (2) the Talmud, New Testament, Qur'an, and Gnostic literature. Finally, we will conclude with (3) the writings of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystics. We may note here how God's journey parallels the evolution of our consciousness. At first, we pictured him as he is presented in the Hebrew Bible, as a tribal war god. Much later, we encountered him no longer as a projected external image but as our own innermost essence. God's journey from the imaginal to the mystical is really our own. The three stages are thus both historical and psychological.

The first stage, the period of the Hebrew Bible, spans approximately from 2000 to 200 BCE. (Of course, other stages of religious development in the ancient Near East preceded this, but the Israelite religion, adopting the Canaanite sky god El as Yahweh, begins in this period.) God here is something utterly other than ourselves, and yet he has a *personality*, as if he were a human. Our treatment of him in this stage, while acknowledging his otherness, will therefore be as a personality who feels, thinks, and behaves in human ways, for this was how the Israelites experienced him.

The second, intermediate stage produced the Talmud, the New Testament, the Qur'an, and the Gnostic literature. It spans from around 200 BCE to 1200 CE. In this period, God is still, with some exceptions, conceived as external to us. However, he here begins to develop, beyond his humanlikeness in the Hebrew Bible, a humanitarian orientation that exercises his inner, spiritual character. He becomes less a personality and more humane. One can observe in this middle phase a chipping away of the original image of the Abrahamic God (Yahweh), each tradition in its own manner.

Lastly, the culminating stage, spanning from about 1200 to 1800, saw a complete transformation of this original image. During this period, the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystics discovered that the true God is not in *any* image but in absolute nothingness. By detaching themselves from traditional, anthropomorphic notions of God,

they found the limitless, formless, changeless, omnipresent Godhead—the *source* of all gods—who always was, always is, and always will be. They believed that we can all at least glimpse this Godhead because, even though it is transcendent, it dwells within each of us. In perhaps the greatest revolution in the history of human consciousness, God and humanity became one and the same.

But this culmination is not the end, at least not for us who, living some five centuries later than the more pivotal of these mystics, would witness atrocities that would raise questions striking at the heart of *any* discussion about God: How could an ethical and now mystically evolved God allow something like the Holocaust to happen? Does his silence mean that he has turned his back not only on his so-called chosen people but the millions of others who also perished? Has he, in his mystical loftiness, simply lost interest in humanity? In order to be complete, *our* journey must confront the dimension of evil and embrace the gritty details of human suffering, and so, in the final pages of this book, we will explore how our mystics and sages could help us with these questions. Their penetrating words and deeds offer something more substantial than the pat answers we are often given, such as, “God works in mysterious ways.” Indeed, we need teachings that acknowledge the powerful force and reality of evil without succumbing, on the one hand, to fundamentalism’s oversimplifications and, on the other, to modernity’s disillusionment and loss of moral values—what Nietzsche was really referring to when he declared that “God is dead.” If in the mystics’ experience God reached the pinnacle of his development, then it is up to us to extract from their experience the insights that would *for us* furnish a more complete understanding of how there could exist a God of love and higher truth in a world as dark as ours. To make their truths relevant to us, we must wrestle with the mystics and sages of our traditions the way Jacob wrestled with God. We must *earn* the benefits of their insights for ourselves.