

Is God a "Person"?: Neil N. Gillman

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Neil, what can we know about God? Is this a legitimate question?

Neil Gillman:

Look, I have some methodological assumptions here, which I think I should articulate at the beginning. First of all, I don't believe that there is any kind of rigorous, logical, objective proof that there is a God in the world in the first place. You know, philosophers have been trying to prove the existence of God and they have all of these classical arguments. None of them has really worked. I think they, they're helpful to people who come to belief in another way, but they've never, they've never bring, they've never brought anybody from atheism to belief. Logic doesn't go, reason doesn't go. My second basic assumption is that the God, at least the God of, of the Jewish tradition, the God of biblical religion, is beyond human knowledge. We cannot grasp God in, in our thinking, in language, God is beyond, God transcends it. Which means we're left with precious few alternatives. One is to lapse into, into kind of a worshipful silence, which is what the mystics do. Or stop asking, which as a philosopher, I have difficulty doing. And the other is to resort to, to a, to a very classical approach, which is to say that what we can say about God is, speak of God in human language, and we use, classical word is metaphors, allegories, constructs. My, my own preference is to use the term word picture. We experience God's presence. Enough people have over the centuries. The sense of, of a reality that transcends us, and a feeling. Now in Judaism, we don't see God, Christians believe that after the crucifixion, Jesus appeared and was seen by his apostles. But very few people in, in Hebrew scriptures have seen God. Isaiah, you know, the elders in Exodus behold God, and they eat, and they drink, they seem to survive. Moses wants to see God, God says no, you can't see me and live. But in other texts, Moses is described as having seen God face to face, so we don't know. It's, it's mixed bag. But it's very rare. But, so, people experience, but that's a weasel word because it's not a sensory experience. Interestingly enough, a lot of people hear God's voice, that, there's no problem. We can talk about why hearing is okay but seeing is forbidden. But on the other hand, there's a seeing, but it's not a regular seeing. What do we see? We see regular things, we hear regular things. But it's an interpretive kind of thing. We interpret what we see as manifesting the presence of God. The Psalms says, the heavens declare the glory of God. The psalmists saw heavens, the same heavens as we see. But he saw them as infused with God's presence as transcendent. And that interpretive seeing is also characterized by very strong feelings, very strong, all kinds of emotions. Some kind, sometimes emotions of horror, of awe, emotions of pleasure, being cared for, being nurtured. And those emotions, those feelings are translated into metaphors. The Lord is my shepherd, I want nothing. Now, the guy who wrote that psalm, felt experienced and nurtured, and he put God into the nurturing process in the world. He didn't see a shepherd and he didn't see God taking care of him. But he felt, he experienced being nurtured, and he identified the feeling with a picture. The picture is of a shepherd, he liked that metaphor. I taught the 23rd psalm in class the other day, and a student jumped up and said I hate that psalm because if, if God is a shepherd, I'm sheep. And I don't want to be sheep to God's shepherd. So, not all men, not all pictures work for everybody. But that's the only recourse we have. And so, what do we know? Know is far too intellectual a word. I don't think we can say that we know very much. But I think we can say legitimately with all these qualifications, we have a sense of God's presence, or we put God into our experience of the world, and then we say a lot for a tradition that says you can't say anything about God, it says an awful lot about God. But it says it using figurative language, God is a warrior, God is a shepherd, God is a judge on the High Holidays. God sits, and the names of all humanity are in front of him, and he decides who will live and who will die, right? God is apparent, God is a lover, God is a friend, God has a hand, which he doesn't. God sees, he doesn't have eyes, God hears, these are human ways of referring to God. And I think the danger is, of course, to see them as literally true. And that's what we have to avoid. So, the metaphors are useful and precarious. That's one of the tensions, you know, that we speak about with the theological language. We have to use metaphors, we have to use figurative language but beware, never take it literally.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

You've even gone so far as to say that for, to describe God and really believe in human languages, like idolatry.

Neil Gillman:

It's not like idolatry, it is idolatry.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Why is that?

Neil Gillman:

Because then you're lowering God to something that is merely natural, purely natural, and that's precarious. I, you know, speaking as a Jew, with all my admiration for, for Christianity has achieved, there was always a tension in the notion that Jesus is God become flesh. Because I believe that what Christianity intends by that idea, is that we see God through the person of a human being. But that seeing through can always become a barrier. So, we only see the human being, and then we identify that as God, and I think that deprives God of God's transcendence, of God's divinity. God becomes excessively vivid, excessively concrete. And then we worship the person, and that's, I think, precarious. Idolatry is a cardinal sin because, and it's not only worshiping wooden stone, which is what, you know, the classical prophetic. It's not only, it's taking anything that is less than God and worshiping as God. You could, you could make an idol of your people, your nation. Marks made an idol, a history, you worship history, history becomes God. Your nation becomes God, my, my nation, right or wrong, did somebody say that, right, that's idolatry.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

On the other extreme, you've said that even to call God an infinite one is still diminishing God because God goes deep beyond that.

Neil Gillman:

Yes, yes. Right. The, the real translation of [speaks Hebrew] the Hebrew [speaks Hebrew], which is a term that Jewish mystics have used, is infinity. Not the infinite one because that makes God into a being. God is not a being, in the same way that other beings are beings. To say that God is a being is again, I think, is a metaphor.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, in the, the tradition, certainly of Christianity, perhaps of Judaism, they think of God as a person with characteristics of a person, intentionality and, and desire, and beliefs. These are characters of a person. How does that articulate?

Neil Gillman:

Well—

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Is God a person in Judaism?

Neil Gillman:

Yeah, as long as you understand personhood as a metaphor. Look, there are, there are Jewish theologians, Jewish philosophers today, who, who insist that we speak of God as person entering into personhood, Martin Buber, I and Thou, this thou is very personal. But Buber understands the personhood of God as a human way of characterizing God, in opposition to Jewish process theologians, for example. who, who will speak of God as a force, not as a noun but as a verb, as activity. We know that an atom is not a little thing, right? An atom is activity. God is a verb. God is a doing.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

In Jewish process theology?

Neil Gillman:

In process theology, God is not a being, God is a doing, an activity. So, so all of these are useful. I think that the

person metaphor is extremely valuable. But here again, we're intention. When I pray, I very much want God to have feelings and to be a person. And to hear, and to relate to me in a very personal way. When I do philosophy, I want God to be beyond personhood.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That's the tension.

Neil Gillman:

That's the tension, that's what you live with all the time. And that's, I, you know, I'm in and out of each of these roles, I am a human being who worships and has a relationship with God, I hope. And I go into the classroom and become a philosopher, and then I'm worried about being too concrete, too vivid, and diminishing God's transcendence. And then I work with my head, it's really, word pictures that speak to my head, and some that speak to my heart and I need both. The feelings are very important. And I think the interesting thing is that the Bible is very free with attributing feelings to God. God is angry, God is pleased, God is frustrated, God is disappointed. I think God is vulnerable. God allows God's people to injure, to disappoint, and comes back for more. In a sense, God has failed consistently through the Bible. Failed with Adam and Eve, failed with Cain and Abel, failed with the generation of the flood. Failed with the people that God took out of Egypt. It's a history of failure, this is not a hugely successful God. But this is a God who keeps trying. Who never lets, lets up. This frustration gets transformed into yearning, endless yearning, and hope, and expectation that things will be better.