

On the Decisional Nature of Faith (and the 'hiddenness' of God)

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I. Introduction

God - to whatever extent and in whatever way God exists – has left it up to us to decide whether and in what way we will believe in God. This is a fact beyond reasonable dispute.

Either God exists in some sense or does not. In either case, God has not made God's existence obvious. The very fact that we debate God's existence is the proof of this. We do not debate the sun's existence.

This 'hiddenness' of God has profound implications for how we should think about religious belief. It is something the religions themselves have been less than clear about. Christianity, for instance, has long represented itself to humankind as if the truth of its creedal claims are, or somehow should be, obvious to all – with the implication that rejection of these claims is therefore morally perverse. But the truth of these creedal claims is by no means obvious.

This does not mean they are not in some sense true, nor that it is wrong to believe in them. But it does mean that the basis of belief for such creedal claims, and the significance of such belief, is fundamentally different than for what we might call "empirical" claims, i.e., claims of simple fact. To clarify the nature and significance of this difference is important for a proper understanding of faith itself. This is the aim of this essay.

It is possible, of course, to treat the question of God as an empirical question. One can define God in one or another way and then ask if there is compelling evidence that an entity meeting that definition exists. But if we define God in traditional terms, the answer to this empirical

question must be no. Certainly there is no *compelling* evidence. Whether there is sufficient evidence to make a belief in God more reasonable than not on empirical grounds is, at best, debatable. In my view, if we approach the question on strictly empirical grounds, the weight of the evidence would not at all favor a belief in God as traditionally understood.

But such an empirical approach misses something essential about the nature of religious faith. God is presented to us by the religions not simply, or even principally, as an entity with a certain set of definable attributes. Rather, God is presented as an object of worship. This, of course, is the meaning of the central commandment of Torah, which Jesus calls the “greatest commandment”: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might.”

From this perspective, the question of whether or not God "exists" is the question of whether or not a worthy object of worship exists. This is quite a different question than the empirical one, and its investigation must be approached in quite a different manner.

II. A Worthy Object of Worship

What would constitute a worthy object of worship? How do we even go about thinking through such a question?

Perhaps the first thing to clarify is what we mean by "worship." To worship something is to hold it as of supreme worth, of ultimate meaning and value. There are many things in our lives that we value and hold as important, but is there anything we know of, or can think of, that would be *supremely* valuable, supremely worthy of devotion?

The answer we give to this question will tell us something about *ourselves*. If, for instance, I hold it to be supremely important that I win every contest I have with others, this defines *me* in a certain way, it makes *me* a certain kind of person.

Looked at from this perspective, the question of religion ceases to be "does God exist?" and becomes "What kind of person do I choose to be?" "What should I hold as supremely worthy of my commitment and devotion?"

The moment we recognize this to be the question of religion, we begin to see religion itself in a new light. Religions present to us *proposals* concerning what we should supremely value and how we should envision it and value it. The different religions provide different proposals, and even within each religion there are different interpretations and practices we are called upon to choose between.

Whether or not, and in what manner, we accept these proposals is up to us. It is a *decision* we make. When we say we believe in God, and we believe God to be a certain way, what we mean – or what, anyway, I think we should mean – is that we have made a decision to devote ourselves to a certain vision of what is supremely meaningful and important. Nothing compels this decision. In making it, we define *ourselves* in a certain way.

Shall we hold the Bible as infallible? Shall we believe in an eternal hell? Shall we believe that love is God's defining characteristic? Shall we believe that all human beings must acknowledge Jesus as divine? Or Muhammed as "the seal of the prophets"? Or the Pope as the God-ordained supreme religious authority on earth?

Nothing *forces* us to adopt or reject any of these beliefs. None of them can be verified empirically. Some may seem more reasonable than others, but given the general limitations of human reason, all may be recognized as viable candidates for belief. Then on what basis should

we decide on some as opposed to others? We have been given the freedom – one might even say the responsibility – to decide on the basis of what seems *best* to us.

And if there is a God, then we must conclude that this is the way God has set things up. God has not presented himself (herself/itself) to humankind in such a way as to force these decisions upon us. God, quite deliberately (to the extent we believe that God acts deliberately), has left the decision to us.

III. Faith as Spiritual Formation

Why? Why would God not simply make it clear what we should believe? The answer, I suggest, is because what we decide to embrace as worthy of our devotion shapes who we are, defines *us* in a fundamental way – and God has left it up to us to define ourselves. This is the essence of freedom.

But what is so important about freedom? Why is it more important that we be free than that we be right? The answer, I believe, is that we cannot *be* right without being free. Without freedom we are not truly ourselves, we are just an extension of our conditioning. In this sense, without freedom we can be neither right nor wrong.

If we posit, then, that God wishes for us to *be* right (not merely profess what is right), then it follows that God must wish for us to be free as a precondition to being right. In order to *be* right, we must *choose* what is right, and we must choose it because it is right.

This leads to a striking theological conclusion: to the extent that it is important to our spiritual maturation that we make this decision for ourselves, *God must remain hidden to us until we've made it.*

Were God to overwhelm us with God's presence our choice would be taken away from us. We would no longer be choosing a value but merely responding to a power. Then we would never be able to become fully mature, self-responsible, adults.

The hiddenness of God, thus, is necessary for the maturation of the human spirit.

What all of this implies is that the God of faith is not the God of the Bible *per se*, nor the God of doctrine *per se*, nor the God of Church, Synagogue, or Mosque *per se*, but the God of one's heart, the God of one's most basic moral and spiritual convictions and aspirations.

Scripture and religious teachings can help point the way to this God, and in this sense they can be spiritually 'profitable' (but also dangerous to the extent that we *confuse* them with God), but the God one must finally worship is the God of one's soul, of one's highest aspirations.

This is not subjectivism. I am not saying that God is nothing but an inner feeling or private conviction. I am saying that it is within our own inner recesses that we touch the eternal reality of God, and that the way we touch this reality is not through passively experiencing it as we might a TV show or movie, but by *choosing* it as our own.

Thus, we are responsible for the God we choose to worship. We cannot absolve ourselves of this responsibility through blind acceptance of scripture or doctrine. On the contrary, we have a responsibility to subject scripture and doctrine to scrutiny to ensure that we only accept from them what is truly worthy of our devotion.

And we can see this message in both Jewish and Christian scripture. In *Matthew*, for instance, Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. . . Therefore, by their fruit you will know them" (Mt. 7:15-20).

The implication here is that *we ourselves* must discern what counts as good and bad fruit. We cannot rely on prophets to tell us, for not every prophet is true. We ourselves must judge the goodness of the prophets. Jesus takes it for granted that we have the ability to do so. Does this mean our judgments will be infallible? Of course not. It means we must subject our judgments to critical scrutiny to ensure that they will be as sound as possible.

We read in first Thessalonians: “Do not despise prophecies but test everything, hold fast to what is good” (1Thess. 5:20-21).

Again, the final responsibility for the prophetic proclamations we accept lies with us. Our own intuitions of goodness must decide for us what we should and should not believe. We are responsible for the faith we adopt.

And all of this allows us to make sense of another scriptural passage that might otherwise seem baffling. In the Gospel of John, the disciple Thomas asks to touch the wounds of the resurrected Christ in order to assure himself that the resurrection is real. After he touches them, Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” But Jesus responds with a mild rebuke: “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing” (Jn. 20:29).

But why is it more blessed to believe without seeing? In our scientific age, we are accustomed to thinking that the opposite is true, that we should withhold belief until presented with solid empirical evidence.

We can make sense of this passage by reference to the *decisional* nature of faith. It is more blessed to believe without seeing because ‘belief’ in this context does not refer to a judgment we make about an empirical event. It refers to an existential commitment. The judgment of faith is not about whether Jesus was in fact physically resurrected. It is about what we should devote

ourselves to as “our Lord and our God.” To the extent that we require miracles as a prompt for faith our faith is less than perfect.

We should make the choice for faith, in other words, not because we see the *evidence* for God as compelling, but because we see the *worthiness* of God as compelling – not because some powerful entity demands it of us, but because our highest vision of ourselves demands it of us. And in this respect, there is indeed a kind of *certainty* that comes with faith. It is not the certainty that God (as an objective entity) exists, nor is it the certainty that this or that miracle occurred at this or that moment in history, nor is it the certainty that this or that metaphysical fact is true – it is the certainty of knowing *who one has chosen to be, what one has chosen to hold as supremely worthy*.

We see this emphasis on God’s worthiness at the heart of Hebrew scripture as well. When God tells Abraham that he will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah due to their “very grave sin,” Abraham responds, “Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? . . . Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:23-25).

Far be that from thee! Abraham is here telling God what God must be in order to *qualify* as God. Is this presumption on Abraham’s part, or rather the very thing that makes Abraham the “father of faith”? I suggest the latter. Abraham’s insistence that God be *worthy* of faith is integral to faith itself. An unworthy God would scarcely be God. Such worthiness is God’s defining characteristic; it is God’s ‘holiness.’ Every other characteristic we might attribute to God – eternity, omniscience, omnipotence – is derivative of this. It is just for this reason – and only for this reason – that we should love God “with all our heart, mind, and soul.”

What we love with all our heart, mind, and soul – what we *choose* so to love – determines who we are. The Jewish notion of *covenant* is expressive of this. A covenant is an agreement one must enter upon freely. As such, it is a way in which one defines oneself. There is a Jewish midrash that says that God offered the Torah to all the nations of the earth before he offered it to the Jews; the Jews were the only ones who accepted. The implication is that the Jews were "chosen" only because they *chose*. It is through choosing that one is chosen.

Such covenantal faith is not passive acceptance, but active commitment. One embraces it because one sees it as worthy of one's embrace. And this suggests another implication of this central command of Torah. It suggests that any presentation of God that seems *unworthy* of our complete love and devotion is one we must not give ourselves to utterly. It is one that, like Abraham, we must challenge. Until we have found a God we can love with all our heart, mind, and soul we have not wholly found God. Then we remain seekers.

Thus – in the language of engineering – we might say that the hiddenness of God is not a design flaw but a feature. It demands a *search* for God and a *decision* for God. And it demands that we decide for God, not because we are swayed by empirical evidence, but because we have discovered what is worthy of our utmost love. It is only through such discovery that faith achieves its fullest actualization, its true flowering – for, in the end, the search for our God, and the search for our highest selves, is one and the same.