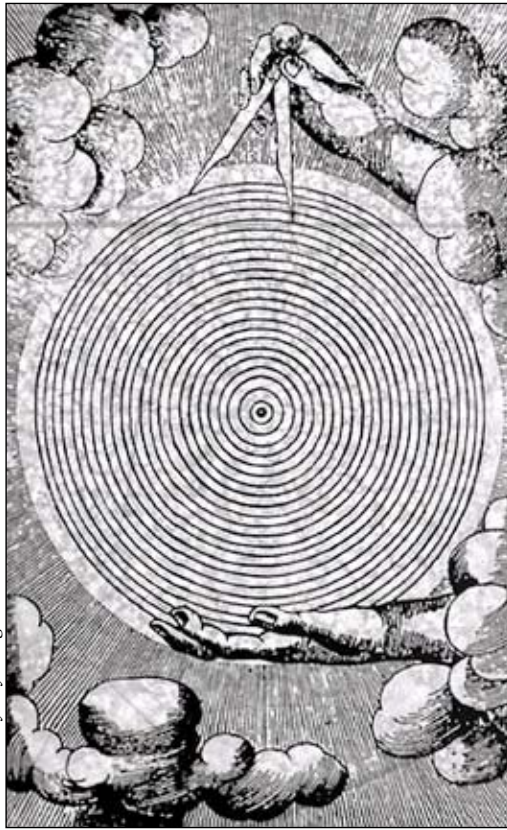


Problem or Mystery?: original art, Lonnie Hanson



A Case for God

RON MILLER

Once asked a group of students if God's existence constituted a "problem" for them. There was silence for a moment but then a young Indian woman responded: "The idea of God being a problem seems funny to me. If I walk along the beach on a sunny day, I may doubt that the grains of sand reflecting the sun are true sources of light, but I could never doubt the sun. As Hindus, we are not so sure how real we are, but we have no doubt about God and God is certainly not a problem."

I was taken aback. I had spent countless hours, whether in the classroom or in dorm lounges, arguing back and forth about the existence of God. Atheists and agnostics were everywhere. How could this young woman have no doubt about God? Why did it seem strange to her that God should be thought of as a problem?

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MYSTERY AND PROBLEM

Shortly after that experience, I attended a lecture by the French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel. In preparing for his talk, I read his major work, *The Mystery of Being*. He makes a distinction in that book that has proved central in my thinking ever since. The young woman was right; the idea of God being a problem really was funny. But more importantly, it was profoundly wrong. Problems are to be solved and solving problems entails objectifying them, successfully separating ourselves from them. We have all been solving problems since our first days in school and it is perfectly legitimate to do so.

But Marcel claims that not everything can be conceived as a problem. Life contains mysteries as well. This does not mean a mystery in the Agatha Christie sense; her “mysteries” were, in Marcel’s language, problems. Who killed Colonel Mustard in the library? We know that’s a problem because it has

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a potential solution. But isn’t all of life about problem solving, about finding solutions? Isn’t everything either a solved problem or a problem waiting for a solution? No, and that’s precisely what we need to acknowledge.

Marcel argues that mysteries are not reducible to problems because we cannot objectify them; we cannot isolate them

from ourselves or submit them to laboratory conditions. Mysteries climb back up on us, just when we are trying to push them away. In Marcel’s words, they “encroach on their own data”. They prove to be inseparable from us and thus resist being turned into problems. So a mystery is not an unsolved problem but something altogether different.

Our existence, the divine reality, life and death – these are mysteries, not problems to be solved. But if we cannot solve mysteries, what should we do with them? Marcel’s answer is the same in French and in English: *participation*. We participate in mysteries. It is a process of immersion, not calculation. It’s similar to the difference between reading all the technological literature about how hot tubs work and the actual experience of lowering yourself into a hot tub. The academic knowledge about hot tubs is not at all like steeping in the warm water.

A colleague of mine informed me recently that he was an atheist. “What would change your view?” I asked him. “I would need a scientific proof for the existence of God” he replied. I pointed out to him that God was not a problem to be solved but a mystery in which he could participate. Or, more precisely, God is a mystery in which he already participates, although he has the option to recognize it or not. I suggested that he might want to meditate, learn to cultivate silence, stay alert for what beckons from so many places in our experience, what the Irish call “the thin spaces” where the divine mystery seems closer than elsewhere.

This is not knowing about God but knowing God in the sense of becoming intimate with God. The Bible speaks of the “knowledge of God” but in Hebrew the word for know is also the word for having sexual intercourse with someone. This kind of “knowledge of God” does not appear as the answer to a set of operations on our computer. We need commitment and dedication; we need patience and prayer. This experienced knowing comes through spiritual practice, not through a process of calculation or reasoning.

It’s important to keep in mind the difference between the methodology we use for solving problems and the methodology we use for approaching mysteries. The essential flaw in all the atheist books pouring off the press these days lies in the fact that their authors are methodological monists. That is to say, they believe that life offers only problems and that all problems can best be met by their particular way of knowing. Most of them are trained in the methodologies of the physical or social sciences and approach the subject of God with the naïve assumption that their particular problem-solving methodology is both appropriate and adequate, when in fact it is neither.

THEISM, PANTHEISM, AND PANENTHEISM

Does God exist? My short answer is “yes” but it’s not that simple. When anyone affirms that God does or does not exist, it’s important to know what they’re affirming or denying.

One approach to the divine mystery is through what we call in theological conversations “traditional theism”. Now since I have already argued that God is a mystery, not a problem, we need to understand from the outset that both this position, traditional theism, and the ones we will later discuss – pantheism and panentheism – are not solutions but clusters of metaphors intended to help us participate in what is ultimately a mystery.

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Traditional theism understands God as an independent entity separate from the universe (usually in a place called heaven). He is often portrayed through patriarchal images: father, king, and shepherd. This God is a separate being. If you add this God to the two of us (you, my reader, and myself) then there are three.

I personally am not drawn into the mystery of God through this set of metaphors. There is another approach in which God is simply everything and everything is God. We can call this pantheism. My problem with this language of simple identity is that there seems to be no reason to use both terms. Let’s just say that everything is – end of story. Why use the “God word” at all?

There is, however, another approach to the mystery of God: panentheism. This is different both from traditional

The Fountain of Life: original art, Setsuko Yoshida



theism and from pantheism. Unlike traditional theism, panentheism does not regard God as an entity separate from the universe. But unlike pantheism, panentheism does not understand God as identical with the universe. In this third view, the universe is in God and God is in the universe; and yet, God is more than the universe. This view corresponds to the mystical understanding of God found in many of our sacred traditions.

I first learned this in graduate school when I was studying the 13th-century theological giant, Thomas Aquinas. He asserted that God was not an entity among entities but rather the existence of every entity, the to-be-ness of everything that is. God is “Subsistent To-Be-Ness” whereas every entity – molecule, plant, animal, human person, or angelic being – is a “Participant To-Be-Ness”. This is heady language and so the mystics naturally turn to poetry.

This is what Gerard Manley Hopkins was talking about when he wrote:

*Thee God we come from, to Thee go.
All day long we like fountain flow
From Thy hand out
Mote-like in Thy mighty glow.*

The images climb on top of each other. First, the simple process of coming and going, the great mystical insight that everything comes from and returns to the divine mystery. Second, the phenomenon of water flowing from a fountain, looking somehow other but in reality being only water. And finally the tiny particles swimming in a splash of sunshine. The images can never be perfect but they give us a glimpse of the mystery to which they point. Meister Eckhart, the great 14th century German mystic, was also using an image when he wrote that the drop poured into the ocean is the ocean. And yet, the drop is not the entire ocean, for the entire ocean is not in the drop. In the same way, the person drawn into God is God, but not all of God. But just as there is nothing in the drop that is not water, so too there is



The Problem of Evil; original art, Lonnie Hanson

nothing in the person that is not God. We either recognize this and live in love's abundance or deny it and live a diminished life. As one of the sayings of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* states: "If you do not know yourselves, then you exist in poverty and you are that poverty".

A river doesn't flow higher than its source. If consciousness and love are our highest attributes, then their source cannot be lower. Though not a person, the divine must be somehow personal. The mystics' experience of the divine confirms a mystery that is trans-personal but not impersonal: a reality loving us, embracing us, inviting us to participate fully in what we most deeply are, God. Everything that exists is God in manifest form; and yet, unlike pantheism, the manifestations do not exhaust the source.

This God does not inhabit a place called heaven but resides at the heart of everything that exists. All our experience is in God. Even atheists enjoy an unremitting experience of the very God they are so determined to deny. This is the God in whom we live and move and have our being. We can praise this God, thank this God, express sorrow for our failings to this God, and invoke this God for all those needs we feel both for others and ourselves.

The closeness of this God is not an option. As the Qur'an states, God is closer to us than our jugular. Whether we recognize this closeness is our only option – the reality of God is spread out in front of us but that doesn't mean that everyone sees it. The difference lies in whether or not we realize our deepest

reality, cooperate with the flow of life, align ourselves with the grain of the universe, and accept the divine embrace.

A question in one of my college exams was whether or not there was more reality after God created the universe. This was a classic dilemma. If I said there was more reality, then how could God be infinite? If I said there was no more reality, then was I not a pantheist? The only way between the horns of this dilemma was pantheism. There was no more reality after creation but the reality was differently manifested.

PUTTING GOD ON TRIAL

This all sounds well and good, but what about all the evil in the world? The problem appears already in ancient philosophy, finding echoes in the writings of many contemporary atheists and agnostics. It eventually acquires the name theodicy, justifying God or putting God on trial to see if God is indeed just.

The case against God often takes the form of a compelling trilemma, three propositions that are asserted to be incompatible with faith in God.

1. *God is all-powerful.*
2. *God is all knowing.*
3. *God is all loving.*

The argument demands that we drop one of the three propositions or drop our faith in God. Perhaps God is not all-powerful; then God is relatively impotent. Perhaps God is not all knowing; then God is to some extent ignorant. Perhaps God is not all loving; then God

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may well be a monster. And yet, if God is indeed all-powerful, all knowing, and all loving, then the evil in our world precludes this God's existence.

At this point, we can easily recognize the fact that this logical trilemma presumes traditional theism, the understanding of God as a separate entity, a larger than life being. This being exists separately from us and can intervene in our affairs at will. Why, then, is that intervention so infrequent and inconsistent? Why does God choose to save two lives from the plane wreckage and take seventy? Why does God riddle one body with cancer and yet spare another?

I don't believe that this challenge can be met within the parameters of traditional theism. From that perspective, we are set up to find someone to blame. Why did God allow Auschwitz? But from the perspective of pantheism, another avenue of response appears. If God is the very to-be-ness of all that is, inseparable from the life we experience, then there is no separate God to accuse.

At this point, an important shift occurs. When we are no longer able to hold a separate God responsible for evil, then we must seek other loci for the evil we find in our world. Am I a source of evil? Are other people a source of evil? Are the parameters of our world – from bacteria to tornadoes – sources

of evil? More importantly, however, whatever sources of evil we disclose, our primary concern is to respond to evil, to learn from it, and to the extent that we can, to alleviate its effects in our world. As a panentheist, I cannot expect an entitatively separate God suddenly to appear on stage (the traditional "deus ex machina") and solve the problem. Evil is integral to the mystery manifested in and around us. But just as evil is part of our reality, so too is our response to it.

A story from the Jewish mystical tradition may help us to understand this panentheistic perspective. Somewhere in Eastern Europe, a Jew was attacked and beaten by some drunken Cossacks and left half-dead on the road. He was found there by a Jewish family who took him in, nursing him back to health. When they saw that he had regained consciousness, the family inquired as to what had happened to him. The Hasid answered: "The God who attacked me on the road is now the God who is restoring me to life".

Clearly this Hasid felt the pain of being attacked, just as he felt the comfort of being nursed to health. The story certainly expects us to condemn the evil inflicted by the Cossacks and to emulate the compassion shown by the Jewish family. But what makes this story significant is its panentheistic perspective. The Hasid didn't look for a God to blame. There was no God separate either from the Cossacks who attacked him or from his fellow Jews who helped him.

What is lacking in panentheism is a basis for any case against God. It simply disappears. Plaintiff and defendant are

one. From this panentheistic perspective, when we experience evil, our primary impetus is to respond to it, not to blame it on God. And this applies to the evil done to us, the evil done to others, and the evil that we ourselves do. We waste no time in trying to judge a distant God who has decided to let this evil happen. For no such God exists. The only God is the one who lives and works in us, inviting us to be conscious of our oneness with all that is and to act in the world in ways that reflect that oneness. Love your enemies. Why? Because you have no enemies...they are you.

Mystery; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

THE CASE RESTS

I can believe in the God of Gabriel Marcel, the God of Thomas Aquinas, the God of Meister Eckhart, the God of the Hasid. This is the God I find when I am able to participate in mystery. And this leaves me with no separate God to blame, and certainly no separate God to deny. The God I affirm is a mystery, not a problem. This God is the great With of human experience, the One from whom we can never be separated. And it is this God for whom I would presume to make a case.

