



Michael Wyschogrod and the Scandal of Jewish Theology

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From *The Body of Faith* (1983):

Maimonides' demythologization of the concept of God is unbiblical and ultimately dangerous to Jewish faith. Jewish faith cannot survive if a personal relation between the Jew and God is not possible. But no personal relation is possible with an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover...The story is told of a Yeshiva student who loved to pose riddles. One day he posed the following to his friend: "What is it – it sits on a tree branch, it is red, and it sings?" His friend guessed various creatures such as birds, squirrels, plants which make a noise in the wind, etc., only to be told that he did not have the right answer. When he gave up he was told that the right answer was a pair of *tefillin* [black leather boxes worn during prayer]. When he protested that *tefillin* did not sit on a tree branch, were not red, and did not sing, the riddle-master replied: "Those things I put in to make it harder."...if the Torah depicts God as having emotions, changing his mind, walking in the Garden of Eden and being angry at a disobedient Israel, it does so not because it wishes to communicate that the opposite of all these traits is true: God has no emotions, God never changes his mind, God never walks on earth and God is never angry. **If the Torah had wished to teach these ideas, it would have taught them and not their opposites...**

From *Revelation and the Orthodox Intellectuals* (Tradition, 1966):

...There are grave difficulties involved in making such an assertion [that God has ideas and desires which he communicates to humanity]. When I am told that Mr. Green is thinking a thought or has a desire, I generally understand the meaning of such an assertion because I, too, have had thoughts and desires and I therefore assume that Mr. Green's are rather similar to my own. But when I attribute thought or desire to God, am I to understand by this that God has thoughts or desires in the same sense in which humans do? ...The difficulty, however, is that just as no physical characteristics can be attributed to God, so no other attributes can be attached to God either. From Maimonides' point of view there are two reasons for this. The first is that if God had any attributes whatsoever, his unity would be threatened since anything that has attributes is a composite. The second and probably more compelling consideration is



that no attribute that is used both of God and man has any common meaning whatsoever. In the words of Maimonides (*Guide*, Part 1, Chapt. 56) "... there is, in no way or sense, anything common to the attributes predicated of God, and those used in reference to ourselves, they have only the same names, and nothing else is common to them." ...

The disturbing problem that this line of reasoning leads to is this: since there is no common meaning to any attribute applied to man to God and since we derive our insight into the meaning of any term from its sense as applied to man, I am simply left without any understanding whatsoever of the meaning of any term that is jointly applicable to God and man. ...The case I have here outlined is the religious-philosophical argument against the knowability of God. Its strength is derived from the insight that **by uncritically speaking of God as willing, commanding, loving and warning, an inevitable humanization of God occurs by attributing to him characteristics which cannot possibly apply to an Absolute being who is altogether one. And it is important to realize that there are no easy or cheap ways out of this problem...**

Where does all this leave us? Must we remain silent in the presence of God, to fulfill Wittgenstein's dictum that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"? If talk of God were the result of human initiative, the answer would have to be yes...Instead, it is God who descends to man. In the mystery of his freedom He addresses man, permitting man to speak to Him and about Him. The Torah, and therefore God, speaks in the language of men, permitting His glory to be contained in human concepts. **But this miracle of revelation can be accepted in gratitude only when it is seen to hover over a philosophic impossibility. The philosophic impossibility remains an impossibility in its rational integrity even in the light of the divine power which conquers it...**

It makes all possible difference, therefore, whether we proclaim the speaking and willing God before or after the realization of the philosophic impossibility involved. Before this realization, our words are a deceptive piety which erode the majesty of God by reducing him to human concepts which can then be applied to Him literally. Such theological positivism, while often well-intentioned, is idolatrous and ultimately destructive of the living word of God. **When the words which God applies to himself are proclaimed by the believing community in the full awareness of the abyss over which it hovers, of the limits of the human word and of the power of the word which is God's rather than man's, theological positivism gives way to a theology of wonder and gratitude, wonder over the presence of God with us and gratitude for the condescension of the God of creation who becomes the God of Abraham whose presence is miraculously preserved in the Biblical word.** Israel can therefore assert that God loves it, that He has chosen it from among all the nations of the world to honor it with his commandments and that He will redeem this nation and through it all of humanity in the fullness of his time. And all this is true not literally but in that ultimate mystery which entitles us to say what we say and for God to remain the God who proclaims that "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55: 8-9).

