

# RECONCEIVING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

RECONCIBIENDO LA FILOSOFÍA DE LA RELIGIÓN

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## RESUMEN    ABSTRACT

Los filósofos han trabajado durante mucho tiempo con concepciones de Dios, inadecuadas para representar a un Dios genuinamente digno de adoración. Una deficiencia importante es la omisión de la noción de severidad divina, apropiada para la idea de un Dios digno de adoración. Como resultado, muchos filósofos tienen expectativas equivocadas sobre Dios, es decir, expectativas que no concuerdan con lo que serían los propósitos relevantes para Él, si Dios existiera. Estos últimos propósitos incluyen aquello que Dios busca lograr cuando revela a los seres humanos (la evidencia de) su realidad y voluntad. Las expectativas equivocadas de Dios nos pueden llevar a buscar pruebas de su existencia en todos los lugares equivocados.

El antídoto necesario requiere una reconsideración cuidadosa de nuestras expectativas sobre Dios, y nos capacita para acercarnos a una epistemología de la religión, de una manera que le hace justicia a la idea de un Dios digno de adoración. El artículo sostiene que la evidencia disponible a los seres humanos de un Dios digno de adoración, no sería para meros espectadores, sino que buscaría desafiar la voluntad de los seres humanos para cooperar con la voluntad perfecta de Dios, como sucede en el caso del desafío divino de Getsemaní.

Philosophers have long worked with conceptions of God inadequate to a God genuinely worthy of worship. A key inadequacy is the omission of a notion of divine severity appropriate to the idea of a God worthy of worship. As a result, many philosophers have misguided expectations for God, that is, expectations that fail to match what would be God's relevant purposes, if God exists. The latter purposes include what God aims to achieve in revealing to humans (the evidence of) God's reality and will. Misguided expectations for God can leave one looking for evidence for God in all the wrong places.

The needed antidote calls for a careful reconsideration of our expectations for God, and enables us to approach religious epistemology in a way that does justice to the idea of a God worthy of worship. The article contends that the evidence available to humans from a God worthy of worship would not be for mere spectators, but instead would seek to challenge the will of humans to cooperate with God's perfect will, as in the case of the divine challenge from Gethsemane.

## PALABRAS CLAVE    KEY WORDS

Concepto de Dios, evidencia, expectativas de Dios, fe, Getsemaní, Dios, severidad divina, voluntad.

Concept of God, evidence, expectations of God, faith, Gethsemane, God, severity, volition.

## Expectations of God

Our expectations of God, if God exists, can get in the way of our receiving salient evidence of God. Perhaps we assume that God would have certain obligations to us, even by way of giving us clear evidence, and when those obligations are not met, we discredit God, including God's existence. This is a fast track to atheism or at least agnosticism. We need, however, to take stock of which expectations of God are fitting and which are not, given what would be God's perfect moral character and will. If God lacked a perfect moral character and will, then God would not be worthy of worship, and hence would not satisfy the supreme title "God". We then might have a god, but not God.

Perhaps God is not casual but actually severe regarding available evidence of God, owing to God's intense concern for the realization of divine righteous love (*agapē*), including its free, unearned reception and dissemination among humans. Perhaps the latter concern stems from God's aim to extend, without coercion, lasting life with God to humans, even humans who have failed by the standard of divine *agapē*.

God's severe commitment to that goal could figure in God's making human life difficult, or severe, for the sake of encouraging humans, without coercion, to enter into a cooperative good life with God. This severe God will not sacrifice a human soul to preserve human bodily comfort.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) offers this main definition of "severity": "strictness or sternness in dealing with others; stern or rigorous disposition or behaviour; rigour in treatment, discipline, punishment, or the like". This definition does *not* entail moral badness or evil, or any moral deficiency for that matter, contrary to some less prominent uses of "severity". The severity in question, however, does involve discomfort, anxiety, stress, rigor, or insecurity.

Being perfectly and severely active in gracious righteousness, God would oppose whatever obstructs perfect righteousness among agents. This opposition would be wisely intentional, and not impulsive or irrational. It could allow, however, for some short-term unrighteousness for the sake of long-term righteousness. So, God's opposition to certain occurrences of unrighteousness, such as unjust human warfare, could be eventual rather than immediate.

God could allow some episodes of unrighteousness to persist for a while in order to have them culminate and be seen as harmful by a wide audience. A sound morality would not require God to oppose all unrighteousness immediately if a purpose of greater righteousness would be served only by means of postponing opposition. Opposition to unrighteousness, then, does not entail immediate opposition to all unrighteousness<sup>1</sup>.

### Severity in God

*The New Testament* offers some ascriptions of severity to God, and these ascriptions can illuminate how God can be oppositional. In Luke's version of the Parable of the Pounds, Jesus attributes the following statement to a man who functions as God's approved representative and thus images Jesus himself and even God: "You knew that I was a severe (*austēros*) man, taking up what I lay down and reaping what I did not sow" (Luke 19, 22) (cf. Matthew 25, 24).

Likewise, Paul remarks as follows, in connection with the divine offer of mercy to humans coupled with the divine judgment on human resistance: "See then the kindness and the severity (*apotomian*) of God" (Romans 11, 22). Evidently, then, some of *The New Testament* writers would propose that divine love has a certain severity about it.

We can use the previous OED definition to clarify the talk of divine severity in Luke and Paul. We begin with the idea that divine severity involves "strictness or sternness in dealing with others; stern or rigorous disposition or behaviour; rigour in treatment, discipline, punishment, or the like". We need to clarify this talk of severity to capture a fruitful conception of God often ignored by philosophers, theologians, and other reflective people. This neglected conception prevents us from thinking of God as akin to a doting grandparent or a celestial Santa Claus figure. The neglected conception rightly preserves genuine moral *gravitas* in God and in God's dealings with humans.

Since the time of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work on discipleship (1937), many people have been wary of "cheap grace" from God. Such grace would not challenge its recipients to undergo profound transformation toward

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant notion of "greater" righteousness is complicated, of course, but we need not digress.

righteousness corresponding to God's moral character. According to Paul, in contrast, the divine gift of grace includes the gift of righteousness and is therefore profoundly morally transformative (Romans 5, 17).

In Paul's view, God's redemptive plan is that "grace might reign through [the gift of] righteousness to eternal life" (Romans 5, 21). Given this key linking of grace and righteousness, we should be suspicious of any "cheap theism" that either makes God morally lax toward unrighteousness or divorces divine grace from divinely empowered righteousness among humans. If severity is a divine meta-attribute that applies to the divine attribute of righteousness (among other divine attributes), such cheap theism will misrepresent God's moral character.

Philosophers of religion and theologians speak often of divine "love", but they talk much less frequently, if at all, of divine *severity* toward unrighteousness. The result is a conception of a God who is alleged to "loving", in some sense, but who is anything but a "consuming fire" of moral righteousness (cf. Hebrews 12, 29 Deuteronomy 4, 24).

This conception sacrifices divine righteousness for a kind of love that is soft on unrighteousness. We shall ask whether this conception fits with the moral character of a God worthy of worship. Perhaps divine love involving worthiness of worship is severely righteous in a way that opposes unrighteousness of any kind. If so, God would be actively *oppositional* and even *severely* oppositional toward unrighteousness. We can find a divine redemptive goal of the moral transformation of humans in such oppositional behavior, which bears importantly on human knowledge of God.

Many biblical passages yield a striking portrait of a severely oppositional God. In the Hebrew bible, God is portrayed as inherently jealous: "you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34, 14) (cf. Deuteronomy 6, 14-5).

This divine jealousy differs from, and is even incompatible with, selfish human jealousy. The jealousy in Israel's God aims to protect the people of Israel in their relationship with God by opposing all idolatrous substitutes, visible or invisible. Accordingly, this God announces to the wayward people of Israel: "I will chastise you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished" (Jeremiah 30, 11) (cf. Exodus 20, 5).

God intends such just chastisement to be corrective and life-giving, according to Jeremiah and other Hebrew prophets; it is not an end in itself. Even so, as punishment, it can be retributive, or compensatory, in virtue of penalizing behavior opposed to God's character and life. The same holds for the notorious divine wrath that motivates the prophesied punishment of people disobeying God; it, too, can offer a penalty as well as a purported correction. A penalty could include, for instance, severe human discomfort or stress intended to draw attention to a needed correction among wayward humans.

*The New Testament* portrays God as oppositional toward unrighteousness in a number of ways. Paul writes: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Romans 1, 18). He also remarks:

The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one [namely, God] who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8, 20-1)

The divine aim, or hope, is to free people from bondage to what does not give a life of freedom with God. Pursuing this aim, God subjects creation to futility, according to Paul, in order to manifest and to overcome the inadequacy of the created world for the life of freedom needed by humans. *The New Testament* message implies that God alone will emerge as adequate for providing such life.

Paul suggests that God intends tribulation in human life to produce human character and hope agreeable to God's morally perfect character and life (Romans 5, 3-5). Human tribulation, then, is not portrayed as an end in itself.

Another way to oppose unrighteousness includes God's supplying receptive humans with a special kind of power. This is the power to "put to death the [disobedient] deeds of the body" that alienate people from the life of freedom with God (Romans 8, 13).

In this view, humans need help, particularly helpful power, from God to overcome the world's pull toward unrighteousness. The helpful power would be an antidote, at least for willing humans, to unrighteousness as

disobedience toward God. Divine opposition to human unrighteousness, accordingly, would aim for a human life of freedom reconciled to God.

Divine opposition to human unrighteousness has various manifestations and resists any simple characterization. It includes the divine severity of subjecting creation to futility, or frustration, in order to liberate people from their bondage to decay in inadequate sources of freedom and security. Such divine opposition occurs in at least some human suffering, dying, and death, but an important qualification is needed. God could subject creation to futility, for redemptive purposes, without *directly* bringing about every instance of futility in creation.

God could create free agents who freely bring about some of the world's futility and are therefore causally and morally responsible for it. This option can raise serious problems for a characterization of God as successful in realizing God's will at every point. The latter characterization would have to face the reality of the power of created free agents, if they exist, to frustrate God's will. Part of God's noncoercive "providence", then, may be to allow other agents to exercise control, even harmful control, over parts of creation.

God would not have to be the direct cause of all that occurs in creation, because God could allow some opposition to unrighteousness to arise from the causal powers of created agents. In that case, God's *permissive will* would be operating, even if God's *executive will* would not. God's allowing an action by another agent does not entail God's causing, performing, recommending, or approving that action.

A memorable case of divine severity emerges in the crucifixion of Jesus as a self-avowed emissary for God. Aside from the theological significance of his crucifixion, the human treatment of Jesus just before his death was remarkably severe. Some theologians assign this severe treatment ultimately to God, and not just to the Roman officials and soldiers, on the ground that God chose to punish Jesus to save humans from the just desert of their sins.

This interpretation is highly controversial, partly because it lacks clear support in *The New Testament*, and, in any case, it raises serious questions about divine justice. Nonetheless, God's *allowing* the crucifixion of Jesus is severe by any ordinary standard of severe permission, even if certain Roman officials and soldiers were causally and morally responsible for the harsh punishment involved.

The God of the Hebrew bible sometimes judges people by withdrawing the divine presence from them. God reports to Moses:

My anger will be kindled against them [the people of Israel] in that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. (Deuteronomy 31, 17)

In such a case, divine hiding involves severe divine punishment, even if the recipients are unaware of the punishment<sup>2</sup>.

Some commentators apply the idea of divine hiding to Jesus's cry of abandonment on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15, 34) (cf. Psalms 22, 1 Matthew 27, 46). The idea is that, in order to condemn human sin, God withdrew divine presence and fellowship from Jesus, as the atoning representative of humans, at the time of his troubled cry to God.

This is arguably a plausible way to unpack Paul's following remark:

God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh. (Romans 8, 3)

It does not follow, however, that in condemning "sin in the flesh" God condemned Jesus himself. The message of Paul is that God ratified Jesus and his obedient life by resurrecting him, but only after allowing a severe death by crucifixion. This message offers Jesus as a personal model of human dying into lasting life with God.

Three questions can illuminate the potential ways of God toward humans. These questions may be called *expectation-evoking*, because they are helpful in eliciting sound expectations regarding God and God's ways of intervention in human lives. Inquiry about God would gain enhanced precision if more attention were given to such questions. Philosophers and theologians have given inadequate attention to expectation-evoking questions about God in connection with the problem of divine severity. This paper begins to correct that deficiency.

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<sup>2</sup> It does not follow that all divine hiding entails God's punishment of humans; see Moser (2008).

## Personalism

First, how should we expect God to relate to humans if God aims to be known directly by them *as a personal agent*, and not as a principle, an idea, or an impersonal cause? If God is worthy of worship, then God is a morally perfect, perfectly loving agent and therefore is personal (rather than nonpersonal). In virtue of being personal, God would be an *intentional* agent, with purposes and plans, and God's being personal could be reflected, if imperfectly, in human persons.

Accordingly, God could not be replaced without loss by a principle, an idea, or an impersonal cause. Any such replacement would dispense with perfect *agapē*, for instance, because only a personal agent can offer perfect *agapē*. Principles, ideas, and impersonal causes do not love anything, or perform any intentional actions, for that matter.

Direct knowledge of God as a personal agent with a will would serve an important redemptive purpose. It would give humans a direct apprehension of God that could not be supplied by principles, ideas, or impersonal causes. In doing so, it would reveal God's irreducibly personal character in a way that principles, ideas, or impersonal causes could not. Such direct knowledge thereby would convey an important feature of God's actual character to humans, and could be an experiential avenue to awareness of God as worthy of worship and perfectly loving.

Aiming to be known directly as a personal agent, God would value *interpersonal interaction* of a direct, second-person sort. Such interpersonality is *de re*, or more accurately *de te* (from the Latin "tu" = "you"), involving the direct acquaintance of one personal agent with another personal agent in the second person, beyond any *de dicto* (conceptual or notional) relation involving ideas or principles. This kind of acquaintance between God and humans is not bodily acquaintance, because God has no physical body.

The most plausible human context for direct acquaintance with God is human *conscience*. This is the psychological place where a human could directly know, and be known, together with God (see the etymology of "*con + scientia*") as God calls a person (sometimes, to account) in the second person, as *you*. This proposal fits with Paul's suggestion that in human conscience God bears witness to the divine moral character as represented in the law of God, thereby holding people accountable (Romans 2, 14-5).



It also fits with Paul's suggestion that his conscience can confirm something by God's Spirit (Romans 9, 1); (cf. 2 Corinthians 1, 12 5, 11). In this perspective, one's conscience is the inner place, involving one's spiritual "heart", where one can directly experience hearing from, being called by, or being taught by God (cf. John 6, 45) (Matthew 16, 17) (1 Corinthians 1, 9) (1 Thessalonians 3, 11 4, 7-9) (Hebrew 3, 7-15).

The role of human conscience in knowledge of God is widely neglected among contemporary philosophers, and this neglect can obscure the experiential reality of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. It also can minimize the crucial role of prayer in evidence-conferring interaction with this God. The latter role finds its perfect model in the prayer of Jesus to God in Gethsemane: "Father, not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14, 36).

This paper contends that such a Gethsemane attitude toward the priority of God's will is central not only to cooperative life with God but also to human appropriation of evidence for God. This approach is neglected among philosophers of religion, past and present, but this paper begins to correct this neglect.

Our first expectation-invoking question leads to a subsidiary question: is there actually a Godward presence or call in human conscience? Human conscience can be insensitive, corrupted, and outright diabolical. We should be very skeptical, then, of Wittgenstein's following remark: "Certainly it is correct to say: Conscience is the voice of God" (75).

Even so, conscience is not thereby emptied of Godward value, just as perception does not lose its cognitive value given the misleading functions or uses of perception. Humans can treat conscience honestly or dishonestly and earnestly or indifferently. Dishonest or indifferent treatment of conscience does not undermine the representational value of conscience treated honestly or earnestly. Personal accountability thus can figure importantly in the handling of human conscience, including in its representing or not representing God to oneself. In addition, we should not expect conscience to coerce humans in its representing God, as if humans had no responsible interactive role toward God.

Many philosophers of religion seek principles that supply intricate human explanations of God's ways. This paper contends, however, that we have to deal primarily with a personal God who may not honor such principles (cf. 1 Corinthians 1, 18-25).

As a result, we should expect our characterizations of God in some areas to be less “cut-and-dried” and even less adequate than we might have wished. Even so, the paper contends that God can, and does, make Godself known via a receptive human conscience in ways that are much more personally challenging (even severe) and morally robust than the arguments of traditional natural theology.

We shall see that a distinctive kind of *personifying* evidence of God can be found in the personal moral character of a human agent, beyond mere propositions, claims, or arguments. For instance, John’s Gospel and Paul’s letters suggest that Jesus is the perfect human personifying evidence of God, and he is, of course, not a mere proposition, claim, or argument. As a personal agent, with definite intentions and plans, he can serve as personifying evidence for God, who also has definite intentions and plans of the same sort. Other humans, too, can become personifying evidence of God in virtue of their cooperatively receiving certain features of God’s moral character. In this approach, involving evidential personalism, persons can play a role in foundational evidence of God that cannot be reduced to mere propositions, claims, or arguments.

Looking for principles instead as ultimate, some philosophers of religion miss the distinctive point and value of evidential personalism regarding God. For instance, much of analytic philosophy of religion fails to consider some of the key features of Jewish–Christian theistic personalism, such as the bearing of Jesus himself on human knowledge of God.

This paper contends that we would do well not to sacrifice such personalism for any kind of deism, mere theism, or principle-based approach to God.

### **Deep transformation**

Our second expectation-evoking question is this: how should we expect God to act in relation to humans if God aims to redeem them not just as thinkers but as *morally responsible volitional agents* who need a self-commitment to cooperation with God, for the sake of companionship with God? We may formulate the latter aim in terms of God’s aiming to win humans, themselves, and not just arguments with humans.

This divine aim would offer a gift of divine–human reconciliation that originates outside any human resources. It would include a person-to-

person (divine-to-human) call to be renewed at one's motivational center via a life of self-commitment to cooperation with God. Such a divine aim would feature the divine generosity of companionship offered to humans and, by way of an accountable response, the human cooperation demanded by God. Notoriously, the latter demand can lead to real severity in cases of human irresponsibility toward God.

From God's side, the companionship would include God's self-giving intervention in Christ on behalf of humans, whereby God seeks to self-identify and live with humans. Without such divine grace in action, many humans properly would doubt that they meet the standard set by God's own moral character, and they therefore would lack proper confidence regarding their acceptance by God. As a result, without divine grace in action, any self-commitment to God would be seriously deficient.

God's redemptive aim would be to give receptive humans a renewed volitional center of agency in companionship with God, including a renewed will to live agreeably and therefore unselfishly with God. The divine aim of human companionship with God would stem from the human need of such benefits as encouragement, chastisement, and specific personal guidance from God. It also would stem from the human need of seeking, including asking for, these benefits from God, as part of interpersonal communion. As a result, no mere principle, command, law, morality, argument, or human effort would accomplish this redemptive aim.

The transformation of humans in divine redemption would oppose moral self-sufficiency in humans. Accordingly, it would oppose any presumption of humans being good *on their own*. Instead, it would aim for moral transformation *in human companionship with God*. For the good of humans, this would be reverent, submissive transformation anchored in the prayer offered by Jesus to God in Gethsemane: "Father ... not what I will, but what you will". Such transformation would be person-to-person, in a context where a human submits to God in companionship with God. The result would be significant human change via willing human participation in God's perfect moral character.

God's pursuit of the volitional transformation of humans would not be served by just abstract theoretical claims about God, such as claims about divine impassibility or divine omniscience. Claims of that sort would

invite philosophical and theological discussion, perhaps even endlessly, but they would not challenge the volitional center of an agent. They would not challenge an agent to make a commitment of self-sacrificial love to a God of redemptive grace. Concrete self-sacrificial actions and corresponding commands from God, in contrast, could infuse the needed challenge with motivational significance for humans.

Accordingly, the Christian message is that God's culminating revelation comes in the self-giving person and life of Jesus Christ, who manifests God's grace and wisdom, and not just in ideas about God.

We should ask what the relevant divine actions and commands would look like, given God's perfect character that includes divine severity. The separation of (evidence for) God's existence from (evidence for) God's perfect personal agency, as in much natural theology, invites serious problems and should therefore be avoided (see Moser 2010).

This paper identifies a role for human self-sacrifice, as submission of one's will to God, as part of a proper response to divine self-sacrifice. It argues that a philosophy of religion adequate to a God worthy of worship must award a key role to such human sacrifice to God.

### **Human boasting undone**

Our third expectation-evoking question is this: how should we expect a God worthy of worship to intervene in human lives if this God seeks to undermine all selfish or otherwise misguided human boasting? One plausible answer is straightforward: by an undeserved gift of divine grace that displaces any such boasting. This displacement of human boasting would challenge misguided human self-pride on various fronts, including in connection with morality, knowledge, and wisdom. Such pride involves one's exaggerated assessment of oneself or of one's contributions or achievements, such as when one self-confidently takes credit for something (for instance, in morality, knowledge, or wisdom) where such credit is manifestly not due.

A familiar example includes a human's self-confidently taking credit for what is plainly an undeserved gift. If wisdom, righteousness, and life from God, for instance, are undeserved gifts to humans, then humans are in no position to take credit for these gifts. Misguided human pride

regarding such gifts is harmful, because it disallows God, from a specific human perspective, to be truly gracious in some central areas of human existence. Substituting human self-credit for divine grace, such pride obscures the importance of human dependence on a gracious, morally perfect God.

Because human agency is a requirement for divine companionship with humans, we should not expect divine grace to coerce a human response of commitment to life with God. Owing to moral weakness, however, humans cannot live up to God's moral character by themselves. They therefore fall short of perfectly obeying divine commands to love God fully and to love others unselfishly. In manifesting this human moral inadequacy, divine love commands show the human need for divine grace. They show that humans do not merit, or earn, approval from God, if God's moral character sets the standard for approval.

Human moral pride will not welcome this lesson, but this is no count against the lesson. Instead, such pride itself falls under proper suspicion once the reality of human moral deficiency emerges. This deficiency does not entail despair, however, if divine mercy underwrites forgiveness of humans.

Divine moral perfection combined with human moral imperfection, including human self-pride and despair, would call for a severe human struggle in receiving divine grace and wisdom. Following Pascal (*Penseés* sec. 435), we shall see that neither human self-pride nor human despair would enjoy a firm footing relative to a severe God's moral character. If divine grace and wisdom, as personified in Christ crucified, encompass redemptive self-sacrifice for God's purpose, then human appropriation of such grace and wisdom will be not only a response to, but also an exemplification of, such sacrifice. This appropriation will go against any human self-pride or despair incompatible with such sacrifice. It will involve, as a fitting response, self-sacrificial appropriation of grace and wisdom which are likewise self-sacrificial.

### Gethsemane method

We can use expectation-evoking questions to focus on human expectations for God's reality, while offering the term "God" as a preeminent title requiring worthiness of worship. Our understanding

of evidence, and thus of knowledge, regarding God should be guided by the relevant notion of a God worthy of worship, rather than by a cognitive standard that is questionable relative to this notion.

Our initial question becomes not so much whether God exists as what the character and purposes of a God worthy of worship would be, if God exists. In keeping with the previous expectation-evoking questions, we should ask this: what *kind* of evidence and knowledge of God's reality should we expect a God worthy of worship to offer to humans?

A plausible answer is that God would offer the kind of evidence and knowledge that represents and advances God's worship-worthy moral character among humans.

We should expect evidence and knowledge of divine reality to be available to humans only in a manner suitable to divine *purposes* in self-revelation. We should expect these divine purposes to include the transformation of human moral characters toward God's moral character, for the sake of human improvement in companionship with God.

This lesson yields a major shift in our understanding of human knowledge and evidence of divine reality. It demands that inquirers become sensitive to the character and purposes of a God worthy of worship, in a manner that challenges and reorients human wills, as in Gethsemane. This lesson illuminates some of the severity in God and in human life, in terms of the needed transformation of humans in companionship with God.

Some philosophers think of religious faith as purely intellectual, similar to belief that, for instance, transfinite cardinal numbers or subatomic leptons exist. This, however, is a big mistake that leads to confusions about what kind of evidence is to be expected for religious faith. We shall see that the relevant evidence is to be appropriated in a self-sacrificial struggle in response to a divine challenge. Religious faith is a human moral struggle in appropriation of divine grace and wisdom, for the sake of reverent companionship with God.

Our inquiry about divine severity does not reduce to an inquiry about a traditional problem of evil, because the reality of divine severity is no challenge to God's existence or even God's goodness. On the contrary,

one should expect divine severity upon reflection about the implications of the worthiness of worship suited to God. Even so, one might propose that divine severity is a challenge to God's graciousness, on the ground that it suggests that God is holding back on the best for humans even if God is morally good on balance. A natural question, then, is this: could not God be more gracious and less severe, without any loss of value? In other words, could not God's "good and perfect will" (Romans 12, 2) be less severe? More specifically, is God at best restrictedly gracious toward at least some people? (Such questions occupy Moser 2013).

Divine severity, properly understood, does not undermine perfect divine grace but should be expected in the light of such grace. It points us to the volitional crisis of Gethsemane, for the sake of cooperative and lasting human life with God. In doing so, it invites us to consider the priority of divine power over philosophical propositions, persons over explanations, and God's will over human wills.

Accordingly, we should reconceive the philosophy of religion in the light of the Gethsemane crisis, including in the significant areas of the methodology and epistemology of God. This reconceiving leaves us with philosophy of religion renewed by a needed interpersonal and existential vitality, grounded in widely neglected but nonetheless salient evidence of God's redemptive severity.

If God is redemptively severe in a way that challenges human wills, then an important autobiographical question emerges: am I present for God's redemptive presence?

That is, am I genuinely available to struggle to receive and then to manifest God's purportedly transformative *agapē*? Or, alternatively, am I preoccupied with other priorities that omit divine *agapē* and a struggle for it as a priority in my life? If God's presence involves a kind of powerful *agapē* that includes an authoritative call to receive and obey God, am I willing to be adequately attentive to listen for and receive this call? In particular, is my conscience sufficiently sensitive and receptive to this life-giving call, particularly its offer and demand of unselfish *agapē*, in such a way that it enables me to hear and obey God's morally profound call? (On a divine call and the combination of offer/gift and demand regarding divine *agapē*, see Brunner 1937 (114-31 198-207); 1950 (183-99).

If I am sincerely receptive, I will be available to join the *agapē* struggle in a way that resists, as in Gethsemane, the priorities contrary to this divinely commanded struggle. To join this struggle is to join God's own life of ongoing struggle for self-giving love for all agents. Arguably, Jesus had this kind of divine expectation in mind with his striking remark that "there is need of only one thing" (Luke 10, 42).

We gain nothing by begging the question about God's existence. Instead, the present recommendation is to be both sincerely open to a subtle divine invitation to *agapē* struggle and genuinely attentive to any indicators of divine involvement for the sake of such struggle.

A way of testing the redemptive theism in question is to accept that recommendation with honesty, and then to assess one's subsequent experience accordingly over time. In this case, God ultimately must deliver the needed experiential evidential at the suitable time for each person. If the best explanation of one's experience supports such theism, then one can move beyond fideism and question begging (see Moser 2010 chaps. 2-4); (cf. Wiebe chap. 5).

Given that God's character of *agapē* is not purely conceptual, the needed evidential support for humans must have a basis in human experience. The previous considerations raise the issue of how we might remove obstacles between God and us, to participate in God's powerful life of *agapē* for others, including God's redemptive suffering for the world. Such questions also prompt the question of whether God's suffering for the world, such as in the self-giving death of Jesus for others (Romans 5, 8); (cf. Moser 2008 chap. 3) (2010 chap. 4), aims not to preserve or secure the world *as it is* but rather to redeem it in a new mode of life where *agapē* for others, including enemy-love, is the norm and the operative power for all agents.

We are now on conceptual soil foreign to traditional philosophy of religion, as we should expect in the presence of a challenging God worthy of worship<sup>3</sup>.

The primary concern of a truly redemptive God would be not so much with the specific intellectual content embraced by humans as with their

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<sup>3</sup> On the latter point, see (1 Corinthians 1, 18-25); (cf. Hays chap. 1) (cf. Gorman 275-80).



willingly joining an *agapē*-deepening struggle for others, in dependence on the God who is the source of perfect *agapē* for humans.

This struggle would be as much a struggle (in cooperation) *with* God as a struggle *for* (the redemptive mission of) God. In the divine remedial school, God would struggle with humans for the sake of their *agapē*-oriented transformation, both when they resist (at least without final rejection) and when they cooperate (if imperfectly). In other words, God would participate in the *agapē* struggle for the sake of disseminating and deepening the noncoercive power of divine *agapē* among humans. To that end, God would engage in self-giving suffering for the benefit of humans, as important parts of Jewish and Christian theology suggest (on which see Heschel (1962) Fiddes (1988)).

Given *agapē*-focused redemptive purposes for humans, God would aim to have us be in a distinctive relation to truth, in order to accommodate the *reality* of the purported redemption anchored in divine *agapē*. The aim would be, not just that we know truth, but more importantly that we ourselves *become true* to (that is, in full agreement with) divine *agapē*, because the intended redemption in *agapē* is *for us ourselves*, and not just for our beliefs. Kierkegaard (1991) puts the point as follows:

[...] Christianly understood, truth is obviously not [just] to know the truth but to be the truth... [O]nly then do I in truth know the truth, when it becomes a life in me. (205-6)<sup>4</sup>

The reality of divine *agapē*, then, must become a life, not just an object of reflection, in us. Divine severity can serve that redemptive end, as long as humans cooperate.

The suggested incarnational approach to redemptive truth goes beyond any merely intellectual relation to truth. It requires that the reality of divine *agapē* become the motivational center of our lives in order to have us become personally reflecting, or imaging, of God's moral character, ever more deeply.

This incarnational relation is *personifying* toward redemptive truth, and not merely intellectual, because divine *agapē* exceeds intellectual matters and involves a human *as a personal agent* with a life to live in the face of severity. The purported redemption in *agapē* involves cooperative

<sup>4</sup> See Moser and McCreary (2010).

personal transformation toward God's moral character, and not just new knowledge, in virtue of a person's receiving and manifesting divine *agapē* for all persons, even one's enemies. The model, again, is Gethsemane.

The incarnational approach portrays God as coming to humans by judging, or subjecting to futility, all that is anti-God. The divine aim is to make willing humans new in the moral image and the companionship of the God who puts *agapē* first, even toward enemies.

This redemptive judgment works via willing human appropriation of redemptive truth whereby one struggles to participate in God's moral character and life, including in divine unselfish *agapē*. The litmus test for the divine authenticity of this struggle available to humans is the *experienced realization* of the aforementioned *agapē* struggle, including a struggle for enemy-love. In the absence of a struggle for enemy-love, in particular, one is not engaged in a struggle for or with the God worthy of worship. Accordingly, much of what goes under the category of "religion" does not positively involve the God worthy of worship. Much of it is, in fact, counterfeit and anti-God, despite any appearance or language of piety (see Juergensmeyer (2003) Stern (2003)); (cf. Seibert 2009).

When one is willing, the *agapē* struggle takes one beyond mere wishful thinking about God to the Gethsemane transformation of humans in volitional companionship with God. This struggle involves a meeting with God that includes an invitation and a demand: an invitation to life with (including in cooperation with) God and a demand to be conformed to God's moral character of unselfish *agapē*. Some people acknowledge a call to such a divine-human meeting; others do not. The resulting disagreement is familiar and undeniable, and it should come as no surprise on reflection.

The failure of some humans to acknowledge God's presence in the *agapē* struggle arises from various sources; as a result, we have no simple explanation on this front. Many different voices populate this world, and the remarkable multiplicity leaves many people confused and doubtful.

The cacophony leaves people not knowing what the needed redemptive gift of God would sound or look like. In addition, many people opt for selfishness and for hate of enemies over genuine *agapē*, and this choice creates a bias against acknowledgment of a God committed to *agapē*

toward all agents. Some people even announce their desire not to be in a world governed by God; out of fear of a loss of their autonomy (Nagel 130).

We should distinguish, however, between autonomy as independence of God and autonomy as capability to choose for or against a life of *agapē*. The latter autonomy is genuinely good and would be preserved by a God worthy of worship, but the former autonomy is arguably not good at all, given that humans lack the power to sustain their lasting flourishing on their own.

We must pay careful attention to the whole range of our experience, because the indication of God's reality should be expected to be subtle and even elusive. We should not expect divine revelation to be cheap and easy, given its unsurpassed value and profundity and our need for transformation toward divine *agapē*. A key issue is whether we can find self-giving suffering love at work, because divine *agapē* toward wayward humans would be inherently marked by it. This would be intentional *agapē* for the sake of others, grounded in one's looking to practice *agapē* for the good of others even when severity and suffering come to oneself.

What ultimately matters for the divine redemption of humans is *God's power of agapē*, not any human metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy, hermeneutics, theology, or other kind of human theory. We have considered the view, widely neglected among philosophers and others, that God's redemptive power is available to humans in the struggle of obedient receptivity toward the offer and demand of unselfish *agapē*, and not in mere thinking, talking, theorizing, or even arguing.

This is *dynamic, Gethsemane theism*, because it identifies God's redemptive power and corresponding self-revelation and evidence in connection with the struggle of human receptivity and activity, including active obedience on the part of humans. It assumes that God's redemptive power must give us humans, without coercion, the life we need if we are to survive and flourish lastingly in the face of severity.

According to Gethsemane theism, our lasting well-being comes from someone other than a mere human, as a humanly unmerited gift given noncoercively to willing humans at God's appointed time. This gift, however, comes with judgment on the world that is anti-God, not judgment as condemnation, but judgment as subjecting to futility all

that is anti-God in order to bring flourishing to willing humans in companionship with God. In coming with such redemptive judgment, this divine gift must be received in the aforementioned *agapē* struggle if it is to be received at all. The redemption on offer is thus dynamic rather than static.

One's being evidentially assured of God's reality and role in the *agapē* struggle is diachronic rather than once and for all, or synchronic, given that the divinely desired character transformation occurs over time, and not all at once. Even though the beginning of the struggle occurs at a particular moment, the decisive evidence in the struggle builds over time as a person struggles willingly and increasingly deeply with and for God.

Accordingly, the *agapē* struggle is an interactive person-to-person relationship that develops over time. Its characteristic evidence likewise yields knowledge of God over time, contrary to the familiar philosophical norm of knowledge of God as synchronic.

We cognitively limited humans do not have, and should not expect to have, a full explanation of the world's tragic and horrifying evil, but we still can have a perfectly loving sustainer with us in this world. Paul puts the point as the fact that nothing is able to separate willing humans from the *agapē* of God, "neither tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, peril, death, nor any other thing" (Romans 8, 35). Such a "theodicy" of *nonseparation* from God's *agapē* is ultimately the only theodicy on offer for us.

We now can begin to understand the otherwise cryptic remark at the center of the ministry of Jesus: "*Struggle* to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able" (Lukas 13, 24).

Famously, Socrates remarked that the unexamined life is not worth living, but we now can add that the *nonstruggling* life relative to divine *agapē* is not worth living either. Philosophy of religion, then, should make room for the kind of wisdom that includes a divinely offered and commanded *agapē* struggle and its corresponding distinctive epistemology.

This sea change would yield profound benefits for the philosophy of religion as we know it. The test of authenticity, ultimately, is in the

living through the *agapē* struggle on offer. The remaining question is whether we humans are sincerely willing to undergo the test. Philosophy of religion now becomes existential and self-engaging, even urgent to human life.

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