

# The Face and Back of God: The Predicates of Godliness

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A Monograph by Rabbi Harold Schulweis  
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## *Questions:*

- 1. Can we construct a credible bridge between those who can't believe in God and those who claim to be spiritual seekers?*
- 2. How can one love a God who is nameless, imageless and beyond shape or form?*
- 3. What does it mean to assert the Oneness of God?*

## A Religious Exercise

I teach a post-confirmation class of young men and women, who have attended Hebrew School and Day School and are not strangers to the Synagogue service. I teach Jewish philosophy and theology and we speak of God, ritual and the problem of evil. They are bright youngsters, believers in science and of social action, marvelously articulate on all subjects, except when it comes to "God talk." When it comes to talking about God, they are strangely diffident. Their shyness stems less from irreverence than from irrelevance, less from ignorance than from indifference. They are not unlearned—they know the narratives of the Bible, they know the where, when and how of ritual behavior; they have imbibed a smattering of Jewish history and are acquainted with the practices of Jewish holidays. Some belong to Jewish organizations and attend Jewish summer camps. Like their parents, they "belong" and "behave." But like them, "belief" is out of bounds.

A colleague once related that when a group of fourth grade students was asked whether they believed in God, most remained quiet except one child who waved her hand eagerly. The teacher asked her why she believed in God and she blurted out, more wisely than she suspected, "I don't really know why I believe in God. I think it runs in the family." Belief does not run in the contemporary family, nor is it dealt with in the Jewish Hebrew School.

How then do children learn about God? Most have absorbed a "street theology" from the cinema and cartoons of the popular media.

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God is drawn as an omnipotent Superman: "faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound." Superman is not of this world. He comes from another planet and he can swoop down upon the earth to rescue innocent people and punish villains. Superman remains a powerful metaphor for God, a model of an all-powerful and benevolent divine super-human being. Children want to believe in an intervening Superman (as do adults), but as they grow older the fantasy becomes harder to hold on to in the face of Krypton.

I thought surely we can do better Jewish theology than to play into the infantile fantasies of youth. I first turned to some of the traditional arguments for the existence of God that were so popular and credible in philosophy during my high school and college years. These arguments came from natural theology, not from supernatural revelation or scriptures. God's existence would be demonstrated by reason and observance. I trotted out some classical theological arguments. For example, I argued that the causal argument begins not with scriptures, but with facts we all observe. We see things move and change. For one event to occur must there not be a prior event to cause it to happen? For every effect, there must be a cause. As we trace effects back to their causes, we can either continue indefinitely down a non-ending path or arrive at the conclusion that there must be some primary cause that itself does not require any further causal explanation. We are compelled by natural reason to recognize a First Cause of all causes. If there is no First Cause, we would be condemned to an endless regress. The Cause of all causes necessarily exists, and that we call God.

From several members of the class, similar demurrers were heard: "The universe does not have to have a First Cause. The universe could always have been in existence, a product of infinite causes, without a beginning."

I offer another, equally celebrated philosophic argument, based on observation and logic. Do we do not infer from the design of objects e.g. a clock or a house, the existence of some intelligent designer? Look around at the designs in nature, from the rising and the setting of the sun to the countless laws of nature. Will your observations not lead you to infer the existence of an intelligent cause that designs effects? Must there then not be some intelligent Designer behind the intelligent universe? This argument as well is met with a negative shaking of heads. "There is as much evidence for the absence of order and design as for design in nature. Consider natural calamities: hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, tornadoes. Do they testify to a divine intelligence, to a devil which plots disorder?"

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Few in the class were convinced by the classic arguments that had persuaded me in my younger years. This generation lives in an entirely different climate of plausibility. They live in a scientific and pragmatic universe in which God arguments are irrelevant to their intellectual and moral lives. They are sensitive to prejudices and discrimination, and resound to the Jewish mantra of repairing the world (*tikkun olam*). But they are immersed in a secular, scientific, humanistic culture where "the action is." The action is not in the world of synagogue and prayer.

If they don't come to the synagogue to pray, it is largely because they do not believe they can petition a God who directs the universe and rewards and punishes. From their perspective, the prayer book's constant reference to God is estranging. The traditional God lives outside the circle of their concerns and responses.

At the tail end of one heated discussion about prayer, one articulate student confessed his disaffection with prayer sharply: "What does prayer have to do with me? As I see it, prayer is all about someone else. The *Siddur* is all about Him. It is He who heals, saves, helps the poor, who opens the eyes of the blind. Where am I in these prayers and in this prayer book? What is it that is expected of me other than to recite "Amen" and "Blessed be His Name?" Do you know what is missing in the prayer book? Me." There was something about the intensity of his remarks that spoke to their distance from God.

How can we build a religious bridge between the class and the synagogue? What religious language may speak to these dissenting searchers?

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### Subject and Predicate Thinking

In the following session I drew two Columns of religious claims on the blackboard:

Column A	Column B
God is merciful	Extending mercy is Godly
God is just	Doing justice is Godly
God is forgiving	Forgiving is Godly
God feeds the hungry	Feeding the hungry is Godly
God cares for the sick	Curing the sick is Godly
God raises the fallen	Raising the fallen is Godly
God protects the innocent	Protecting the innocent is Godly
God punishes evil	Punishing evil is Godly

I asked how many could believe in Column A. A few hands were raised, but not most. Asked why they did not believe in Column A, they answered, "I would love to believe the God of Column A, but too many things stand in the way." They listed family tragedies, the atrocities of the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda and the Sudan, the beheading of innocent people, the suicide-homicides of terrorist bombers. In the presence of disaster, they cannot say "Yes" to the affirmations of Column A.

I turn to Column B and asked how many could believe in Column B. The majority raise their hands. Why "Yes" to Column B and "No" to Column A? Why "Yes" to godly and "No" to God? Why "Yes" to Godliness and "No" to God?

What difference is there between the two Columns? In terms of syntax, I inverted the Subject and the Predicate, placing the Subject before the Predicate in Column A and placing the Predicate before the Subject in Column B. I turned the nouns in Column A into gerunds, verbal nouns ending with the suffix "-ing" e.g. curing, raising, protecting.

Far more than syntax was involved in their choice. In the course of our class discussion, they pointed out that the focus in Column A is on the Subject itself. The Subject is a noun or pronoun, whether "He," "She" or "It," but it is the Subject alone who is praised, petitioned and thanked. The Subject noun seems to refer to a Being, separated from the human worshipper and who Himself acts, rewards, punishes, responds and intervenes in the world. In contrast, in Column B, the Predicates of Godliness focus on the verbal gerunds of moral activity: doing justice, raising the fallen, protecting the weak. For them, the Predicates in Column B are believable and personally actionable.

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The response of the class was arresting. It signaled no sudden conversion but it overcame their previous taciturn response to "God talk."

Column B presents a paradigm shift, from Subject to Predicate religious thinking. It offers another option to the conventional Subject theology. The Predicate approach did not stop remaining doubts about faith, but it invited other kinds of questions, and opened the door to other kinds of responses. Assent to Column B brings with it different emphases on the role of faith, the posture of the believer and his/her relationship to such matters as the problem of evil, prayer, ethics, the self and the community. We continued our conversation and turned to their concern with prayer which, for many, tests the relevance of Predicate theology.

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### The Posture of Prayer

Do we pray differently under the pattern of Column A or of Column B? I think so. The relationship portrayed between believers and believed in Column A is vertical: God is above, the recipient below. The vertical prayer posture depicts the worshipper as acquiescent, obedient, awaiting the intervention of the Sovereign Subject who alone acts and controls events. In Column A, petitions ascend upward and responses descend downwards. In Column A, the governing preposition is "to": I pray "to" the Sovereign, I pray "to" the "Other" for wisdom, sustenance, healing, peace and prosperity. Praise and petition are all directed "to" the Sovereign Subject.

With Column B, a new model shifts the prayer posture. The vertical prayer relationship of Column A is bent horizontal, and with it, the preposition "to" gives way to "with" and "through." One prays "with" and "through" a community, "with" and "through" one's self and community in the pursuit of Godliness (*Elohuth*).

If the end of Subject Prayer is adulation of the Sovereign "Other," the goal of Predicate prayer is the godly behavior of the worshipper. The gerunds in Column B we identify as godly do not point upward to a Subject dwelling in splendid isolation, but to this worldly relationship.

With Column B, prayer calls for human responsiveness not as a formulaic reading in the liturgy, but as a behavioral response to petitions and aspirations. In Column B, prayer is collaborative. I pray for the realization of those sacred ideals which call for earnest effort of the human community through me.

Column B advocates are intent on avoiding the segregation of Godliness from the human world. The human "I" and "we" are indispensable in Predicate prayer. We cannot pray for health while violating the wisdom of hygiene. We cannot pray for forgiveness without ourselves forgiving. We cannot pray for God's mercy while retaining the hardness of our hearts. The intent of Predicate prayer in Column B is not to move the divine, unmoved Mover, but to move the unmoved worshipper out of pulpit and pew into the marketplace.

In Subject prayer, prayer places the burden of active responsibility on the Sovereign "Other." The self petitions the "Other." Human activism, human responsibility and responsiveness, are secondary, and, as we will argue, characteristics missing from the traditional prayer book. In Column B, human prayer is "*avodah*," human work. "A human being's prayer is not accepted unless he puts his heart in his hands."

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## Four Questions Revisited

Palpable inroads were being made with the class. At least, the fourth child of the *Seder*, who “does not know how to ask,” found his tongue. He asks questions of his own and searches for different sorts of answers. Many of the questions and answers about Predicate theology fall into four inquiries:

### *1. Where is God in Godliness?*

Where is God in Godliness? How are Column A and Column B related? I suggest that Column B translates Column A, *Elohuth* (Godliness). Column B exemplifies God, acts out God and defines God to the extent that God is definable. The question persists, “But still, where is God in Godliness?”

It is a question similar to that which the philosopher Professor Gilbert Ryle identified as the “categorical mistake.” Ryle had been challenged to define the “university.” He pointed to the buildings, campus, gymnasias, library, school facilities and faculties, student body and alumni. But the inquiries continued: “We see all those places and people, but where is the university itself?” Ryle responded that the structure and infrastructure of the university defines the meaning of “university.” The university is not some mysterious entity independent of the way in which its parts are comprised and organized. I answer analogously that Godliness defines God. The Predicates define the Subject. The Subject God is like the figurative biblical Face of God that cannot be described or seen except through those activities observed from the Back of God. Godliness is, as it were, the Back of God, which we follow to follow its direction. To claim more for our knowledge of God than the Predicates of Godliness is to attempt to rip the veil from the Face of God. It is not that God has no moral Predicates. God is the moral Predicates. Godliness is the ostensive definition of God.

### *2. A Personal God: Can You Pray to Predicates?*

The class members, like most of us, have been raised to think of God as a Super-Person. God, they contend, must not be less than a person. Their argument is well taken. We understand how to address a divine Person, praise Him, sanctify His name, even cajole Him. It is the root of all anthropomorphic projection. We understand God as a Person, even as we understand ourselves as persons. Persons can grow angry, be appeased, loved, embraced. But the Predicates of Godliness are not persons. They are qualities, values, ideas and ideals. Can we love an idea?

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It is precisely such a question that the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber posed to Hermann Cohen, the nineteenth century, neo-Kantian Jewish philosopher. The latter responded to Buber's question rhetorically. "Can one love an idea? How is it possible to love anything but an idea? Does not love, even in the case of sensual love, mean only the idealized person, only the idea of a person?"

What does it mean for Hermann Cohen to love God? He answers, "I love in God the father of men. I cannot love God without devoting my whole heart, and living for the sake of my fellow man, without devoting all my thoughts to this God in His correlation with man. The love of man for God is the love of a moral ideal. Only the ideal can I love and I can grasp the ideal in the archetype of morality. The archetype of morality is action." As Cohen elsewhere writes, "To love God is to love the avenger of the poor."

Without claiming Cohen for Predicate theology, I find in his notion of the correlation of God and man, and in his reverence of the God-idea, a theological approach consonant with my own. In the *Shema* prayer (Deuteronomy 6:49), we are told to love God with all our heart, soul and might, but how can one love an incorporeal, spiritual God as if He were a person? Can I hug such a God or be hugged by Him? The very verse that follows the *Shema* counsels us to teach the moral ideals diligently to our children, to recite them at home and away, to bind them as a sign upon our hand and as a reminder above our eyes, to inscribe them upon the doorposts of our house and upon our gates. God as Person cannot hug or be hugged, but in embracing our children and teaching them the ideals of Godliness, we can be said, as it were, to embrace God. Whom do I love, if not the idea and ideal of Godliness? Buber himself spoke of a relation with God that is experienced as if it were a person-to-person encounter. At bottom, God is not a Person for Buber.

The personal bond between the individual and God characterizes the felt reality of the relationship, but does not reify God as Person. To experience God personally is not to claim Him to be a Person. To experience evil personally is not to claim the existence of Satan.

While Godliness is not a Person, commitment to Godliness is profoundly personal. The pursuit and realization of Godliness, even to the point of sacrificing one's life, is deeply personal. What is more personal than the pursuit and defense of love, peace and freedom?

The class and I have been raised to personify God: "Blessed are Thou, O Lord." The memory of such early education, that binds us to the inherited prayer language of tradition, need not be abandoned. But for those who are troubled by God as Person, the translation from God to Godliness, from *Adonai* to *Elohu*, may open the doors of belief to those who hear the poetic metaphors of God addressed as King or

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Father or Savior, are not bound to transform metaphorically into literal belief. Godliness translates the unknowable Noun into accessible Verbs that actualize the ideals of Godliness (*Elohuth*).

### 3. *Is Godliness One?*

God is One and His Name is One. The class understands divine Oneness as unity lodged in one heavenly space. But in what sense can one speak of the Oneness of Godliness?

On the festival of *Sukkot*, the worshipper waves the *lulav* (palm) and *ethrog* (citron), while chanting from Psalms, pointing the symbolic species everywhere: north, south, east and west. Significantly, when the name YHVH is mentioned in the Psalm, the worshipper is instructed to stand motionless, pointing the palm and citron to no direction. So it is with Godliness; Godliness is neither geographic nor numerical. The Oneness of Godliness is recognized by discovering the harmony within its diverse values. Mercy without justice, power without morality, love without wisdom, frequently collide and threaten the Oneness of Godliness. Oneness refers to the integration of multiple godly values that are complementary.

Oneness, in Hebrew "*Yichud*," refers to the unification of Godly parts into the whole of Godliness. *Yichud* opposes idolatry, which worships parts as if they were the Whole. The symbol of Godliness is the Tree of Life, whose branches grow out of one root and must not be broken apart. The Oneness of Godliness is discovered in the harmonization of its predicates. "*Yichud*," unification, requires mindful integration. In Oneness, polarities co-exist in harmony.

### 4. *Who is Responsible?*

With the bridge constructed by Column B, the traditional question of evil takes on a new form. The question is inverted. Not, why did God not intervene, but why did we not intervene? Not, why did God not answer the prayers of the tortured, but why did human states and sanctuaries lock their gates? With the inversion of Subject and Predicates, the direction of the question has turned reflexive.

As the moral Predicates become the major subjects of our attention, it is the human self and community that become the proper subjects of the problem of evil. Means and ends are discovered in the collaborative collegiality of Godliness. The Godliness of Predicate theology is within and between human relationships.

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### A Second Look at Atheism

Atheism conventionally denies the existence and/or the character of God. Subject atheism repudiates God as Noun; Predicate atheism repudiates the Predicates of Godliness.

The poet Goethe observed that while the Devil, like the other angels, believed in God, he did not love Him. The Devil is an atheist, not because he doubts the existence of the Subject God, but because he reviles the moral Predicates of Godliness.

At the end of the term, I asked myself, "What is it that I am seeking to transmit to the class? What message am I attempting to communicate through Predicate thinking? Is it my goal to develop their fidelity to the Noun Subject, or to the verbs of the Predicates? Put differently, what kind of atheism threatens Jewish faith?"

I fear the atheism of the Predicates more than I fear the atheism of the Subject. What sharpened this thought is the arresting rabbinic commentary based on the prophet Jeremiah, who says that God declares, "They have forsaken Me and not kept My laws." Some sages explain God's lament to mean, "Would that they had forsaken Me, but kept My laws, since by occupying themselves with the laws, the light which they contain would have led them back to the right path." (Lamentations Rabba, Proem II) Translated into Predicate theology, the *Midrash* means that it would be preferable for the Subject God to be abandoned and the moral Predicates followed than to cling to the Subject and deny the Predicates. For by pursuing Godliness, the people would be led back to a credible faith. To hold to the Subject while forsaking the Predicates is to submit to Goethe's Devil. The atheism which denies the existence and values of the Predicates shakes the foundations of Judaism.