

FROM GOD TO GODLINESS: PROPOSAL FOR A PREDICATE THEOLOGY

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IN A PAPER presented at the Rabbinical Assembly in June, 1909, Mordecai M. Kaplan set forth in Kantian fashion his "Copernican revolution." He argued there that a deeper understanding of Judaism, and a more effective way to deal with the challenges to Judaism, call for an inversion of the claim that the Jewish people exists for the sake of Judaism. To the contrary, Kaplan maintained, Judaism exists for the sake of the Jewish people. That proposal reveals both, the descriptive and prescriptive elements of Kaplan's reconstructionism. Kaplan's new perception directs us to ask not simply what Judaism is but ask what Judaism ought to be.

Theology with a New Perception

In this paper I want to take advantage of Kaplan's methodological principle (and for Kaplan reconstructionism is more methodology than doctrine) by applying it to our understanding of God. To paraphrase Kaplan's inversionary principle, I will be arguing that, better to understand the God-idea and more effectively overcome the obstacles to the acceptance of God in our lives, we must view theology with a new perception. Elohim, Godliness, the divine predicates do not exist for the sake of Elohim. God, the Subject, but vice versa. It is not the attributes of a divine Ego, but the divinity of the attributes which demands our allegiance. What I propose for consideration is adoption of a "Predicate Theology" as a viable alternative for those who are not persuaded by the arguments and claims of traditional "Subject Theology." I am convinced that for many who intellectually and temperamentally are blocked from expressing their religious sensibilities because of the formulations and presuppositions of Subject theology, Predicate theology offers a way to relate positively to divinity, and its celebration in prayer and ritual. My proposals differ from Kaplan's theological claims in a number of important areas, but I believe they are in consonance with his orientation. While Dr. Kaplan cannot be held responsible for my errors, he is responsible, in larger measure than he can know, for encouraging my own theological reconstruction.

Two Ways of Seeing

God did not create theology. Men differ in temperament, in needs and wants and their theologies reflect those needs. This should not mean the denigration of theology, but it should introduce a necessary measure of theological modesty in our claims. I have argued the importance of the God-idea before many diverse groups, especially in college circles, and for many years. I have noted an interesting response to two different ways of formulating the God-idea. In one form I ask how many could subscribe to the belief that God is just, merciful and good; that it is He who uplifts the fallen, heals the sick and loosens the fetters of the bound. The question is generally met with reluctance, at best with agnostic reserve and frequently with strong denial.

The other formulation asks how many would affirm that justice, mercy and goodness are godly; that uplifting the fallen, healing the sick and loosening the Fetters of the bound are divine. Here the response is largely positive and most often enthusiastic. What is the

meaning of these different reactions? Is it a response to style or to religious substance? Is it the aim of the theologian to prove the existence of the Subject God or to convince others of the reality of the divine predicates? Does my religious interest lie in persuading others that the divine Subject possesses certain qualities, or is it to identify, exhibit and name those qualities as themselves divine? Is the theological task to encourage faith in the Subject or to elicit faith in the Predicates of divinity? Which is more important religiously, morally and liturgically—to endorse faith in the "who" or in the "what" of divinity, fidelity to Elohim or to Elohut? And what difference does there appear to be in the minds of those who are willing to affirm (a) that that which heals the sick is godly while denying (b) that it is God who heals the sick?

The Grammar of Subject Theology

Theological statements are traditionally expressed in terms of subject-predicate relations. However God is portrayed, whether as Person, Being, Power or Process, one speaks of Him as a Subject to which there is attached a number of qualities. Here Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and Re-constructionist prayer books alike follow the same subject-predicate formula: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God who. . . ." The very language of our theological and liturgical forms focuses attention upon the Subject who brings forth the bread from the earth, establishes peace in the heaven, reveals, rewards, punishes, judges and forgives. The language of Subject theology rivets our attention upon the divine Subject and frames the way we look for and at divinity.

The very grammar of our ordinary language is biased towards Subject theology. To say "God" is to use a concrete noun which insinuates the naming of some separate entity. George Berkeley long ago warned that it is only grammatical convention which makes us "apt to think every noun substantive stands for a distinctive idea that may be separated from all others: which hath occasioned infinite mistakes." Despite Berkeley's strictures against the ontologizing bewitchment of language, for most people, "God" is a concrete noun which suggests a corresponding substance, something or someone which underlies the predicates assigned to Him. The Subject is independent of the predicates as the noun is of its adjectives. Modern philosophers have noted that this grammatical prejudice played an analogous role in classical philosophy which favored substantives over verbs and prepositions. Bertrand Russell argues that such linguistic bias led to the erroneous notion that "every proposition can be regarded as attributing a property to a single thing, rather than as expressing a relation between two or more things." It is to avoid such theological limitations that Kaplan insists that God be considered as a functional, not a substantive noun, a correlative term which implies relationship, e.g. as teacher implies pupil and king implies subjects.

Yet, the inherited language of traditional theology and prayer reflects the dominance of the Subject. And it is the Subject, whether described through the categories of classic or modern metaphysics or the biblical notion of a divine Personality, which is regarded as alone unqualifiedly real, objective and independent, and worthy of worship.

The Depression of the Predicates

What happens to the predicates of divinity within the systems of traditional theology? They live under the shadow of the Subject and at its mercy. Characteristically, theologians have qualified them out of their independent and affirmative meaning. They may be analyzed away as negative qualities, puns (homonyms), equivocal or essentially incomprehensible. All that is known for sure is that God is, or that God is He who is, i.e., that God is Subject. But as to His character, His attributes, these flutist he accepted with a grain of salt. The caution

over ascribing literal meaning to the predicates of divinity derives from a sensitivity to the charge that in so doing we are projecting our own human values upon the Subject. Even the Biblical theologians, who will have nothing to do with the bloodless negative theology of the philosophers, tend to suppress the moral predicates of the living God. For they sense that to hold firmly to the moral connotation of the divine predicates, to cling to the positive and humanly comprehensible meaning of such attributes as goodness and justice and mercy is to risk playing havoc with the Subject.

Theodicies Defend The Subject

Most especially when confronting the gnawing problem of evil and the suffering of innocence, the traditional theologian feels compelled to mute the original moral meaning of the predicates. To defend the Subject, and that is the core concern of all theodicies, the moral predicates must be rendered inapplicable to the Subject. Reciprocal divine human covenant or not, moral imitatio dei or not, confronted by the patent immorality of events, the theologian grows aware that the danger to the Subject comes from the moral predicates within. For the jobian outrage with which the theological defenders of God must deal is based upon earlier belief in the moral predicates of divinity. Reluctantly but invariably the theodicies of Subject theology feel compelled to raise the divine Subject beyond the reach of the moral predicates. The underlying strategy of traditional theodicies is to render the Subject invulnerable from the internal attack of the moral predicates. The warm and full-blooded intimacy with a personal Moral God must be cooled. The moral attributes originally ascribed to the divine Subject are now discovered to be qualitatively other than the same moral attributes ascribed to human conduct. The meaning of God's goodness is not simply "more than" human goodness, it is "wholly other," apart from the connotation it possesses in the domain of human affairs. Over and again, relief is found in the assertion that the Subject's ways are not the ways of man, nor its thoughts ours. It is a costly defense. For the denial of the human comprehensibility of the moral attributes of God is accompanied by the denial of human competence to make moral judgment. If "good and evil" in the eyes of God are construed as qualitatively different from that understood by man, then man's judgement and emulation of God's moral traits are invalidated.

Moral Predicates Challenge The Subject

Karl Barth articulates the root case for Subject theology in bold fashion. "Strictly speaking" he asserts, "there is no divine predicate, no idea of God which can have as its special content what God is. There is strictly speaking only the Divine Subject as such and in Him the fitness of His divine predicates." While few Biblical theologians flaunt the absolute autonomy and independence of the divine Personality as openly as Barth does, in the last analysis, and particularly before the onslaught of innocent suffering, they too resort to the same argument. God's ultimate retort to the Jobian plaint draws upon the inscrutability and freedom of He who is. The moral predicates normally assigned to Him must fade away. For faith in the moral predicates would mean the right to challenge the Subject. But it is the Subject who judges the predicates and who assigns it meaning. The divine Subject's disclosures cannot be questioned or held to any single, constant meaning by the standards of the moral predicates.

With Subject theology, faith in God is faith in the Subject itself, independent of the attributes. The love of God is not justified by man's appreciation of His qualities, for that would set man above God and limit the freedom of God. The unconditional love of God is for the divine Ego, for the Personality. However God may appear to act, whatever moral contradictions may appear in His conduct, the height of faith demands acceptance of the Subject beyond the predicates.

The Schism Within Divinity

Inadvertently traditional theology is compelled to sever the Subject from the predicates of Divinity. For it, the proper subject of theology is the Subject. The moral predicates seem all too human. This separation of Subject and predicate is reflected in the growing tension between faith and morality, the divine and the human. In his *Meaning of God* and throughout his works, Kaplan expresses his sensitivity to the schism we have described by warning against the erroneous theological view which conceives of God and man as separate and distinct, "with man, on the one hand, enslaved by his physical self, by his fellow man, or by his own tools, and on the other hand, God completely transcendent, in Himself absolutely, free, dispensing the gift of freedom."

The "Why" and the "Who"

The mind-set which allows the Divine personality to swallow up the moral predicates and frames God as the Subject, conditions the believer to see the world in a particular fashion, to raise certain questions and to accept only certain answers. To draw some of the implications of this orientation, let us examine a typical benediction informed by Subject theology. The prayer which proclaims "God heals the sick" entails a number of presuppositions. The liturgical language suggests a linear causal relationship between the Subject and the patient. In recovery, all praise is due the Subject. Should the patient fail to be healed or indeed die, theological explanation of the tragic event again must refer to the Subject alone. For however the competences of the physician and attendants may be involved in the cure or the failure, these are secondary factors which for satisfactory explanation must be traced to the sole agent who directly or obliquely heals or restrains the hands from healing. Which rabbi has not experienced the series of "whys" in such crises! "Why did he die?" "Why did he have to suffer?" "Why did it happen to him?" No explanation of the tragedy in terms of congenital or contagious disease, ignorance, neglect or accident is acceptable to the questioner. For these explanations are regarded as secular, naturalistic, human accounts which ignore the divine Subject who ultimately controls the destiny of men. "Why" questions are the consequence of "Who" formulations; and the latter legitimates only certain kinds of explanations.

Theodicy Subject Leads To Religious Masochism

Only answers which refer to the will or design of the Subject may put an end to the limitless "whys." And, insofar as many of the events to be explained patently violate the moral expectations expressed in the moral attributes of divinity, the situation can be saved only by mind-reading the intention of the inscrutable God. Somehow we are to be persuaded that the affliction is not truly bad or else that it is deserved. Our predicates are not His, but whatever His are they must be good. It is not for naught that so much of the theodicies of Subject theology lend themselves to exercises of religious masochism.

As a consequence of such Subject theodicy, the identification of the "acts of God" with those phenomena which are unpredictable, uncontrollable and inimical to man is irresistible. For it is precisely where men are incompetent and impotent to act that God's hand appears to be unmistakably revealed. Hurricane, earthquake and whirlwind appear as the unambiguous bearers testifying to the divine Subject's free will. Contrariwise, where men participate in the curative process, the acts of healing are merely human, at best derivative. The acts of God are not the acts of men, else we flirt dangerously with humanism.

The Perception of Predicate Theology

How different is it to invert the prayer that God heals so that it reflects the belief that that which heals is divine? The newer formulation directs our attention to the natural realm in which transactions between man and his environment take place in the process of healing the sick. The vertical relationship between Subject and patient is horizontalized. We no longer look for "Elohut" in the unknowable designs of a supra-moral personality, but in the activities whose qualities we experientially discover as sacred. We learn that healing is dependent upon the non-human givenness of energies, the potentially curative powers which remain dormant without the will, competence and moral purpose of men. We come to recognize that actualization of these potencies depends upon the training, skill and dedication of researchers, medical practitioners, nurses and the manner in which a society chooses to dispense these powers. These activities manifest qualities of intelligence, cooperation, and responsibility which are not dismissed casually as merely human or simply secular or only natural. They are the significant signs which are daily with us, morning, noon and evening, and testify to the reality of "Elohut."

Good and Evil Not Personalized

In what sense are these signs of divinity? What makes them divine is not their lodging in some alleged Subject. They are sacred not because they inhere in any person or supra-person, but because they are instrumentally or intrinsically good: The discovered qualities of Godliness reside in no single thing but in relationships through which they exhibit their sacred character. Elohut or Godliness, then, describes the way the predicates of divinity are organized and coordinated. Sickness, suffering, death, according to the predicate view of divinity, are real but their origin stems neither from a benevolent or a malevolent Subject. Good and evil are not personalized in the form of a God or a Satan. They are neither rewards nor punishments visited upon us by a mysterious Subject. The painful reality of accident, negligence, greed are neither divinized nor demonized. Blame, responsibility, guilt are not foisted upon another realm wherein the Subject needs be either exonerated or condemned.

Suffering and evil, fault and responsibility are taken seriously by predicate theology; but the latter invites different expectations and demands different human responses from those which are generated by Subject theology. The Job of predicate theology is sensitive to the evils which beset man, but his questions are not directed towards a plotting, purposing, supra-human Ego nor are his friends raised in a theological atmosphere which prompts them to decipher the hidden motives of a morally remote Subject. The Job of predicate theology and his friends look elsewhere for explanation and for response. They would examine the "how" and "Where" and "what" which brought forth the pain of the situation, in order to call upon the powers of Elohut in and between them and the environment so as to bind the bruises and to act so as to avoid repetition of the tragedy.

Predicate Prayer

To reverse the Subject and Predicate of theology is no idle grammatical inversion. It proposes that we reflect upon the predicates of divinity as the proper subject of our theological concern. Not the attribute of the Divinity but the divinity of the attribute requires our attention. The form of our traditional Subject liturgy is focused upon an it or Thou or He. In the coin of the traditional benediction it is a "who" to whom all praise is due; a "who" brings forth the bread from the earth. Predicate liturgy would invert the formula so that religious attention and appreciation is directed to the givenness of earth and seed and sun and water, to the preparation of the soil, the weeding, ploughing and nurturing of the field, the reaping, winnowing, grinding of the wheat, the kneading, seasoning and baking of the dough and to the equitable distribution of bread to those in need. "Brukhah elohut ha-

motziah lehem min ha-aretz." Blessed is Elohut which brings forth bread from the earth. The prayer form celebrates the reverent acknowledgment of those values and qualities which through human effort unite to satisfy the needs of man.

These divine qualities are not invented but are discovered in society. They are revealed not by or through some hypostatized existence above or beyond or beneath the world in which we live, but in and through our transactions with each other. They are located in the this-worldly hyphenated realm of I-thou-we which Buber has called "betweenness." They are disclosed in the values discovered through the relationship "between" self and other, "between" self and community, "between" self and the environment. The discovered attributes are as real as living, as objective as our social agreement and our community's acceptance of the consequence of their use, as significant as love, justice and peace are for our lives. And because discovery and confirmation of divine attributes is an on-going process coterminous with the life of our people, Elohut is not fixed forever. As long as the community of faith is open to life, no predicates reign immutable, no set of predicates can exhaust the changing and expanding character of Godliness.

The Category Mistake

But where is Godliness in all this discussion? Where is "Elohut" located? The question is itself inherited from the vertical view of Subject theology. On our analysis the question stems from what philosophers have termed a category mistake. Gilbert Ryle's questioner also sought to know where exactly the "university" is, even after being shown the faculties and facilities, the student-body and alumni. His query could not be answered, not because the "university" is not real or important or objective, but because "university" does not function logically like the term gymnasium which can be inventoried as an item alongside the laboratory. The university is not illusory, an imaginary, arbitrary invention. One cannot point to the university because the university is simply not a thing among things but the way in which all that has been pointed out is organized and inter-related. The university is no mysterious entity beyond those events which have been exhibited. Analogously, Elohut or Godliness refers to the way the predicates a tradition discovers, accepts and names as divine are related. Elohut, like university, has a unitive function. Elohut, Godliness is One in that it unites and relates the godly attributes. Unlike Subject theology, the unity of the predicates is not maintained by virtue of their belonging to some independent Subject. The oneness of Elohut is found in the common relationship of all the predicates to goodness. Intelligence, compassion, justice, peace, etc., are named divine when they serve ends which the community of faith judges to be good.

Predicate Theology in a Post-Holocaustal World

Predicate theology is not for all persons. Some may think it too prosaic, too natural, too human. Others may think it denies the mystique of the wholly other Subject. But for many others, living in a post-holo-caustal world, the older consolations and mysteries of traditional theologies and theodicies take too high a moral toll. In this Nietzsche spoke for the modern consciousness: "To look upon nature as if it were proof of the goodness and care of a God; to interpret history in honor of a divine reason, as a constant testimony to a moral order in the world and a moral final purpose; to explain personal experiences as pious men have long enough explained them, as if everything were a dispensation or intimation of Providence, something planned and set on behalf of the salvation of the soul: all that is passed; it has conscience against it."

For too many the alternative to the traditional presuppositions and forms of Subject theology is simply the abandonment of the God-idea together with all of religious sensibilities. The

twists and turns of traditional theology before the face of Auschwitz appear to them as desperate rationalizations, worse, as a betrayal of the moral stance. For them, to save God the Subject at the expense of faith in the moral attributes of divinity is to be left standing before a naked God. To have faith in the Subject alone strikes them as at least amoral. Fenerbach warned that devils too believe in God. What is important then is not faith in a Subject God but in the character of divinity which serves as a model for our own lives. The criterion of theological meaningfulness remains that of C. S. Peirce. The serious theologian must ask, "Suppose this proposition were true, what conceivable bearing might it have on the conduct of our lives?" After the traditional theodicies are over we are left with a God beyond morality. Belief in such a God, for many, makes no moral difference. Following Peirce's criterion, William James concluded "a difference that makes no difference is no difference." Predicate theology deserves to be considered by those who require a conceptualization of God which will reflect the primacy of a moral ideal respectful of man's moral capacities, one recognizing divinity in his creativity and demanding his responsibility. This is entailed in the shift from Subject to Predicate, from noun to adjectival characterization of divinity, from substantival entity to transactional process of the idea of God.

Two Difficulties

Aside from the problems which some have in identifying divine qualities as real without some substantival base, there appear two ancillary blocks to predicate theology. One of these is apprehension over its emphasis upon the moral essence of divinity which seems to reduce religion to ethics. The other difficulty questions the legitimacy of employing such terms as godly, divine and godliness to describe what are primarily ethical qualities.

I would answer the first question by pointing out that, while ethical concern and behavior must lie at the heart of the God-idea and of religion, there is far more in belonging to a community of faith than belief in a moral deity. Judaism includes ritual and liturgical reflection, an entire gamut of affective, cognitive and celebratory activities and a central fidelity to the career and destiny of our world, people. Our discussion of the God-idea in no way is meant to reduce the religious phenomenon to ethical culture or philosophy.

As far as the use of terms such as divinity, Elohut and godliness, these are chosen for three reasons.

(a) There is a commonality of interest and value between traditional and modern conceptions of divinity which is expressed by allegiance to certain sacred terms. Godliness, godly, Elohut express the nexus between my ancestors and myself. However critically different the many forms of Jewish theology may be, what they hold in common, and thus what is the essential core which unites them, are the moral predicates which are to be lived out in our lives. Analogously, the myths of the Bible, e.g., the Garden of Eden episode, the deluge and Tower of Babel, the miracles in Egypt, are differently interpreted by different generations. Although I may question their historical accuracy, they remain significant because the common moral intention of their telling can be translated in non-miraculous terms. Does a non-Orthodox interpretation of the Torah lose thereby its legitimation as a sacred text? The diverse theological forms in which the divine qualities are posited ought not eclipse the sanctity of the attributes which express our faith and direct our behavior.

From Secular To Sacred

(b) The briefest rehearsal of the history of Jewish theology from Philo to Kaplan will offer evidence that each reflective thinker of Judaism has proposed conceptions of God quite other than that which is found in the Biblical text. Maimonides' reconstruction of the God-idea might have been, and indeed was challenged, on the grounds that his notions of an

incorporeal deity and of negative attributes were foreign to the Scriptural text. To establish monopoly on the use of God-terms would serve only to arrest theological freedom. To submit to a monolithic semantics would stymie theological response to the intellectual and moral demands of our people and would put a halt to theological progress.

(c) Terms like godly or divine are emotionally charged. They are used to express the ultimate significance which a community of faith attaches to certain qualities. The identification and naming of such predicates as divine mean to raise them out of the ordinary, "merely" secular into the realm of the sacred. The incorporation of values into the realm of Elohim, into the liturgical vocabulary of our faith-language is no casual act. The naming acts which call "peace" or "justice" divine are critical in articulating the conscious spiritual tasks and purpose of a people.

In his haunting novel *The Accident*, Elie Wiesel portrays the tortured spirit of Sarah, the prostitute-saint of the death camp. His hero cries out that "whoever listens to Sarah and doesn't change, whoever enters Sarah's world and does not invent new gods and new religions, deserves death and destruction."

Wiesel is a traditionalist, but he cannot endure the thought of theology and religion as usual after Auschwitz. Theological and liturgical same-ness is not of itself a tribute to tradition, especially when that tradition records so much courage and audacity in propounding new ideas of God and new ways to commune with the divine.

Our proposals for predicate theology and predicate liturgy, despite the dispassionate and analytic character of its presentation, is one response to Wiesel's challenge. Its intention is to help those embittered by the absurdity of the Holocaust, and upset by the amoral tones of the defense of God after Auschwitz, to look again and differently at the face of Elohim. It is meant for those who cannot go home again using the old routes, but who may learn to believe and pray and celebrate again through another way. We are an old-new people and we require old-new ways to renew our connection with our ancestors' faith. From Elohim to Elohim is not a path away, but towards our spiritual renewal and reconciliation.