God and Revelation: Post Class Reflections

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What can we know, if anything about God and Revelation from the readings for this past week. Obviously these readings make many claims. It is important to remembers that these claims about God and Revelation are from within a particular context: the context of belief and commitment. The writers are part of a structure of thinking and a form of life called Christianity. So what they say about God is necessarily informed by their commitments.

In answering the question what can we know about God from these readings we need to keep in mind the starting point(s) of the authors of our readings. In class we identified several things: we said that we know that God is Love, Transcendent, Ineffable, Multiplicity, and Agent. Of course, there is more in these readings about God than we actually discussed. I would encourage you to continue your reflections and identify the many and various ways in which God is imagined, portrayed and discussed in these texts. This is important because you need to be clear about the idea of God enshrined in your tradition. And if your tradition is nervous about this idea you need to be clear why. A good way of addressing these issues is through dialogue and discussion with other thinkers and theologians. We said God can not be captured through language but can only be experienced. “Capture’ is perhaps not the right word here for God cannot be captured. In this sense the claim that God cannot be captured through language is correct. But this is quite a different claim from the one that asserts that we can describe aspects of God or of our experience of God. If God is that which cannot be captured through language is a true statement about God, then we can say we have just successfully describe at least one aspect of God.

We also discussed what language means. In the context of theology we said that language is more than verbal expression, it more than natural language like English, French German or Zulu. We said that language is symbolic as well as natural. We talked about the embodied nature of language. I claimed that understood in this comprehensive sense nothing lies outside language. I said that the very possibility of describing the ‘non-linguistic’ requires language of some kind. We wondered whether the concept of God is universal.

We also talked about Revelation. We framed the discussion of Revelation in terms of the debate between Reason and Faith. Some tried to give priority to reason and others to faith. A third group sought a middle position between faith and reason involving some kind of synthesis. I distinguished between the order of creation and the order of experience and suggested that when trying to answer the question which comes first reason or faith in our understating of God it is important to take this distinction seriously. I did this in order to highlight the Barthian problem of whether human reason plays any role in humanity’s encounter’s with God or whether that encounter is primarily the work of faith in which faith is situated as a gift and as a sign; that it is God who takes the initiative in and through God to reach out to humanity. I distinguished between at least two ways of thinking: what I called ‘religious faith’ and ‘anthropological faith’. We said that faith is both a kind of intuition as well as a structure of belief informed by both practice and custom or habit. I said that one of the distinguishing features of faith is the idea of belief and I gave the example of the confession of the creed. I invoked the ‘I believe’ clause of the apostles creed in order to illustrate this point. I argued that faith and reason are God given, that they are part of what it means to be a human being and that although both can fail and in some way become inoperative or inoperable, nevertheless, they are part of the structure of our creaturely being. I argued that all human beings have some kind of faith which exists in the form of the unexamined assumptions that undergird how we take everything around us for granted. I gave the example of walking into a room and proceeding straight to sit in a chair without first examining to see whether the chair is structurally sound and capable of being sat on. I also illustrated my point by briefly describing how infants are dependent on their guardians.

We discussed the problem of the relationship between the universal and the particular. One idea was that the universal can guarantee peace, amity, and human collaboration. A question was raised as to why start with the universal. Why not start with the particular and then move towards the universal. Some suggested that the particular is the source of violence. A third view was that humans should just strive to live in peace with each other and the problem of the universal and the particular will take care of themselves. At the end of this discussion I warned that both universality and particularity have historically been put to dangerous use. I urged us to introduce the notion of plurality in order to think about how we might relativize both universality and plurality.

We discussed interpretation and the nature of interpretation in relation David Tracy. Is Theology all about interpretation? Is interpretation everything? What is it that interpretation seeks to interpret? We talked about certainty in relation to both interpretation and revelation. In this we looked at the concept of openness as an important interpretative phenomenon.

Revelation, universality, particularity, language, faith, belief, practice and custom all play different but important roles in how we construct our ideas of God. They are all part of the materials we bring into our imaginative conversations about what its is possible say about God.

What we did not do in class was to focus more specifically on the traditional conceptions of God: on the nature of the Christian God as trinitarian; on the so-called attributes of God as omniscient, omnipresent , omnipotent, as self-sufficient, etc. All this was covered in our readings in different ways. These phenomena continue to inform many traditional ways of thinking about God. Thus it is important to take them seriously and to think about what sort of images of God they render possible and whether such images are helpful or not.

We continued some of our discussion from last week on the distinction between first and second order claims.