

The God of Silence¹

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The modern Western world has been astonished by the unexpected fulfilment of a peculiar prophecy: the coming of atheism. Atheism had been generally considered an aberration and a revolt against the true order of things. Yet it has been defended, not only by men of intellectual as well as moral integrity who confess no religious beliefs, but also by Christians who claim that the true Christian message in a world come of age is essentially connected with a godless outlook on life and an atheistic insight into Christ.

Before taking up the problem we would do well to enlarge and deepen our perspective so as not to reduce the question to a discussion of recent decades, or to a consideration of only Western culture. The purpose of the present reflections is to help focus the issue of the place of atheism within Western thought from the perspective of both Eastern and Western religious traditions.

Taking a broad over-all view, we discover a threefold thread running throughout the history of man. One thread is the mythical one. Man cannot live without myths, but neither can he subsist with myth alone. The passage from myth to logos is the second thread. It is the distinctive feature of man's civilization in the last five or six thousand years. But modern man, having divinized the logos in one of its many forms (trinitarian, ontological, epistemological, cosmic: *verbum dei, entis, mentis, mundi*), is trying now to overcome this stage. This attempt is characteristic of our present-day anthropological mutation. Yet it is not possible to kill the logos in man. Myth and logos only co-exist in the spirit. This is the third thread. The spirit is freedom—even from Being. God here is not so much the free Being as the very freedom of Being. We are neither telling a myth nor playing with words—*logoi*—because this statement makes sense only as coming from the myth and transcending the logos in the spirit. We cannot regain mythical

¹ This paper is a modified version of an article published in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Spring 1968) summing up some ideas of a Spanish book by the author: *El silencio del Dios*, Madrid (Guadiana) 1970. The reader should keep in mind the over-condensed and programmatic character of this difficult study [R. Panikkar].

innocence. Myth, Logos, and Pneuma, or, if we prefer, *mâyâ*, *cit*, and *ânanda*, or History, Reason, and Love, form the three-fold braid that may become a cord to hang ourselves or a rope of salvation. Willynilly, human destiny is in our hands.

I want to deal here with only one question among the many that arise from a serious study of the meaning of modern atheism.

The identification of God with Being cannot be considered a universally recognized axiom. Not only will a certain contemporary atheism deny God because it will not recognize his monopoly over Being, but, from the opposite point of view, there have existed and still exist a large number of religions that, having accepted God without argument, will not identify him with Being either. The problem appears from both these perspectives:

A. *The divinization of Being (the God of Being);*

B. *The de-ontologization of God (the 'Being' of God).*

In the working out of the relationship of these two perspectives lies a great part of the destiny of philosophy and the future of religion. Moreover, Christianity has so far committed itself to such an identification of God and Being that any denial of the equation appears to question the very essence of Christianity.

Indeed, Being can be understood as a noun (substance), as an adjective (quality), as a verb (relation); in other words, as an existence, an essence or a relationship (Being, being and being). These distinctions call for important qualifications which we cannot undertake to expound here, but still all the three interpretations have in common the assumption that God *is*.

The history of human thought seems to show that man has no other alternative than to choose between divinizing Being or ontologizing the Divinity. God and Being do not permit two supremacies, each in its own field, because both claim superiority in the same sphere. There seems to be no other solution than a fight to the bitter end: either God and Being are identified (by divinizing Being or by ontologizing the Divinity) or one kills the other. In this latter case, either there is only Being-without-God or there is only God-without-Being. How Being can survive without God is indeed a serious question, but the naked existence of God without Being is a still greater one.

Simply stated: If 'philosophically' we start with beings and Being, very soon we shall come across gods and God and shall have to assign them a place in metaphysics. Now, God does not resign himself to playing second fiddle in the scale of the beings; therefore, he has to break through to reach Being. The beginnings of Greek philosophy offer us a paradigm of this problem. God may come later and from outside into philosophy, but he will inevitably tend to conquer the very summit of the ladder of beings or die in the escalade.

Similarly, if 'theologically' we start with God, the problem of Being will appear as soon as God has to be concerned with the world and has to clarify his connection with it. Identification is not dialectically necessary as in the first case, but somehow God will have to rule over beings and will not admit to any higher court of appeal. A private God may avoid having it out with Being, but as soon as the divine hierarchy as well as the scale of beings is established, the connections between them will perforce be so close that they will soon be one and the same.

This seems to be the destiny of human thought, without excluding the Western trends, up to our times. Ontology and theology, carried to extremes, cannot help concurring. Now our age raises a doubt precisely about this concurrence that has cost centuries of speculation and of 'progress'.

Our problem is now this: What happens to God and to Being if we disentangle them? Can we go back to the 'primitivism' of a God who does not want to have anything to do with thought (for thought is what discloses being to us), who does not suffer philosophical scrutiny? Or must we plunge forward and peremptorily abandon a God who has usurped the throne of Being for centuries? It is here that we have to adopt a multi-cultural and plurireligious outlook in order to find a way of solving this disentanglement. We must first ask whether it is possible to de-divinize Being without doing harm to God and second, whether it is possible to de-ontologize God without doing harm to Being. If this is not feasible there will be no other solution than identification of God and Being, or nihilistic atheism.

The problem is far from being only theoretical. Is not the strong reaction of a good part of the youth in the West a new form of anti-ontological and aphiloosophical religiousness? Is not the equally sincere and spontaneous reaction of a good part of the youth in the East a new form of antiritualistic and a religious humanistic attitude?

A. The God of Being (Divinization of Being)

Not only do the so-called primitive religions not envisage God as Being, but in almost every religion the identification between them is considered far from necessary. An exciting history that has still to be written would be the history of the divinization of Being. I would suggest three attitudes: anthropomorphism, ontomorphism, and personalism.

Needless to say, these three attitudes should not be considered as three consecutive periods in a linear conception of time and history, or as three necessary moments of a dialectical process. Rather they should be seen as a triple dimension of a single problem, the complete solution to which we can approach only if we do not throw overboard any of the positive components. We need to find a fusion temperature high enough to

allow for the combination of the three without contradiction or syncretism. A history of humanity could perhaps speak of *kairological moments*.

I am well aware that the spiritual situation of our time is still far from the solution. The tensions and differences among the three points of view are strong, but they seem to have lessened during this last period. The framework is now established for the three above-mentioned attitudes.

I. ANTHROPOMORPHISM

God might have created man in his image and likeness, but man has, undoubtedly, conceived God according to his own picture and resemblance. It cannot be otherwise: If God is to make any sense to men, he has to be in one way or other homologous with man. Anthropomorphism is necessary for men to think of God and for God to reveal himself to men. If we 'refine' and 'purify' God too much from the human, he fades away. In fact, since the religious beginning of mankind, God or the gods have always been considered as having anthropomorphic features. Without them there is no prayer, no cult, no possibility of human relationship with the divine. The *karmamârga* (the way of action), the sacrifice, the rite, and the life are fundamental elements of any religion. God is the Lord, the Other, the Super-being, but most important, he is like man. All God's superiority has man as a point of reference; his own superiority is an anthropomorphic feature.

II. ONTOMORPHISM

Yet, regardless of this anthropomorphism, man is a thinking being with the power to abstract from himself, and he cannot help desiring to know more and more. Philosophy and theology are the ways open to him for relating the divine to the exigencies of the thinking mind. Indeed, the believer will say that the very intellect itself is effect; or grace, or creation of the Lord. Nevertheless the human effort towards intelligibility demands that God be no longer an unpredictable Will or a whimsical Power beyond any possible apprehension (awe and fear being thus the first religious categories), but that he be Truth, Goodness, in one word, Being. In this way he conforms to the rules of the ontic play, thus allowing men to discover his Will and his nature not just by asking him directly but by scrutinizing the mystery of reality and of man's very existence. Truth is the Will of God and Goodness his nature. This being the case, then God as Being means that there is no longer need for an irreconcilable conflict between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, the world and religion. The *jñânamârga* (path of knowledge) is the way towards salvation. Real tragedy in the classical sense is no longer possible, because there is no destiny outside and above the realm of God.

III. PERSONALISM

But man is a religious person. He cannot help desiring an authentic personal life, which amounts to aspiration for an integrating relationship with the divine, which a too philosophical notion of God blurs. Man is a living being and his consciousness of suffering and evil brings into an insuperable crisis the concept of God. If God is Being, he is also responsible for the dark side of the world. If he is not, then he would have to give up his claim to be supreme and almighty. Further, if God is *absolute* Being, he is incapable of love and man cannot enter into a relationship of prayer, entreaty, joy, or thankfulness with such a God. Man needs the *bhaktimârگا* (the way of love) as badly as either of the other two previous attitudes. This is why this third tries to synthesize both, not by saying that God is anthropomorphic, or that he is just an immutable and static Being, but by defending the assertion that Being itself is personal, that the absolute itself has a personal nature.

Now, a personal supreme Being cannot be alone, for person implies society. Christians may welcome this idea by pointing out that it is precisely what the Trinity stands for. But the relationship should neither be substantialized (there would then be either three supreme Beings or none), nor considered exclusively *ad intra* (for this God is not only person for himself). Further, the relationship of God with the non-personal world should then also be re-thought on a different basis.

None of these three fundamental attitudes satisfies the level of consciousness of a great part of mankind today, and yet they cannot be dismissed altogether. God, after climbing up to the throne of Being, feels uncomfortable there. The God of Being seems to have ceased his dominion over the people. He either resigns or is overthrown.

No need now to voice all the criticisms against these three attitudes; they are in the air, almost everywhere. No need either to elaborate further the point that an eclectic 'solution', drawing now from one attitude now from another one according to the doubts or queries of the so wrongly called unbelievers, will not satisfy anybody. The weakness of any pastoral approach is that it excludes the pastor from being approachable—because it assumes that he knows the answers, whereas here it is the question itself that is questioned.

The insufficiency of these attitudes raises the second major problem: What happens to God if he is disentangled from Being; can he survive?

B. The 'Being' of God (*De-ontologization of God*)

From Aristotle in Europe and from the Upanishads in India, Being is mainly the substance. It is what subsists and supports the rest of reality. It is what is hidden because it is the basis of every-

thing; but because it is hidden it does not cease being real. Being is the subject, the *ousia*, the *âtman*.

Accordingly, if God exists, he cannot but identify himself with Being: He will be the ultimate Subject, the Substance—the basis of everything—the *brahman* identified with the *âtman*, and therefore the primary Cause, the motionless Motor, the ultimate Creator, the infinite Goodness, the perfect Idea, the utmost Justice, the supreme Being. But such an identification breaks down nowadays. It collapses from both sides, that of Being and that of God.

On the part of Being, it happens because substantial thinking is no longer dominant and decisive in our time and consequently substance has lost its privileged ontical position. To call God a 'super-being' or a 'super-substance' (!) may solve the problem of pantheism or monism, but does not meet the more fundamental issue, because the 'super' remains always a qualification of the 'being'. The so-called ontological difference, the same classic distinction between essence and existence and many currents in modern philosophical thought arise from premises other than the ones of the primacy of substance. Now, if Being is simply a function, can God be reduced to playing such a role? We could formulate our question in two ways: negative and positive.

The *negative* would read: How does God escape from ontology? That is, how does he escape from the nets of ontology so that we can justify both? The peaceful symbiosis between God and Being that from Aristotle on has constituted the spine of Western culture is no longer possible. In fact, many a time when ontology was in a blind alley, it appealed to God to back it. An example is the case of Descartes, who needed divine truthfulness for his system to maintain itself. On the other hand, when the concept of God finds itself in insurmountable difficulties, then men turn to ontology with a concept of Being that tries to overcome the apologetic obstacles. An example is the problem of evil: God the Father (person) can permit evil because he is the Being which includes everything.

Is it possible for us to disentangle God and Being so that there can be a place for God near or above or below the Being of ontology? The problem here refers not so much to Being as to God, who would have to emancipate himself from the tutelage and the refuge with which metaphysics has provided him so far. How can God get rid of the rank of Being?

The *positive* formulation of the same problem will simply refer to the connection of God with Being, for it could hardly consent to refer to what kind of 'being' God is, or what God's place is in the universality of Being.

Is it possible that a religious attitude may escape from the exigence of thought, that it can avoid the nets set up by thought? One could discuss, from Parmenides and the Upanishads on, what the exact connection is between Being and thought, but

one thing seems to be evident: that if being is, thought will discover it for us, at least partially. This would be the minimum in common between thinking and being, although the connection may be much more intimate. Thinking is not being as such, but it is the organ of being, it discloses being to us.

Now, is a post-critical attitude possible, an attitude that is reflective, that is not merely instinctive, vital, preconscious, one that gives rise to a real connection with God but without encroaching on the field of thought, that is, without touching the sphere of being? There can be a thinking that does not refer to God, but can there be a God that does not refer to our thought? Can thought hide and keep itself respectfully outside the ambit of God? The unsolved problem lies in deciding who is to limit thought, because if the limits are self-imposed they are not real limits. If, on the other hand, they are forced, nothing can forbid thought from disregarding the prohibition and approaching the tree of knowledge of good and evil on its own terms in order to attempt to become like God. Can God be or become apparent, meaningful, or even real to us if we leave our faculty of thought aside?

I do not intend to give a reply now to such questions. If the history of the God of Being is still to be written, the history of the 'being' of God is still to be lived and experienced. This history, still to be carried out, represents the 'kairos' of our present world. What the post-critical attitude of our time, by and large, has been trying to do is to de-ontologize God. It is an understandable but not always a well-balanced reaction. What has happened is that God has been hurriedly *denied* instead of our proceeding to *reform* the concept. The denial of God belongs to the very process of *demythologising* 'him'.

Just as the three attitudes described earlier represent three constitutive dimensions of human religiousness, so also the three factors that I am going to sketch constitute three acts in the drama of the human being facing his ultimate concern:

I. ATHEISM

The serious thrust of atheism lies not in its anti-theism, in its negating the personal character of God, but in its denial of either existence or essence to God; in other words, it refuses to consider God as Being or as an absolute of any form whatsoever. Atheism criticizes whatever idea of God we can put forward. In a way, from this point of view, it is irrefutable. It is weak, on the other hand, when offering a positive substitute for the theistic picture. Atheism is necessary as a constant corrective to any kind of belief in God, but it betrays its mission when it becomes a substitute for God, religion, or whatever. Atheism is a constant reminder that man cannot transfer on to Another the burden and the joy of his own existence, that there is no Presence somewhere, ready to excuse man for being just man. God for atheism is the

great absence, the echo that responds only to man's voices, and that should not frighten its author.

II. APOPHATISM

God is not only Being, says more than one religious tradition, but corresponds also to Non-Being. If atheism is the negation of God as Being, apophatism is the denial of God as Non-Being. It is as inappropriate to say that he exists as to affirm that he does not. Human silence may be the epistemic category to reach God, and ontic silence his own first attribute. The Logos, the Speech, the Word is not God, but his Son, Image, Manifestation. In a word, Being is not God, but God's epiphany. The only way to guarantee divine transcendence is not to play with or manipulate that concept, not even in a pretended analogous way. The only way to make room for God, this attitude will say, is to leave him and not defend him or try to introduce him into the frame of our thinking. Faith in God demands such total confidence as not to bother about his being or existence. God transcends our being and our thinking powers. He transcends any possible form of conceiving being or thought. It is not that his ontic density, as it were, dazzles and overwhelms us; it is rather that he has no ontic density at all, because he is not. Modern and ancient forms of describing that God is love or pardon and the like have tried sometimes to put into words what others have preferred to keep in silence.

Whereas atheism is inclined to declare itself incompatible with any theistic affirmation—contradicting itself in so doing (for then atheism becomes a substitute for theism), this apophatic attitude declares itself compatible with any type of theistic formulation. Whereas atheism is cataphatic, this second moment is purely apophatic; it sinks into an utter silence, raising its voice only to quiet our own urges asking for something that the very questioning contradicts. How can I question the unquestionable?

III. THE RADICAL RELATIVITY

Whereas the two preceding acts are a corrective to the corresponding affirming attitudes, this third act of our drama is pure affirmation without claiming to rise above its own limits. It says, not that everything here on earth is prey of an all-destructive 'relativism', but on the contrary that without escapism into transcendence, immanence or scepticism, we can envisage the problem of God as that of the totality never exhausted in itself. Because reality is the *radical relativity* of all things, it shows the divine, neither as one aspect of things, nor as pure totality or otherness, but as the pure and really infinite mutual relatedness of everything. Reality is nothing else but an inexhaustible bundle of relations. In other words: the genuine experience of

contingency leads man to discover, not that he is leaning on 'another' being in order to subsist, but that his own being is nothing but an *in*, a *from*, a *part*, a *tension*, a *pole*, an *element* of a whole, and that this whole is not the sum of the existing factors but the relationship of everything. God here is neither being nor not-being; he neither exists nor does not; he is neither one with the world or man, nor different and other; he is the very relationship, the radical relativity, the non-dualistic dimension, ground, summit, or whatever words we may choose according to our system of reference.

In summary, we have tried to explore only one issue and do not claim to reach any conclusion, except perhaps that of saying that the aspects of human religiousness mentioned are constitutive and yet insufficient dimensions of man's inexhaustible quest for Reality. We could perhaps gloss that answer of the Buddha, when asked about the purpose of *nirvâna*: 'This question, O Radha! cannot catch its limit.' It is really not a question and thus any attempt to give an answer will only entangle us more and more in unnecessary complications. Perhaps the query about God has an answer only when it quiets the very question. But then it is no longer the quieting of the question or giving it no answer; it is rather that the question does not arise because the questioner is quieted: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit!'

Meanwhile, we go on inquiring, loving, believing...