The Encyclopedia of Religion on the Afterlife

Mircea Eliade, Editor in Chief (MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987)

I have elsewhere said already that one of my starting points on any topic related to religion is this encyclopedia. So to gain some insight into the nature of God, using the index, I was sent to the Afterlife! How appropriate! Symbolically, that is.

So, on the question of the nature of God I perused Volume 1's article on the Afterlife by Jane I. Smith, which covers pages 107 through 116.

Smith's treatment of the nature of God begins on page 108. Her first paragraph is quite comprehensive:

> The basic issue concerning the nature of the divine is whether God is to be considered a personal being with and to whom one can relate or is held to be reality itself, the source and ground of being in impersonal or nonpersonal form. Between these absolutes lie a myriad of possibilities, compounded and enriched by a variety of experiences that can be termed mystical.

Smith continues by expanding on these possibilities, noting that those who are in the nonpersonal side of the spectrum

> . . . must ultimately sacrifice the relationship of deity and devotee, whether this be understood on the model of master

> and servant, parent and child, or lover and beloved.

Smith cites two persons, an Indian philosopher and a Muslim mystic, who tried to create a middle way where both extremes are true. She then goes through examples of different ways God or the Gods have been, historically, described.

Smith does not say anything about the Indian, Ramanuja, a twelfth-century philosopher except (p. 108) that his

> . . . qualified nondualism was the logically problematic attempt to reconcile a philosophical monism with the overwhelming need to respond to God in loving devotion.

Having just read *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, this statement set of an alarm bell. If Siddhartha, after achieving wisdom, had read these words he would undoubtedly have said in response that 'if you are trying to force-fit Reality into thoughts and words, you are on a fool's errand.'

Marguerite Porete, seeing these words, would no doubt have recalled her words from her book describing the path to God:

> So bring low your sciences
> Which are founded by Reason,
> And put all your trust
> In the science conferred by Love,
> That are lit up by faith –
> And then you'll understand this book,
> which by Love makes the soul live.

[Cited on page 39 of *Radical Christian Writings, A Reader,* Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland, Eds., (Blackwell Publishers,

Oxford, UK, 2002)]

Smith says of the Muslim mystic, also of the twelfth century, whose name was Muhy al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, that (p. 108) he

> . . . posited a series of descending levels of the godhead through which the absolute, nonmanifest divine gradually actualizes itself to the form of a Lord with whom humans can interact.

Having just completed my page discussing the thought of Dionysius the Areopagyte, this sounded quite familiar!

At the risk of going out on a limb, I also feel that if Mormon doctrine ever gets fleshed out more completely, it will come to resemble a Dionysian vision of hierarchies of divine being reaching from the ineffable to the human. In fact the first two Prophets of Mormondom described just such a hierarchy of divinity in being:

> Furthermore, if men can understand and receive it, mankind are organized to receive intelligence until they become perfect in the sphere they are appointed to fill, which is far ahead of us at present. . . . It is the Deity within us that causes increase. Does this idea startle you? Are you ready to exclaim, 'What, the Supreme in us!' Yes, He is in every person upon the face of the earth. The elements that every individual is made of and lives in, possess the Godhead. This you cannot now understand, but you will hereafter. (1852, Journal of Discourses [JD] 1:93; see also 1856, JD 3:335)

In an even more on-target statement, Young asserts that through revelation one

> . . . could understand that matter can be organized and brought forth into intelligence, and to possess more intelligence, and to continue to increase in that intelligence, and could learn those principles that organized matter into animals, vegetables, and into intelligent beings; and could discern the Divinity acting, operating, and diffusing principles into matter to produce intelligent beings, and to exalt them -- to what? Happiness. (1859, JD 7:23; see also 1859, JD 7:285).

This notion of God being diffused to a greater or lesser degree in all creation, but especially in the intelligent life that we represent and are part of, was also mentioned in a contemporary of both Smith and Young, Orson Pratt, when he described an unpublished revelation by Joseph Smith. In this revelation, Joseph Smith taught the doctrine of the Divine Emanation: God in all and all in God. In this revelation, Ahman was the name assigned to God the Father; Son Ahman, Christ, was described as being the greatest of the parts of God; Sons Ahman, man, were the next greater of the parts of God; and lastly, angels or Angloman were, in their turn, the next greater of the parts of God (1855, JD 2:342).

The point? These fifth- and twelfth-century ideas bridging the seemingly impassible chasm between an ineffable God, the ground of being, and a personal God, are alive and well today. But as Siddhartha would say: they are just thoughts, just words. And as Marguerite would say, try to understand the Divine Nature using love and faith rather than intellect's power of reason. OK. Good Advice.