

Fingering God The Folly of Identifying the Divine

Forgetting the Point

Can you recall your mother telling you, "it's not polite to point." In some cases pointing someone out can even get you killed, which is why we must have witness protection programs. Criminals refer to it as "being fingered." The word *point* itself comes from the Latin word *punctus*, meaning puncture, pierce or prick. No wonder it's considered impolite! Nobody wants their identity fingered, penetrated, pricked, pierced or punctured without first consenting. Nevertheless, as rude and possibly dangerous as pointing can be, there are so many who routinely point to God without so much as a second thought, as if the divine can actually be singled out and clearly identified.

It's typical that they point to a paternal god who demands *his* will be obeyed, and they usually proceed to point out exactly what *his* will is. Knowledge concerning the will of God is most often handed down from one generation to the next, through the teaching of beliefs and traditions, both orally and written. Unfortunately, the part of the tradition that seems most often ignored, is the that which says it's not possible to define God, that the Divine is a great mystery.

Look, and it can't be seen.
Listen, and it can't be heard.
Reach, and it can't be touched.

Says the Tao Te Ching...

Seamless, unnamable,
it returns to the realm of nothing.
Form Includes all forms,
image without image,
subtle, beyond all conception.

Here in the west the divine is commonly referred to as "Father," and I have little doubt God is paternal. But paternity is but one minuscule divine attribute. We must also conclude God is maternal, and child like, and the Earth and the Moon and the Sun and the Stars and everything between and beyond, seen and unseen—the *Form that includes all forms and is beyond all conception*. To narrowly focus on only one aspect of the Divine is to miss it completely. When the Father becomes God, then God ceases to be the father. This sort of paradoxical reasoning may seem familiar in the East, but what of the westerner who thinks less abstractly and demands a more concrete god? I suggest it is also the westerners' tradition to consider the Divine as a great mystery who must never be defined. Doesn't one of the Ten Commandments say, *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image*? The divine doesn't seem to like concrete gods, gods who are carved in stone. Perhaps this is a metaphor suggesting the Divine doesn't like to be defined at all.

In his book, *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm once wrote;

To say [that] God... is wise, strong, good implies again that [God] is a person; the most I can do is say what God is not, to state negative attributes, to postulate that [God] is not limited, not unkind, not unjust. The more I know what God is not, the more knowledge I have of God... Following the maturing idea of monotheism in its further consequences can lead only to one conclusion: *not to mention God's name at all*, not to speak about God. Then God becomes what [God] potentially is in monotheistic theology, the Nameless One, an inexpressible stammer, referring to the unity underlying the phenomenal universe, the ground of all existence; God becomes truth, love, justice." [p.58]

It's important to note Fromm's conclusion God is the Nameless Ground of All Existence, is based on the "monotheistic theology" of the West, not the more esoteric religions of the East, as we might expect. For example, when God first came to Moses, it was in the form of a burning bush. Isn't this an indication that God, like an ever changing flame, is without definition? As you know, the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, chose fire as the symbol of his belief all of reality is in a constant state of flux. During his encounter with the Divine, Moses asks God's name;

And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. [Ex.3:14]

Some theologians have more accurately translated God's words as, "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE," suggesting the idea again that the Divine cannot be defined but is always changing. Later on, when the children of Israel were wandering through the wilderness, it's written;

... the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night. [Exodus, 13:21]

This example, once again, illustrates just how ill-defined, cloudy, changing is the Form of this God who has inspired the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions. In Jewish tradition this principle became so important that it became a sin to speak or write the name of God. Indeed, the Third Commandment says, "*You shalt not misuse the name of the Lord your God...*" So, much of the Old Testament refers to God with the four character tetragrams YHWH and JHVH. But around 300 BC, still worried about taking God's name in vain, they began even substituting these tetragrams with the word, *Adhonai*, which simply means *Lord*. This practice continued through the Greek and Latin translations which substituted the word *Kurios*, again meaning *Lord*, which is used in the *King James Version*. It wasn't until the recent *American Standard Version* that translators again began going back to the tetragram JHVH, adding to it the vowels from the word *Adhonai* so that it now reads as *Jehovah*.

It must be understood, however, that *Jehovah* is not meant, as is often the case, to be taken as the name of God. Indeed, the meaning of this word is so obscure the Jews often

added words to it in order to emphasize a specific attribute. *Jehovah-jira* means Jehovah will provide, *Jehovah-nissi* means Jehovah is my banner, *Jehovah-shalom* translates, Jehovah is peace. There is also, *Jehovah-Shammah*, Jehovah is there, *Jehovah-Tsidkeno*, Jehovah is our righteousness, *Jehovah-ropehka*, Jehovah heals thee, *Jehovah-megaddeshkem*, Jehovah sanctifies you, *Jehovah-tsaboath*, Jehovah of hosts, *Jehovah-elyon*, Jehovah most high, and *Jehovah-roi*, Jehovah is my shepherd.

In the New Testament we see a hint of this idea as well. Jesus' entire message is one of inclusion, as if by not defining God at all, he was able to see divine presence in all beings, including the harlots, tax collectors, lepers, and others that his culture considered unclean, unholy and unworthy of God's love. There's also an interesting story in Acts, during the Apostles Paul's visit to Athens where he discovers an altar with the inscription, TO AN UNKNOWN GOD, possibly the same oracle Socrates worshipped. Paul was convinced this unknowable God must be his God, "*The God*," he said, "*who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of Heaven and Earth and does not live in temples made of hands.*"[17:24]

From these examples we begin to realize the identity of the Divine is as obscure in western tradition as it is in the East, and that when the ancient Chinese sage wrote the words, "*The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name,*" he may very well have been writing about the same God who says, "*I will be who I will be!*" We cannot finger God!

Old False Face

It's also interesting that when Moses asks to see God, he is only allowed to see God's butt. Yes, God mooned Moses! Perhaps this is the Divine Comedian's way of saying, "You can only see the results of what I've already accomplished." God's behind, is symbolic of what God leaves behind, God's past. The Creation, with all its beauty and wonder may very well be God's ass! I find this a wonderful paradox that, again, teaches us we must never take God's identity too seriously. We must never take our grand and lofty ideas about God too seriously!

Moses was mooned by God, because if he had seen the Divine in its entirety, he would have died. This idea was taken so seriously by the Jewish High Priest, the only person allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the Holy Tabernacle, where it was believed God's presence dwelt, that he would tie a rope to his leg before entering. This way, if he should see God and drop dead, others would be able to pull his body out. Perhaps this indicates the only way we can ever truly know God is in death, when we merge once again into the Great Mystery, into Universal Being.

This idea that we can't see God's face is as important as realizing God cannot be named. If you hear others begin to describe God to you, or if you yourself think you know what god looks like, then you are likely recognizing a false god, what some Native American traditions call the *False Faces*. There is a common legend among the North Eastern tribes

that says a mighty giant once tried to oppose the great Creator. In a test of strength the giant moved a mountain. The Creator then moved a mountain as well, and moved it so close to the giant that it smashed his nose. In one variation of the story, the Creator returns to the world after having been away, only to see a being approaching in the distance whose face was already twisted and disfigured. This twisted figure had tried to convince the inhabitants of the earth that he was it's actual creator. Again, the two beings compete by moving mountains. The Native Americans honored this story by forming False Face societies which danced while wearing masks, usually featured with a twisted or broken nose. They came to call this False Faced being, *Old Broken Nose*.

I bring this up because it reminds me a lot of the Gnostic tradition concerning Yahweh. By now some of you are familiar with the old Gnostic saying, "*The only problem with Yahweh is he thinks he's God!*" The Gnostics, who were eventually persecuted into extinction by what became the official church, might consider Old Broken Nose and Yahweh as one and the same. The idea is that Yahweh came from a race of higher beings of light, but wanted to take all the credit for creation. When the higher beings of light tried to remind him where he comes from, he rebelled by creating humanity in order to convince them of his greatness. The higher beings of light then instructed the serpent, the shining one, to tell the humans the truth. This really pissed Yahweh off, and he kicked the humans out of paradise and severely punished the serpent, just as Zeus punished Prometheus for giving fire to humanity. Still, the children of the earth falsely worshipped Yahweh for many years. That's when one of the higher beings of light decided to come to the earth himself and teach people about a higher truth. That person, according to Gnostic tradition, was Jesus, who, again, taught that we must love and accept each other.

This is not to say that Yahweh doesn't also come from the Higher Beings of Light. Our only mistake is when we assume our concept of God, depicted as Yahweh, the Lord, Father, Buddha or even Jesus, is all there is to the Divine. The Divine is much more than any of us can ever imagine or describe. So we must remain humble and open ourselves to all possibilities if we want to know the Divine. God is all things and no-thing. And as soon as we confine God to a particular thing, be it a thought or an object, that thing ceases to be God. "I will be whoever and whatever I want to be," the Divine laughs as it pulls down its pants and shows us its butt.