

Figuring/Refiguring God

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1.

God is not a phenomenon. But God is invoked everywhere. The Invisible, who hides from our senses, is celebrated, adored, thanked, and revered as the most familiar, though incomparably mysterious addressee of those who pray to God. Those who pray to God, are in touch with him *via* and thanks to the transformations their own embodied soul has undergone through the mysterious working of God's presence in their past and present life. Thanks to personal and historical experiences of their communication with God, human individuals and communities have been religiously involved.

For such an involvement, it is not sufficient that one frequently use particular phrases or symbols, perform distinct rituals, or enjoy specific feelings; the main feature of a religiously engaged life lies in a characteristic attitude or *stance* and a particular mode of moving forward in accordance with a specific orientation that provides a God-linked motivation and perspective. A religious life is a quite earthly, bodily and spiritual, part of human history, but it is also marked and deeply marked because no deeper dimension can be found by its being affected religiously. Indeed, involvement is more serious than belief; it affects, tunes, attunes, and shapes from the inside our "hearts" and "kidneys." Often the mode of such affections is still vague and in search for a more determinate meaning. How should we feel and how should we emotionally respond adequately to the hints that seem contained in the religious events or experiences that befall us? But once touched, further exploration seems almost inevitable: How can I (re)adjust to the hidden secret that affects me, so that it can echo in my person and change my stance for the better?

Existing religions and exemplary people who have found their way, offer paradigmatic constellations of names, words, sayings, beliefs, rites, and practices to help us find a vocal, imaginative and thoughtful way of appropriately expressing, interpreting, and thus more fully contacting and communicating with the secret that seems prone to settle in our lives. Most often, a religious fact or event that affects us through awe, gratitude, guilt, or jubilation is accompanied by words or symbols—a

narrative or prophecy for example—that begin to interpret the meaning of our affections. The Sacred Books and the historical flow of spiritual literature are full of such illuminations.

All religious interpretations appeal to human imagination, because the language they speak is entirely metaphorical: it uses images, symbols, and likenesses to evoke the believed aspects and interventions of the God, who, despite deep hiddenness, is believed to participate in the human history whose players are embodied subjects living within the limits of their earthly confinement. The religious *metaphors* in which all religions take refuge to explain what happens in their communication with God, do not capture God's own self in an attempt to erase the abyssal difference that separates God's mode of being and acting from the human way. And yet, the names one uses and the stories told to evoke and celebrate God, reproduce proper features of humanity's own worldly dimensions. The One who is adored, invoked, praised and thanked, is the lord of armies, the liberator from slavery under Egypt's tyranny, the king of our people, the fortress that protects us, the rock on which we can build, the pastor who finds water for his sheep when they are lost in the desert, the creator who constructs the cosmos out of nothing, the concerned father who gives an abundant harvest, the bridegroom who loves his bride, the judge who pardons and punishes our sins. Thus, human life on earth, despite its bodily confinement in space and time, becomes a dramatic story in which God participates without ever appearing, although he is the most important protagonist of it.

Metaphors are words, signs or symbols that point and refer (*pherein*) to realities that are not directly presented or unveiled, but only represented by other, well-known and easily accessible realities that, despite considerable—and often enormous—differences, show some features or activities that are somewhat similar to those of the signified, but not directly presented or even un-presentable realities.

Since we, humans, are not able to see, hear, touch, taste, grasp, confine, delineate, sketch, or portray God, because God is not a phenomenon, we focus on a phenomenal reality that fits in our familiar world, in order to *refer* and move the reader's or listener's imaginative activity (our own included) toward a hidden, not immediately knowable occurrence in which God is involved. If we understand the referring character of religious metaphors, we are invited to follow their motivating and moving force. While obeying a metaphor's suggested direction, we concentrate our attention on the target it intends: the "thing," "point," or "sake," that demands our interest and concentration. Because we cannot grasp and encompass or properly name God directly, we follow a recommended trajectory that leads to an encounter, even if the intended target remains hidden and obscure. However, little knowledge is necessary in order to address someone by saying "You." A vocative is possible without a host of information about the addressee. Would it not be enough to know in which direction I must go to encounter the intended one? As soon as I know that something or someone is hidden in or behind some better known reality, a partial hint or simile (a fingerprint, for example) might be sufficient to know how I can recognize the one who is sought. But would it then be enough for being involved in a religious relationship to know that all religious metaphors serve as pointers that

converge into the all-gathering and omni-aspectual *You*? Can God be sought and encountered *via* stammering expressions like the “maker of heaven and earth,” “the Lord of all lords,” “the first principle,” the “greatest,” or the “Beloved”?

Three thousand years of biblical tradition prove that it is possible to identify God as the You of all yous on the basis of metaphorical indications that show the way. The movement that is implied in a great variety of such indications conspires with the originary movement that draws and drives all human lives, insofar as an essential or “natural” and primordial desire, *eros*, or *pathos* mobilizes them for an exodus that begins with birth. It is remarkable that not only the Bible (and all presumably sacred books), but also Western philosophy has interpreted the search for God as the outcome of the primordial movement that characterizes the human essence (or “nature”) as dynamic principle of all human unfolding. Within the biblical traditions, the purest realization of this movement lies in prayer (in all its communal and individual forms from liturgical celebration to the silent contemplation of desert dwellers and recluses), whereas philosophers—at least in the West, and especially during modern times—have tried to stylize the search as a form of study and learned thematization.

2.

It was a remarkable, but probably unavoidable, development of the Christian tradition that it judiciously received and partially adopted the philosophical heritage with which it was confronted in the regions where it settled during the first centuries of its growth. Justin, Clement, Origen, the Cappadocians, Ambrosius, Augustine, and other intellectuals who had embraced the Christian way of life, were also acquainted with fragments of Greek and Roman philosophy. They began the great enterprise of correction and integration of the best available “pagan” thoughts by transforming them into elements of a *theological* systematization of Christian wisdom. Thus they inaugurated the history of a new search for understanding that indeed could be characterized as a *fides quaerens intellectum*, a “faith in search of understanding.” The faith they confessed and practiced was enriched by their integration of Greek and Roman *logias*, while purifying them, into their own search for intellectual insight in the revealed wisdom of Christ. The pursuit of this theological project would play a leading role in the most brilliant and inspiring highlights of the next 2000 years of Western culture, not only in philosophy, theology, literature, music, painting and architecture, but also, and even more importantly, in its praxis of communitarian lifestyles, care for the poor, and personal sanctity—despite numerous aberrations. Many pitfalls and aberrations have threatened and wounded the Europeanization of the Christian faith, however, and a certain tension between the emphatically Biblical, liturgical and praying stance, on the one hand, and the studiously learned and (theo-)“logical” response to Revelation, on the other, had to be managed with great care in order to prevent or overcome clashes that would lead to divorce or mutual destruction. The conflict between the great theologians of the 13th century with the *facultas artium* of the Parisian university might be seen as one example of such clashes; but the post-medieval

philosophy shows more blatant wars between intellectually illuminated faith and logically expert but non-edifying enlightenment.

Indeed, the post-medieval proclamations of a philosophy that should ignore all authorities other than the philosopher's autonomy, radically changed the presuppositions of a Christian universe—and therewith the roles of religion and faith, and the function of religious metaphors. Since the limits of this article do not permit an analysis of the main conditions that set or changed the stage for figuring and refiguring God, I must be very brief in sketching how the dominant perspective of modern philosophy makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to indulge in any figuring of God at all. Instead of giving a condensed sketch of such an analysis, I will therefore offer here only a few remarks about the perspective of a typically modern *philosopher*, while being well-aware that my emphasis and shortcuts might be called—and, to a certain extent, rightly called—*caricatural* rather than phenomenologically quite accurate.

3.

What is the dominant perspective of the autonomous thinker who perceives him- or herself as independent from any faith (not only from the Jewish or Christian faith, but also from other faiths, such as those of *atheists*, *polytheists*, *humanists*, fetishists, *agnosticists*, or *secularists*).¹ And what could God, religion, religious metaphors and prayer—and all other religious topics—mean to so many people, including many philosophers, who attach great significance to them?

An entirely autarchic philosopher occupies a place from which he can observe and display all meaningful topics and questions before his mental eyes. By bracketing every as yet unproved belief, he allows all phenomena (with all the questions that emerge from them) to show up before his unprejudiced, and to that extent still undecided, mind. The horizon of his view is panoramic: it encompasses the totality of all that can be displayed or—in the widest sense of the word “object,” thus including also all subjects and subjective features—*objectified*. All that is or has been or will be possible can be perceived, thematized, defined, distinguished, and linked, and the philosopher who keeps his distance and height (because he needs to keep a panoramic overview), presides at the spectacle that permits him to define, distinguish (and thus limit), link, order, and reorder all things that together compose the universe. Even if this philosopher counts all human subjects, including his own ego, soul or self among the “things” he observes and tries to conceptually adjust to the logical and ontological conditions of his cosmic and historical world map, he maintains his freestanding but all-encompassing perspective. All “things”—i.e., all that exists or can exist—are transformed into one systematic whole: a universe of

¹ The question of whether any completely faithless person can continue to live is not easy to answer. Would a positive answer not imply that one can live even without any implicit, sub- or unconscious guess or hope or trust that to be a human individual must have at least *some* meaning? That no philosopher in fact has ever invented a systematic philosophy without—at least implicitly—appealing to some kind of faith or basic trust, can be demonstrated rather easily by way of a thorough scrutiny of the philosophies of our history.

well-defined and tightly connected components, in which the philosopher himself participates, although, as philosopher, he remains their supreme analyst and all-connecting master.

To fulfill his ideal, a philosopher must guarantee that the universal coherence of his mental universe reproduces the objective totality of the universe, which survives the temporality of his own merely human and mortal thought. Consequently, he tries to prove the existence of a meta- or superhuman principle that grants and certifies the existence of his philosophically reconstructed cosmos, and often he calls this supreme principle “God.” Does this mean that a perfect philosopher is able to demonstrate that the creative God of the biblical traditions is not only revealed by inspired prophets but equally by the best of autonomously reconstructive and logically expert philosophers? Does “natural reason” reach as far in its conceptual and syllogistic endeavors as the faith of careful listeners to the Word of the revealing God?²

If philosophy is a rational enterprise that proceeds by undistorted evidence, accurate delineations, clear distinctions, categorical relations, predicative theses and correct arguments, the answer must be that the highest and ultimate, supreme and most originary, principle to be found within the horizon of such a philosopher’s universe is necessarily as finite as all other partaking entities of which that universe (for instance that of Spinoza or Hegel) is composed. For, *all* entities, *including* the highest, deepest, most basic, or “first,” that can be defined and distinguished from or contrasted with other, similarly defined, distinguished, and contrasted entities— including the highest, greatest, best or most beautiful one—are equally *limited* and *finite*. Even the unified and unifying togetherness of all such entities—their rationally justified totality—cannot constitute the creative source or pre-finite principle of this selfsame finite totality or “whole” (*das Ganze*). It is not enough to state that God cannot be captured as a phenomenon, because also God’s non-sensible but thinkable hiddenness resists the logical and ontological net that we, philosophers, throw out to capture and conceive of the initial Principle. God is neither *a* being—not even the first or most superlative supreme one—nor the *whole that gathers* all beings in itself, as if it were composed of them. Neither comparatives, nor superlatives (which are *higher, better, greater, or more* beautiful than all other very high, good, great, or beautiful beings that together compose one whole) can capture the God who transcends all finitude. Only if some kind of superlative can be so *absolute* that it can no longer be compared at all to any degree or ladder of degrees in goodness, beauty, greatness, highness or being, it might suffice for properly naming the Origin (or the “Father”) to whom Jews, Christians and Muslims direct their mind when praying. Can something equivalent to such a “*super-superlative*” *absolute* be found in philosophy?

² Cf., Adriaan Peperzak, “How Natural is Reason?” in *Philosophy & Theology*, 21(2009), n. 1-2, pp. 179-198.

4.

There is indeed a tradition of philosophical thought that points into the direction of the truly incomparable God; but this tradition is caught in an ongoing struggle with the question of its own (onto-)logical status. It is the tradition of Plato's astonishing affirmation according to which "the Good" (*to Agathon*, which is also "the Beautiful itself") transcends "being" (*ousia*) itself because it "gives" being to all that is (and also the *light* that both being and the knower's thinking need in order to constitute being's truth).³

It is easy to formulate objections against Plato's startling statement or to ignore it because not only *prima vista* but also while repeatedly meditating about it, it seems too incredibly unlogical, although the question of *why* the universe of beings exists and is as it is, inevitably points to another X than the universe itself. The least one can say about Plato's non-being super-absolute, which he calls "*the Good*," is that it "is" extremely paradoxical insofar as it seems to simultaneously negate and affirm that the Good itself somehow "is" (i.e., has or is some kind of being). And yet, the overwhelming enthusiasm with which such great classics of philosophy as Plotinus, Proclus, Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventura, Cusanus, Descartes, Leibniz and Kant have responded to Plato's rather prophetic than philosophical words about the Good that grants being and light, must give us pause. Plato's exhortation to look up to the "sun" of that which originates and sustains the being of all that is (*ta panta* as forming *to pan*) without being part of it, was accepted by thousands of philosophical and biblical theologians as a guiding devise for the unfolding of their onto-theo-logies. It took centuries before late-hellenist and medieval philosophers dared to identify "the Good" as "the Infinite," but once one has discovered that the ontological project itself necessarily leads to a relativization of its own parameters and method, the way is open for breaking out of the panoramic confinement of thought to the circle of finitude. This revolution obliges us to clarify, as much as possible, the relations between God's infinity and human finitude without treating these relations as if they were connections between mutually limiting realities that can be delineated, distinguished, defined and linked on the basis of their shared finitude.

If infinity radically separates itself from the total universe, whose finitude is demonstrated and expressed by its subordination to a logical network of definitions, distinctions, comparisons, categorical relations, predications, and syllogical conjunctions, the Infinite can no longer be treated as a member, a part, or even as the whole itself, like other components, parts, or totalities of the universe. It cannot occur or find a place besides, behind, within, above or underneath the universe, because the primary and ultimate meaning of the entire universe depends on it. The miniscule human philosopher-god, whose mind, from a presumably freestanding perspective, analyzes and recomposes the natural and human cosmos, might then discover that his all-encompassing intentions remain blind to the *absolute* and incomparable Superlative whose originary independence escapes all composition or

³ Cf., *Politeia* 508e-509, 517b-c, and *Symposium* 210e-211c. 6

complete self-unfolding of “the All” or the universe. Even a philosopher might learn that prayer—as outgoing form of looking, listening, and moving up—procures a more truthful and dynamic perspective, because it corresponds more adequately to the human drivenness, whose erotic pathos motivated Plato’s ascent and its many transformations into Christian itineraries of Desire.

If philosophy can discover God’s Infinity, we can understand that God is not merely greater, better, or more beautiful than the most brilliant and life-giving corporeal or spiritual sun or any other finite being. No astronomic, human, historical or angelic enormity or mystery can compete with the absolutely ir-representable and trans-conceptual Desideratum that transcends all comparatives. All comparatives, including all metaphorical ones, shrink then to the status of arrows that are sent from an infinitely far—but therefore also infinitely close and intimate—distance.

Being neither outside or inside, nor before or after or confined to the here and now of “all things,” God incomprehensibly dwells “in” all that is amazingly admirable and thus “more” overwhelming and “more” superlatively intimate in all that is not God but cannot exist without God’s simultaneously far off and immeasurably close presence-past-future. If this coincidence of far and close is understood, i.e., felt, imagined, pondered in meditation and activated through practical dedication, then we can convert *any* “thing” or aspect of our world and history into a metaphor of God, who faces us through and from within such a deficient but moving reference—without suppressing or jealously competing with any finite glory. If that is the metaphoric meaning of all faces and appearances that we encounter on earth, then we can sympathize with Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola when they find and sing of God as hiding and shining “in all realities” (*ta panta, omnia*).

But how could we then continue to reduce and obscure God’s *earthly* glory by sticking to our habit of talking about “all *things*”? Shouldn’t we rather emphasize our excitement about the absolutely and infinitely great, good, beautiful, and divine that somehow is masked in *all* that affects us as inhabited by and shining forth as revealing the Infinite itself?

5.

Philosophers have been accustomed for centuries to speculate about beings (*onta, entia*) and their being (*einai, esse*) in terms of “things” (*res*) or “objects”; but neither persons, nor thoughts, symphonies, prayers, animals, stars, mountains, storms, or winds are *things*. How poor and dull is the world of those who gather the wealth of this glorious universe by limiting its showing up (i.e., its phenomenality) to a display of “things” or objects! The biblical tradition was not only more poetic but also much wiser in evoking God as a person through such metaphors as father, lord, liberator, pastor, ally, lover, bridegroom, and so on. Although Western philosophy cannot be accused of neglecting the human soul—many treatises about pathos and affection, knowing and willing, consciousness, conscience, and self-consciousness testify to that constant interest—admirative study of many aspects that characterize the goodness and beauty of human personality and inter-personality seems to have been

postponed until the end of modernity. An accurate phenomenology of personal encounters, mutual perception and understanding, correspondence, competition, friendship, fighting, violence, and recognition has hardly begun. But especially the philosophy of religion and religious metaphors cannot do without a detailed phenomenology of personal encounters, facing, addressing, calling and responding, harming, forgiving, and so on. And not much pleading seems necessary for transforming the customary attention to “things” and the supremacy of scientific objectification into an attitude that allows the huge variety of surprising, admirable, lovable, enjoyable, and awesome or horrible and painful phenomena to tell us in their own “words” how they can and “want to” inspire our poetic, philosophical, but also our practical responses.

All “things” demand from us that we allow them to show and tell us about the fullness of their being: How do they exercise the “working” of their “energy”? Performing their phenomenality is a task that calls for our cooperation, however. By freeing their potential of showing the amazing authenticity of their own, they become and present *themselves* as eloquent metaphors of the infinite secret that hides and shines and faces us in them. Becoming fully what they are—great, good, beautiful—they shine forth as undoubtable signs and symbols—almost as eyes and voices—of the Incomparable. Despite their finitude, “all things”—persons, animals, trees and mountains—then transcend themselves by giving testimony to One who speaks in, through and as them. Transformed into addressing words, all figures become prophetic: God signifies as Word through them. Such power not only lifts and mobilizes earthly phenomena upward, but also invests them with a quasi-divine dignity.

That philosophers may learn from saints may here be illustrated by one very eloquent example among many others: Saint Francis’ poem on the natural and human elements that through his blessing change into the brotherly and sisterly presence of God on earth.

Higher than highest, all powerful, good Lord
All praise, glory, honor, and all blessing are yours.
To you alone they belong
and no human being is worthy to name you.

May you be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially master Sun, our brother,
who gives us the light of day—you illuminate us through him.
He is beautiful and radiant, with great splendor:
bearing your signification in him.

May you be praised, my Lord, *per*⁴ sister Moon and the stars;
You have formed them in the sky—lucid, gracious, and beautiful.

⁴ *Per* stands here for a combination of several prepositions: for, through, by, from within, by means of, masked and incognito as. See the following remarks.

May you be praised, my Lord, *per* brother Wind,
The Air and Clouds, clear and all kinds of Weather,
through whom you give your creatures their sustenance.

May you be praised, my Lord, *per* sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

May you be praised, my Lord, *per* brother Fire,
through (*per*) whom You illuminate the night:
he is beautiful and joyful, robust and strong.

May you be praised, my Lord, *per* our sister mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
producing a variety of fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

May you be praised, my Lord, *per* those who forgive out of love for you
and who endure sicknesses and troubles.
Blessed are those who persevere in peace,
Because they will be crowned by you, most High.

May you be praised, my Lord, *per* our sister corporeal Death,
from whom no human life can escape.
Woe to those who will die in mortal sin!
Blessed those whom Death will find in your holy will,
because the second death will not do any harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and bring him thanks
and serve him with great humility.

Although a worse anticlimax is perhaps not possible, I feel obliged to add a few remarks about the meaning of the Italian *per* that Francis uses here to indicate the role he attributes to all the nameable phenomena that he invites to participate in the universal chorus of praise to God. The *Cantico delle creature* cannot be restricted to a human eulogy that thanks and praises God *for* the precious gifts of which it enumerates some basic examples. Not only do we, sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, thank God for his creatures, whose metaphorical reference to the Source of all goodness and beauty we then recognize; *all* creatures *themselves* are associated with us as brotherly and sisterly singing one polyphonic *laudatio Dei*. Every phenomenon becomes a driven metaphor whose shining itself sings God's glory, while reminding us of our part in it. "Praised be God" is therefore not only meant to mobilize human subjects to thank God "for" good and beautiful creatures. These very creatures are invited as (quasi-)subjects to perform that task on their own by being and becoming more adequately what they are: God be praised *by* and *through* and *in* and *as* the good-and-beautiful they are. By writing a canticle of the *creatures*, Francis invites these earthly realities to join his praise of the Creator who bestows them with

generous and splendid varieties of their good and beautiful existence. They already have joined him by displaying not only their shining, nourishing, and healing grants, but also by their forgiving and pacifying patience. The praise to which they are called is therefore different from an all-human hymn of saying thanks to God for his admirable gifts to humanity. The meaning of the Italian word “per” that is repeated in each invocation to indicate the bond between God and his creatures (“*Laudato sie, mi Signore, per. . .*”) exceeds therefore the expression of our gratitude. We certainly must praise God because of all the goodness and beauty with which we are blessed, but the creatures themselves—even in their most elementary essence like water, air, earth, light, flowers, and fruits—are called to show that God’s presence in them have “lifted” them “up” to the level of telling, addressing, speaking, thanking and praising subjects of a universally shared liturgy. Similarly to the divinization of the human world in “the son of man,” God’s presence in the other participants of earthly life have received a voice for praising together with Francis, the choreographer, as brotherly and sisterly participants in one eulogy. Atoms and molecules, neutrons and electrons thus partake in one all-encompassing meaning that unifies all visible or thinkable “things.” The “*per*” that links the creatures with the Creator can thus neither be restricted to a “because of” (Be praised . . . “because you gave us. . .”), nor to a mediating “through” (May we praise you by recognizing and cherishing all phenomena, including our own existence, as metaphors of your abundant generosity toward humanity). We must accept and treat *all* that exists, each time in its own mode of being and working, as fraternally associated with us in the cosmic liturgy that accompanies the universe according to those who have perceptive ears.

We are not worthy to impose a name on God, but even so—while accepting the anonymity of that which transcends all identification—we can be part of a universal hymn in honor of the absolutely Superlative beyond comparison, whose unfathomable splendor accepts to be revered as presented in and as the most humble realities, like water and earth. For, *all* that is created “bears Your signification” (*porta significazione*). We do have names for these creatures and we will capitalize them (Sole, Luna, Stelle, Vento, Aqua, Terra, Foco, and so on) because all of them are metaphors of the Creator, who hides and shines in them.