



THE SUPREMACY OF GOD and the LOVE WITHIN GOD

Patrick Madigan*

Saint Louis University, USA.

*Corresponding Author

Patrick Madigan

Saint Louis University, USA.

Article History

Received: 07.04.2024

Accepted: 27.04.2024

Published: 15.05.2024

Abstract: The core of Christian theology can be expressed as a tension between two theological intuitions: God's supremacy, and his (contrary, but appropriate) love for his 'image' in Christ, and beyond him, in those humans who 'convert' and model themselves upon him. God is clearly supreme, but there is a 'love' within God that is not apparent at the outset, which means that, rather than being 'upright' and dominant, he is 'concave' and pregnant with an offspring that he loves from all eternity, the adequate expression or 'image' of himself that he loves supremely because he loves himself supremely, and who is the agency of, first, the creation of creatures sufficiently gifted with intellect and freedom to receive the imprint and respond to the offer of relationship with their ultimate source, and, secondly, to expend himself in an eventual but necessary (or eventually necessary) act of self-sacrifice and rescue that produces an even more spectacular, unexpected - almost contrary-to-his nature - expression and demonstration of the goodness out of which he creates the world in the first place. The intensity of the goodness that is God and out of which he operates could not have been adequately guessed or accurately estimated apart from these demonstrations of it in creation and redemption. With these consequences of it and evidence for it lying now all about us, we are without excuse. The 'ball is now in our court', so to speak.

Keywords: Classical Theology, Suffering God, Adequate Cause, Jewish Rejection.

Cite this article:

Madigan, P., (2024). THE SUPREMACY OF GOD and the LOVE WITHIN GOD. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(5), 14-15.

Introduction

The conceptual difficulty to accepting – or even formulating - Christian doctrine at its inception came from its novel proclamation and subsequently central claim that the divine suffered. If you say it enough times, this becomes familiar, but such did not take away its conceptual difficulties for its first audience. In the ancient world, gods don't suffer. You will go a long way in the stories and doctrines of the ancient world before you find a god who suffers. The one exception is Dionysius, the fertility god, who each year is born in the spring, grows over the summer, matures in the autumn, and dies with the chills of winter – to be born again the following spring. This is his appointed task, and he approaches eternity by carrying it out effectively without fail, year after year. Like all the gods, he imitates eternity as best he can. Gods rule, gods triumph, gods are lords – but gods do not suffer – that is not the conceptual task they are entrusted with nor the narrative 'work' they are given in a story to carry out. One god can be 'over' or 'under' another god in a hierarchy, but then both 'rule', the one over the other - perhaps in a 'family' of gods, or after one god has 'defeated' another in a battle between their two 'peoples'. Gods always stand 'upright' – dominant – even if they are subordinated to another god or have endured defeat by him.

One reason for this inflexibility is the gods' association with the stars. Things on earth change, but stars do not change. The first theologies developed in the Middle East which has predominantly a dry climate – ideal for star gazing and the development of a surprisingly expert astronomy – the two were considered identical and interchangeable. Hercules was a 'hero', and for his outstanding accomplishments at his death he was lifted up as a constellation. There was much cultural prestige associated with making more accurate predictions about the location and movements of the stars – predicting eclipses and the like – as with the three 'wise men' who come from the East seeking news about a new 'King of the Jews', because they have 'seen his star' in the East. Stars don't change, and compared to us, gods do not change. In the ancient world the 'lower' attends and obeys the 'higher'; the 'higher' never inclines, stoops or bows to the lower. Whatever else happens, this stays the same.

The chief thing people noticed about Jesus as a candidate to be the 'Messiah' or 'Anointed One' (new 'Moses' who would restore Israel) was that he had been killed – in fact, he was executed. This was not an auspicious beginning for a theology. Almost the whole of 'Christian Theology' came out of the

paradoxical claim that in Christ, 'God suffered.' For the ancient mentality this doesn't make sense. That's not what gods are for. They are for something, but that's not it. They are for triumph and victory, not for defeat. Against ancient assumptions, this was worse than a blasphemy, it was virtually a contradiction in terms.

Plausibly, the creator would have to prepare for the eventuality that at least a certain percentage of creation would decline or reject the invitation to a proper relationship with its creator (most likely almost everyone at different times). If creatures are spread out in time and can 'repent' of earlier mistakes, this creates narrative 'room' for a rescue mission by the Father to offer such a 'second' decision, after an appropriate experience of the consequences of declining the first. This could plausibly produce as well as make acceptable the 'scandal' of a 'suffering god' in the career, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thereby the Christian god is not limited to 'triumphing' or 'ruling', that defines and exhausts the classical theistic repertoire. The Judaeo-Christian God is bent, concave, or 'pregnant' with the Christ, the adequate 'mirror' of the initial divine nature with which God falls in love, but this time with the capacity and willingness to agency to demonstrate this supra-classical divine goodness against a new background or on a new stage after the initial (partial) negative reception by free creation. Jesus is like the bound Isaac whom Abraham takes out for the all-important sacrifice, as willing to carry out God's own mission for him in a later or subsequent phase; it is 'god-himself-in- mission – being consistent with himself in a new extension prompted by unusual circumstances created by the initial (negative) reception as a not-surprising consequence of the gift of freedom. Christ is that part of God's self willing to go out in the mission of rescuing those who can be rescued, at the price of God's demonstrating the extent of his goodness through his willingness to engage in the unanticipated and 'un-divine activity' of suffering in order to forestall and preempt a final human rejection, to keep open the possibility of redemption for those willing to turn back and be 'reconstituted' by a second 'imprint' of their divine source, this time in an act of conscious repentance and redemption. This is the extraordinary, non-classical act on God's part. Prometheus brought fire down from heaven, which was a great blessing. Christ goes further; he offers us the permanent possibility of arguing that our earlier (guilty) self was in fact not our 'true' self – who as it happens, is here present. Who would not accept a judicial process with such generous rules? So this is why, where and how suffering enters into the Christian divine constitution – holding open the initial offer of 'salvation' and relation with God even after its initial rejection.

Judaism of course demurred and eventually declined to accept Jesus as the Messiah, which means it declined to include suffering as a key part of God's nature. He wasn't the kind of messiah they were looking for. They remained, for the most part, wedded to the 'classical' conventions of divine goodness – might,

power, lordship, strength and victory. God leads and dictates, the people hear and obey. God shows patience with his wayward and recalcitrant people, but this is limited and punished with repeated chastisements – floods, defeat, exile. Judaism never abandoned its covert ambition to become 'a great power' – similar to God in his 'classical' dress. We are so used to hearing Judaism list its 'woes' that we forget how often it interpreted its privileged status as the recipient of a 'unique covenant' with God, that we understate or overlook how often Israel interpreted this covenant as placing front and center God's promise to make Israel a 'great nation' – impressive in the same ways as the other 'great nations' of the day – Egypt, Babylon, etc. – in fact, the supreme state towards which all the other nations of the world would one day come 'streaming'. This was unrealistic megalomania on Israel's part. There was no way Israel could compete with the resources of the Nile river or the Tigris-Euphrates complex. The Old Testament regularly inflates Israel's modest size and regional success. In its various defeats and exiles, on the other hand, we see Israel as a dependent 'buffer' between empires east and west, constantly under pressure to enter into dangerous coalitions on pain of disappearing altogether. Yet Israel loved to fantasize that God loved Israel so uniquely that he would lift her up and make her the equal of such mighty powers! In the light of day, however, the fantasy it would not abandon voluntarily, it soon lost involuntarily. After its several wars with Rome, Israel lost king and land; the Law alone remained as a legacy – much of it pertaining to a no longer existent temple. Christianity during its formative period could not entertain such a pipe dream, so this temptation was removed. Christ rode into Jerusalem on a prophetic donkey rather than a Davidic stallion. He did come to 'restore the kingdom of Israel', but in a sense different from the way the majority imagined. When he ultimately received a crown, it would be a crown of thorns. For the Jews the 'great deed of God' on behalf of the Jewish people was Moses' drowning of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. That is how we are 'saved'. For the Christians, it is Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Jesus was distinctive and shocking in calling the Jewish God 'my Father', and replaced the edifice of covenant and Temple law with parables that called people to personal transformation, rather than fixed adherence to an external standard, that was often difficult to discover. There was a 'down-scaling' of religious ambitions from the national to the personal, an internalization and inversion of external legal emphases to what meets the other's need. Jesus did not dwell upon status or ceremony; he scrapped the covenant as a political document, substituting a personal relationship in prayer for its codicils and requirements, and sought healing and equality rather than victory and preeminence as signs of God's presence and concern. One should be ready to inconvenience oneself to rectify a situation or raise a burden, rather than file a claim for religio-cultural-historical recognition. Let the rest care for itself.