

The God Question

Colleagues,

One of my Schroeder nephews, an M.D., has an associate who asks theological questions. Recently he sent me the last batch of such questions. He wasn't actually asking for help, he said, but wondered what Uncle Ed might say. Here are the questions (the numbered paragraphs), and here's what I said. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The God question

1. Does he physically exist?—Is he actually made up of matter, of cells, molecules or atoms? Is it possible to see, hear, touch, taste or smell him?

In the Biblical tradition the word "God" is the term for "Power" folks perceive to be impacting their lives. No wonder the ancients called the sun a god, sex too, war too, etc. They are powers people experienced. Powers are mysterious. Always were, still are. Some powers cause marvel, others terror, some both: Atomic internal combustion within the sun, a sprouting plant, rushing water, sex "drives," SARS, AIDS, carcinoma, death. Opening words in the Book of Genesis set the pattern. "In the beginning . . . God created heaven and earth. Here's how it went: God as RUACH [Hebrew for "wind" (also Spirit, Ghost, GUST = Power) was blowing over the chaos...." Today we say Big Bang. In both cases that's Power. Is Big Bang

(or inflation, or strings) any less mysterious? Hardly. Mysterious power created the universe.

2. Is he alive, a living being? – Does he have biological processes? Genes? Chromosomes? Can he die?

Biblical tradition: THE true God is the Power behind the powers that we know impact us. Liturgical form of that is “King of (other) kings, Lord of (other) lords.” OT term “Yahweh” (the personal name for that power in Hebrew scriptures) = “whoever it was, whose ever power it was, that got us out of Egypt.” NT variation on that is: “Whoever it was that overcame the POWER of death and brought Jesus back from the grave.” Does Power have being? I guess so. Is power “a” being? Some are, some aren’t. Biological? Some are. God is not “confined” to that form of being in Christian theology. For the Greeks the gods were by definition im-mortal. Not so in Christian theology—at least for the second person of the Trinity. But that mortality on his part was not intrinsic in the Son’s god-ness. He assumed human form, we say, and thus assumed mortality as well. But the “biggie” in all this is not divine physics or biology, but that it was done “for us and for our salvation.”

3. Is he a sentient being? Can he see, hear, feel, taste, or smell? If so, does he have eyes, ears, nose, etc?

Biblical imagery often used “person” language for “God-as-power,” so such metaphors abound, analogous to the qualities of human persons mentioned in the question. Helpful for dealing with that, ala Paul Ricoeur, is the “second naivete.” Not “first” naivete where God “really” has fingers, but a second naivete using metaphors for speaking of mystery. God a person? Yes and no. Most likely

not in the manner humans perceive themselves as persons (by which we usually mean personalities). But if “person” indicates someone capable of generating initiatives, addressing others, making claims on others, interacting with others, and capable of responding and receiving responses and processing them, then person categories “fit” the power Christians call God. Even with other powers, it does seem now and again that the powers we experience are “somebody” addressing us. Like death, for instance. Why me? we ask.

4. He is always referred to as “he.” Is he male, does he have a penis or a y chromosome?

Powers as we experience them (usually) don’t have gender. Electricity, atomic explosions, biological pressures within us, etc. But in image language they may. Yet in different cultures they differ. The sun is masculine in Greek, feminine in German. Biblical metaphors for God come in both masculine and feminine formats. Image-ing a personal address coming from a power who is genderless is difficult for lots of folks. So gender as metaphor, yes, but not constitutive.

5. He is referred to as intelligent—does he have a brain?

Your reference to “he” as though there is only ONE god (power) encountering us in our lives is misleading. Gods (=powers plural) abound. That’s why the Hindus can claim that there are millions of them. So it depends on which of these “powers” you’re talking about. Zeus, Aphrodite, Baal, Yahweh, the one Jesus addresses as “Abba.” Their name is legion. Question: is there a “GOD of gods, a LORD of lords, a KING of kings?” The Biblical religions—Christianity and Judaism—and even Islam—say Yes. Other

religions say No. You have to choose. Brain? Probably not the sort of grey-matter in humans. But if "intelligence" is needed for being an active agent, then yes. Might be a totally wireless super computer—but with a twist! Possible new element in today's discussion about God is "information." Not just "what information might God possibly know?" But what information does he have on us?

6. Is he out there some where? Where?

Power is present wherever it operates. Some sense it in more "places" than other folks do. Ditto for all the power(s) called god(s). Ditto for the GOD of all the other gods. First OT image—in the Genesis creation stories—is that God is distinct from his creation—creator not creature—but that God is present within his creation. God "walks in Adam and Eve's garden at the time of the evening breeze."

7. He is said to "exist"—So, if he does not physically exist, HOW does he exist?— as an abstract concept? How do you define existence? Does an abstract concept exist?

Powers exist both as experienced realities and as abstract terms that we can talk about—as I am doing here. Ditto for atomic energy. Whether abstract concepts exist is the old scholastic debate between the nominalists and the realists. The latter said they "really" did exist, the former said only the names (nomina) existed. That's a bigger conversation than I can enter here.

8. How can an abstract concept perform miracles or have knowledge or morals or power?

Right. So the power Christians designate as God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is something else than abstract.

9. Or, if he is neither a physical being NOR an abstract concept, what exactly is he? A supernatural being that has no physical existence? (in which case how can he be a being if he has no existence—that is a direct contradiction) Does his existence abide by the rules of nature (physics etc) that are true on earth as well as other planets and galaxies, and presumably the whole universe?

I think I've addressed that above already. My point is God is a name for POWER. Powers are many. Their name is legion. Conversation needs to specify which one you want to talk about. Christian God-power-talk is about "whoever it was that raised Jesus from the dead." "Supernatural beings" is a Greek way of talking about gods. The term SUPER-nature signals their location and their freedom from what are the rules and regulations "down here" in nature. Still these powers are experienced down here on the ground by folks. Though they are "supra," above the natural world, they do now and then "come down" from Olympus to assist/interfere with the affairs of humans.

Not so, the Biblical tradition. Here THE deity is Creator, thus distinct from creation, but constantly linked to it relationally. So God, distinct from creation, is at the same time regularly "walking in the garden" encountering the creatures. Encountering especially the human creatures and "calling" them to respond (and to respons-ibility)—most frequently through the mediation of other humans. So from the git-go in Genesis, humans are "images (=mirrors) of God" in this yin-yang process of divine address and human response.

10. If the answer is beyond the scope of human understanding, or he exists in another dimension that we humans and other

earthlings do not experience (a parallel universe type of concept), then that means humans can not see, hear, smell, (etc) him, and therefore cannot describe him or his characteristics or his nature, so why do humans believe he exists? Where did humans get their information about him? Where did the idea of him even come from?

“Revelation” is the fancy word in most all differing religions for getting signals about gods. But in the Christian faith it is not seen as the opening of heaven with info poured down. Initially “revelation” amounts to “naming” the powers we encounter in our lived-experience and interpreting them as they relate to us. Then (esp. in the Christian tradition) linking these powers encountered in lived-experience to the Power behind all the powers as that Power relates to us. Such experiences are at best a mixed bag. Hard to tell from them if this Power is for us or against us. When that power finally allows death’s power—maybe even sends it—to have the last word about us, such revelation is NOT good news. Au contraire the “second revelation,” Jesus as “revelation” of God. Although the “power” paradigm applies here as well, it’s different power. He was experienced as a strange power in the lives of his contemporaries—fundamentally the power of mercy and forgiveness, and not the power that paid folks off with their just deserts. He claimed—and they believed him!—to be coming from the same Power who held them all accountable for their shortfalls. Especially their shortfalls in carrying out their “image of God” assignments. As they subsequently told others what had happened to them, the process replicated—and curiously (mysteriously?) continues to be experienced by and through the community that follows him ever since—both in their liturgy and their daily lives. Mystery abounds, but reality too.

11. Is he all knowing, all powerful and all good like some say? If so, why is there pain and suffering and evil in the world?

All-knowing, all-powerful, and other “omni” adjectives are more at home in Greek theology than in Christian God-talk, although they often have been imported from the Greeks into Christian God-rhetoric. Omni-language for God is “at home” in Greek religion where the deities are “super” to us humans, and therefore omni-this and omni-that when compared with us humans who are finite, and not omni at all—limited-this and limited-that. There are two different ways to pose the problem of Evil in the world. One is the way your question does. Basically, “Where does evil come from?” For which different religions give different answers. Biblical tradition speaks of a “mystery of wickedness” (perceived destructive power with origins unclear) and thus has no specific answer to THIS FORM of the question of evil. But that is not all it says, though the word mystery is important here. Like other “powers” evil too is lived-experience, but seldom fully explicable.

Another way to pose the question: Suppose you approach the “problem of evil” this way: Can evil be overcome, specifically can MY experience of its power(s) be overcome? Then the Christian message has an explicit answer. It’s that “second revelation” mentioned above. This second form of the question of evil is usually the question people “really” are asking, when evil becomes existential. Can the evil I am experiencing—inside or outside—be overcome? Are there resources for me to cope with the mystery-of-evil that tyrannizes me? To that the Christian Gospel says a big “Yes.” When the Christian answer to that experience of evil “clicks” for such

folks, the earlier question: where does it come from? loses significance. Though the origins of evil remain a mystery, though personal struggle with evil continue, its fangs are removed.

12. If he exists, why doesn't he make himself readily apparent and visible to earthlings? Why does he hide?

Depends on where you are looking—and for what. One of the central items of Luther's theology, vexed as he too was by these very questions, is his "Aha!" about the paradox of God-hidden and God-unveiled. If the data you are looking at are stuff of the "first revelation," then the results are murky. God, though patently in the mix, is indeed "hiding." Specifically hidden in these data is whether God's last word for me is benign. In the second revelation, so claim Christians, God is "perfectly clear." It's all about mercy. It's the Jesus story. But that's another full essay. Very relevant, though, to this discussion.