



## The Vision of God and its Impact on the Educational Process

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### 1 Introduction

In the educational process the authority and power of the teacher are crucial factors. So whatever religion one adheres to, the image of God is of fundamental importance for one's pedagogical approach. Hanan A. Alexander has recently explored the significance of this for Judaism in his article 'God as Teacher: Jewish Reflections on a Theology of Pedagogy' (*Journal of Beliefs and Values* Vol 22(1) April 2001, pp. 5-17). First I will outline his main contentions and then consider how they may be relevant to or in need of adjustment for a Christian theology of pedagogy.

### 2 A Jewish Perspective

In Judaism God is the ultimate role model - a holy God demands a holy people - a moral God requires Abraham to adopt his moral code. More significantly the rabbis envisioned God in their own image as a 'talmid hakham', i.e. both as student and teacher. God in midrashic Judaism is the eternal student who learns with Israel. The creator even studies the halakhah. The rabbinic teacher represents God both symbolically, by imitating Divine behaviour, and pedagogically, by leading students to understand and embrace Divine teachings. The tradition received at Sinai is Torah which literally means instruction or teaching, thus indicating a pedagogic aspect of the divine personality. Even the 'Shema' (Deuteronomy 6:4-8) has an educational orientation. The prescribed love of God requires taking to heart his words, impressing them upon one's children, reciting them, binding them as a sign on your person and your house. To adhere to the words of the 'Shema' is not only to follow Divine teaching, but also to imitate God as teacher. All this is predicated upon God's deliverance, redemption from Egypt and revelation at Sinai.

## 2.1 Divine Pedagogy

Two aspects of the Divine pedagogy are noteworthy. *First it is dialogical*

. Children's questions are central in remembering the Exodus and Passover. The question and answer format appears in Exodus: "And when your children ask you what do you mean by this rite ? you shall say..." (12:26-27). The asking of questions became so essential that the liturgy for Passover eve was built around four mandatory questions following the Exodus pattern. The dialogue of the Passover Seder is illustrative of the entire rabbinic pedagogic tradition, and the whole of the Talmud is built around the give and take of asking questions and positing answers among students and teachers. Indeed dialogue is essential to the Divine human encounter. There are biblical examples of this dialogical pedagogy, e.g., when God asks Adam in the Garden of Eden 'Where are you?' or when he asks Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' Moreover, this dialogue is not one sided. Humans can also initiate it - both Abraham and Moses question God and God may even change his mind as a result.

*Secondly Divine pedagogy is not only dialogical, it is also relational*

. The command to love God should be understood as responding to God's prior caring like that of a parent or teacher. The redemption and revelation of God were unsolicited acts of love that preceded the expectation of reciprocity. God's love is neither calculated nor utilitarian but unconditional. 'It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, indeed you are the smallest of peoples (Deut.7:7-8). God's concern for Israel is demonstrated by the gift of Torah; in response Israel is obliged to receive that gift and reciprocate by adhering to Divine instruction. This relational aspect is fundamental to the understanding of authority and obligation. Divine authority is not coercive as is often supposed. God does not force the Israelites to obey - to enforce compliance would deny the very idea of Torah as both law and instruction since the free will of those called to observe it is presupposed in, and essential to, a norm or any teaching. Coercive power and moral authority should be clearly distinguished. Power works from the outside in, but authority works from the inside out. Exercising coercive power is a good way to lose authority - to engage in power struggles with children or students results in certain failure. When we resort to coercive power, we leave children with little choice but to rebel in order to exercise their own autonomy and forge their own identities. Since it is cultivated from within, moral authority is fostered by relationships in which feelings are shaped by the caring of one person for another, even though the relation may be asymmetric as with God and Israel. God's caring for Israel does not call for an equivalent act of caring toward God by Israel in return. It calls for another appropriate response, that of the one-cared-for. In the fullness of a caring relation the child cared-for feels free to respond as herself, to create, to follow her interest without fear or anxiety. Her response is thus not precisely predictable, nor even visibly related to the input of the carer but will represent a happy outgrowth in genuine reciprocity as one who feels free.

The emphasis on dialogue and questioning noted above rules out any mere blind or unthinking acceptance of Torah, antithetical to the very meaning of divine authority as conceived here. For a teaching to become mine, I must understand it and be able to interpret and apply it to my situation. This does not mean that there is no role for rote learning in Divine pedagogy. The 'Shema' states clearly that its precepts are to be continually recited even if they are not understood. But in the end mechanical or rote learning accomplished by means of training can only be justified when it leads to teaching and thus participates in the process of moral development. Indeed if training continues when teaching is in order it can become indoctrination; instead of empowering students with the capacity to act independently on the basis of their own understanding, in such a case, unintelligent and mechanical responses continue to be required thus thwarting moral development.

## 2.2 The Implications of God as Student and Teacher

If we take seriously the metaphor of God as teacher this can be understood as the basis for a significant tradition in which to ground the norms of teaching. God in this theology, is the ultimate role model who

enacts in deeds the words of Torah. The divine pedagogy is not didactic but dialogical, encouraging questions, embracing challenges and permitting discovery in a caring relationship with students in which instruction in a vision of the good life is lovingly offered. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah), not an abstract concept but a living being, not perfect but a God who learns and teaches. This contrasts strongly with Anselm's description 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived', involving absolutes such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence etc. If God as teacher is a moral agent, moral agency requires fallibility. To take one example, if God were all-knowing then it would be impossible for students to discover anything new. There would be no reason to challenge or question God as teacher because it would be supposed that God had all the truth already. Questions could only be for purposes of clarification, never discovery; and no form of reciprocity would be possible since there is nothing God requires in return from the learner.

If the goal of teaching is to evoke the appropriate response from the one taught and cared for, that is to lead them to discover their best selves - the person one was meant to be - within the communal and moral framework provided by God's Torah, then God as teacher must be a good, not a perfect being, who is able to teach us by example to learn from our mistakes and return to the right path. That we can learn from our mistakes and chart the course of our own lives is probably the most radical of all Jewish ideas. It is a precondition for any coherent account of teaching and learning and should stand at the heart of all educational theory.

### 3 A Response from a Christian Perspective

Despite frequent emphasis in Christianity on its radical newness, much of what has been outlined above is also valid for a Christian theology of pedagogy. The continuity obvious at certain points goes much deeper than is often perceived and what is presumed to be distinctly Christian, on examination proves to be Judeo-Christian. In fact there is little in the previous section that most Christian educationalists could not affirm. I will therefore limit myself to a few brief comments where emphasis may be rather different.

The most significant factor in the Christian vision of God is its Christological focus. In Christian thinking imitating Christ is an adaptation of imitating God. This should be understood in Paul's formula 'imitate me in as much as I imitate Christ'. Christians assume that obedience to Christ's commands and discipleship in accordance with his teaching is in effect the equivalent of adapting life and teaching to God as the ultimate role model. It is not envisaged that there would be conflict between Christ as role model and God as role model. Christians might argue that the mediation of Christ assists conformity to God's will in human terms and clarifies the obligations of believers. It has not always been clear, however, that following Christ is radically different from copying Christ and some traditions have become outmoded and irrelevant because they did not allow their faith to adjust to changing life patterns. One result of this was a dead orthodoxy with little fresh thinking; another was that a gap opened up between adult believers and their children to whom outmoded answers were presented for acceptance.

In terms of human response, Christianity has not developed fully the dialogical emphasis present in Judaism. This is partly because of an emphasis on Divine sovereignty in the salvation process which tends to make humans more passive, as if faith and passivity were identical. This was most clearly exemplified in the worst examples of predestinarian theology. The Jewish emphasis on faith leading to action, and faith in action might be a useful corrective here; Divine initiative should not be mistakenly regarded as limiting or not requiring active human response. Faith leading to understanding through inquiry is a basic requirement for Christian education.

The Christian emphasis on fulfilment of God's promises through Christ has doubtless given Christians confidence and hope for the future and is an important aspect of Christian belief. Despite this it must be acknowledged that this realized eschatology can and has led to an uncritical complacency with the present state of society, as if individual salvation and security were the answer to all of this world's problems. ~~Another aspect of the above emphasis is that it has resulted in an exaggerated concern with correct~~

doctrines rather than with appropriate actions. Doctrines too can be learned and meaninglessly repeated without proper understanding. Knowledge as abstract truth divorced from life has sometimes dominated in Christian thought due to texts such as 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:32). Christians historically seem to have had difficulty in humbly admitting to limits to their knowledge as well as to their freedom. People who consider they already possess the answer to all ultimate questions make very poor students and have little respect for the educational process, as well as for human freedom generally.

Educationally speaking, the great advantage of our contemporary multi-faith world is that we need not be in competition with each other in the learning process. On the contrary, we can learn from each other's insights and experiences to our mutual advantage. An emphasis upon communal, relational and dialogical aspects of learning in a spirit of open inquiry would seem to be absolutely essential to a good education in the two faiths discussed here. Even though we recognize that our thinking, our culture, and our educational perspectives have been shaped by the particular religious traditions out of which we come, the educational process demands that we learn in and through comparison of differing patterns of thought. This will not lead to one universal norm for education, but it will contribute to true learning and mutual understanding. It may indeed result in an enhanced respect for, and a willingness to critically reconsider, our own educational traditions.

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Created on: April 17th 2007

Updated on: May 18th 2007