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At the Foot of Babel: Disclosure and Concealment

Ted Peters

Does this uncanny capacity to speak lead the human race into Babel's confusion? Or, does it lead us beyond Babel to clarification?

When it comes to God-language, it appears that God's unsearchable mystery renders all language about God only babble. God is nameless. We can address God or refer to God only via symbols, via multi-valent symbols that both connect us with God yet protect God from total disclosure.

Just as a catalyst prompts a chemical reaction, the symbol of God prompts a transformation of the human soul. Divine symbols deepen and enrich the consciousness of the inner self. Coming to know God reorients the mind and inspires both self-transformation and world-transformation.

At the foot of Babel, we will open our ears to symbolic speech. If we listen carefully, perhaps we will still hear the voice of God. What that divine voice says will both reveal and conceal, both disclose and confuse, both objectify and subjectify. Through the multi-valent symbol, the beyond will become intimate to our very soul.

1 Does Language Clarify or Confuse?

The name plates on San Francisco police officer shirts are bilingual. If the officer speaks English plus Spanish or Chinese, the name plate announces this. This practice reduces confusion in conversation. It makes persons whose second language is English feel more at home with Officer Friendly.

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I wonder if San Francisco police are upsetting God? After all, God likes the idea of human confusion. At Babel, “the LORD confused the language of all the earth” (Gen 11:9). Why? Because confusing language prevents storming heaven by building towers from below. Evidently, God wants to protect heaven from earth. God wants to protect transcendent mystery from mundane comprehension. Confusing language protects the divine mystery from penetration.

When later in the Hebrew Bible Moses asked God for a name, God refused. How did God answer? Very cleverly indeed! In Hebrew the response is: אֲהִי־אֲשֶׁר־אֲהִי, *ehyeh asher 'ehyeh* (Ex 3:14). We translate it: “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” We are working here with the first person of the verb “to be.” When we stop quoting the voice and render what is said in the third-person imperfect causative intensive, we get the Tetragrammaton, יְהוָה, which is usually translated “he is”, “he will be,” or “he will cause to be.” On strict grammatical grounds, the third person form of the “I am” can be rendered in either gender or in the neuter, he, or she, or it is. In short, God successfully left Moses and the rest of us with linguistic confusion.

The being of our mysterious God lies beyond language. It lies beyond description, beyond codification, beyond proposition, beyond dogmatic formulation. The beyondness of the divine reality is present to our awareness, to be sure. Yet, like a squirming eel, God is elusive when we try to grab the divine with diction and grammar.

There are two points for the theologian to keep in mind. First, as Dialog editor Kristian Johnston Largen observes, “It is God first and foremost who makes knowledge of God possible” (Largen, 2013, 133). Second, as twentieth century Lundensian theologian Gustaf Aulen observes, “revelation does not remove the mysteriousness” (Aulen, 1960, 83). The revealed God remains the mysterious God.

2 The Axial Beyond Becomes Intimate

This squirmy and elusive divine presence revealed itself paradoxically in multiple locations amidst the axial period during the first millennium before the common era. The monotheistic traditions [Hebraic religion, Christianity, and Islam] as well as the Dharma traditions [Brahmanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism] plus Chinese traditions [Daoism and perhaps Confucianism] underwent a shock to human consciousness by the invading presence of a transcendent and ineffable ultimacy. Ultimate reality, divine or not, confronts human consciousness with a presence that defies linguistic naming or even description. The divine remains mysterious even in revelation.

What our mysterious and transcendent God seems to allow are symbols. Symbols resonate at that intersection of the beyond and the intimate, the transcendent and the immanent, the ultimate and the mundane. When the symbol takes metaphorical form, the divine mystery is described as both like and unlike what is familiar.

Even more importantly, the divine is present when the symbol is present. This is the case even if the divine is incomprehensible. “The symbol represents something which is not itself, for which it stands and in the power and meaning of which it participates” (Tillich, 1989b, 397). The symbol marks the door where the God of the beyond is knocking, where the divine is on the threshold of entering the mundane.

Perhaps we can say still more. When God actively engages in self-revelation that both discloses and conceals, perhaps God is initiating a sharing of consciousness with us in the human race. This is suggested by Binoy Pichalakkatt, mathematician and theologian in Pune, India. “In symbols reality becomes aware of itself and mirrors itself. . . . If we want to understand the wholeness of reality we have to search for a symbol that represents and participates in this wholeness. To understand reality we need the vision of the whole” (Pichalakkatt, 2006, 26). In response to divine self-disclosure, the theologian tries to construct a vision of the whole of reality.

3 Awareness of the Beyond

Our awareness of the divine beyond language is not natural. It’s not built into our nature. Rather, it’s historical. This awareness grew during a specific epoch, a period of history. We call that period the Axial Breakthrough (Jaspers, 1953). The axial period occurred about two and a half millennia ago in China, India, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Israel. The experience of Moses with the unnamed God fits within the axial epoch (Voegelin, 1956–1987).

Where does this awareness of the beyond dawn? Within the human soul. The beyond becomes intimate. Awareness of the transcendent divine revolutionizes our anthropology, our self-understanding.

Here is one implication: we who live within mundane history become equalized. Confrontation with the beyond equalizes all of us living in this ordinary world. No longer can we justify a human hierarchy according to which the king is more divine than the people over whom he rules. Every individual has equal access to transcendence through his or her or their own psyche, their own inner soul. What gets born during the axial age for the first time is a glimpse into a new social truth, namely, there is but one human race to which every soul is an equal member.

What theologians today think of as transcendental awareness dawned on human consciousness during the city-state period of human history two and a half millennia ago. Awareness of an ultimate healing beyond the fractures of mundane living led to a sense of judgment, a condemnation of injustice, violence, and war. When measured over against the divine order, the human order we live in was judged to be futile. Daily injustice became measured against eternal justice.

Human history gained a new interpretation in light of the axial insight. According to post-axial consciousness, human history became thought of as the quest for a final ordering of life that would establish eternal justice, peace, and unity. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Central to the theme of this article is the following: it is the symbol that connects the beyond with the intimate. The symbol, writes theologian Paul Tillich, “opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us...[and] also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality” (Tillich, 1989a, 251). The symbol of the will of heaven for Confucius or the kingdom of God for Jesus provide the mundane mind with a heavenly map of the just social order.

4 Transcendent Justice and the Universal *Humanum*

Justice gains transcendental grounding because of the axial breakthrough. Every soul is judged by the same divine criterion. The biblical Torah of ancient Israel reports God’s demand: Deuteronomy 16:19–20: “You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.” Or, in the words of Plato in Greece: “Communion and friendship and orderliness and temperance and justice bind together heaven and earth and gods and men, and that this universe is therefore called Cosmos or order” (Plato, 1891).

Awareness of the beyond gains traction in the daily social order through the construction of a vision of an ideal social order. Because every individual soul has immediate access to the beyond, every individual soul is equal before the ultimate. This gives birth to a new ideal: a single universal human race. Human unity trumps clan or tribal identity.

The modern notion of a universal *humanum* governed by a transcendent criterion of justice is not something articulated by our pre-axial Neolithic ancestors. The concept of a universal humanity made up of equal persons governed by justice took hold during a specific epoch within history, the axial epoch.

To say it another way, this transcendental insight shed new light on the human condition in the recorded ruminations of Confucius, Laozi (Lao Tzu), the Upanishadic Brahmins, the Buddha, Zoroaster, the Hebrew prophets, and Plato. Whether theists or non-theists, these thinkers cultivated belief in a transcendent moral order and transcendent ground for human reasoning that is trans-tribal and universal in scope. In some instances, this breakthrough became the basis upon which the world’s great religious traditions were constructed. Each of these so-called higher religions make universal claims, placing local ethnic identities within a growing sense that there exists a single universal humanity.

In sum, the divine transcendent exhibited two qualities important to the axial experience. First, the transcendent comes to us from the beyond. Ultimate reality is beyond form, beyond language, and beyond thought. Second, the transcendent represents a new order, an eternal order by which all temporal orders are judged to be deficient. This is how the beyond takes on moral or ethical valence in guiding the social order.

5 Speaking About the Ineffable Beyond

If we rocket up from the Tower of Babel to the stratosphere above all language, we become aware of the beyond without being able to capture it propositionally. This is due to the axial insight, remembered by philosopher of religion John Hick. “All the great world faiths affirm, in their different ways, the indescribable nature of the ultimate” (Hick 2010, 164).

Indescribability is what Laozi (601–531 BCE) described when opening his treatise, the *Daodejing*, the principal work of Daoism. Laozi asserts that the Dao is beyond naming. To name anything is to distinguish it from everything else that has a different name. By denying a name to the Dao, Laozi asserts that the Dao is undifferentiated. As both undifferentiated and total in its reality, the Dao is inclusive of all that is real. “The Dao, considered unchanging, has no name” (*Dao Te Ching* 32:1), he writes. The Dao is “formless, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted).. .. I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Dao (the Way or Course).. .. I call it The Great” (*Dao Te Ching* 25:1 and 2).

But we must use some words, right? So, Laozi concedes that he must do something linguistically. He decides to describe the Dao metaphorically as the mother of all things. “It may be regarded as the Mother of all things” (*Dao Te Ching* 25:2). Literally, the Dao has no name. Metaphorically, the Dao is the mother of all things. Conceptually, “*Tao is the way of ultimate reality*,” comments the renowned scholar of world religions, Huston Smith (Smith 1991, 198). Over against the Dao, every one of us stands equally humbled.

6 The Primacy of Scriptural Metaphors and Symbols

What does this imply for the theologian? My answer, I hope, will be illuminative for theologians in any of the post-axial traditions, even though my answer is derived from the Western history of biblical interpretation.

Here is the first and most significant principle: theology as formulating rational propositions should be considered second-order discourse.¹ The symbolic language of the sacred text constitutes first-order discourse. Theology, as second-order discourse, reflects rationally on the symbolic discourse found in scripture.²

¹“Systematic theological analogical language...is a second order reflective language re-expressing the meanings of the originating religious event and its original religious language to and for a reflective mind” (Tracy, 1981, 409).

²“Theology has God and the ‘religious’ as its referent. It is ‘faith seeking understanding’, and therefore a second order discourse... Therefore, religious/theological discourse within a ‘third’ discourse’ needs to be aware of semantic dualism, and to use both ordinary language and philosophical or scientific language, with new or novel definitions [to] be meaningful” (Wong, 2019, 182).

There is a corollary principle. The theologian should presuppose that what the sacred text says about the beyond is not literally true. Because the beyond is ineffable, what the sacred text says must be taken to be non-literal. What scripture says is only obliquely referential. That a sacred text in Daoism or another religious tradition might be riddled with metaphors is to be expected. Metaphors should be interpreted as metaphors, not literally.

Most—not all—scriptural symbols come in the form of metaphors. Like a wind chime, symbols melodiously sound an alarm that an invisible wind is blowing our way. Metaphorical symbols resonate at the intersection of mundane thought and the incomprehensible presence of the beyond. Each metaphorical symbol vibrates with the numinous energy of transcendent reality.

7 Theology as Rational Reflection on Symbolic Discourse

I follow hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricœur and theologian David Tracy when declaring theology to be second order discourse. Here is Ricœur's central axiom: "The symbol gives rise to thought" (Ricœur, 1969, 237).

This means, on the one hand, that rational or univocal propositions are abstractions from more primary symbolic understanding. It also means, on the other hand, that symbolic speech forms and even transforms the human mind or soul. This transformation is the result of the symbol's double valence. "Unlike a comparison that we *look at* from the outside, symbol is the very movement of the primary meaning that makes us share in the latent meaning and thereby assimilates us to the symbolized, without our being able intellectually to dominate the similarity. This is the sense in which the symbol 'gives'; it gives because it is a primary intentionality that gives the second meaning" (Ricœur, 1974, 290).

Only via the multi-valence of the symbol can we become aware of the beyond, aware of God. Without the symbol opening our horizon to what lies beyond the horizon, we would have no access whatsoever to the beyond. Here is how Ricœur puts it. "The symbol...opens up and discloses a dimension of experience, that, without it, would remain closed and hidden" (Ricœur, 1969, 165).

Three traits of the symbol are relevant here. First, theological thought reflects on the meaning of the symbol which comes prior. Second, the symbol gives meaning. Thought does not need to hogtie and arrest meaning. The symbol already resonates and vibrates and emits meaning for the reflective theologian to interpret.

The third trait is the analogical structure (Peters, 1978). Here is such a metaphor that illustrates the analogical structure: "the Dao is the mother of the universe." Note the context.

Before the universe was born
there was something in the chaos of the heavens.
It stands alone and empty,
solitary and unchanging.

It is ever present and secure.
 It may be regarded as the Mother of the universe.
 Because I do not know it's name,
 I call it the Tao.
 If forced to give it a name,
 I would call it 'Great'. (Laozi, 1996, Ch. 25)

When Laozi says that the Dao is our mother, he's saying that the Dao is like a mother in certain respects. The Dao is not literally a mother, to be sure. But the Dao is like a mother in some respects but not in all respects. The Dao is like a mother in respect to giving existence to its progeny. Yet, the Dao is unlike a mother in respect to its physical make-up and existence in time and space. The analogy hidden within the metaphor declares that the beyond is both like and unlike the analog.

Every heart and mind, observes David Tracy, needs "some similarities-in-difference, some analogues, some principles of order, some ultimate harmony in the whole of reality" (Tracy, 1981, 409). The similarities and differences announced by the metaphor prompts the rational mind to reflect. "Christian theological discourse" should be "understood as a second-order, reflective discourse" (Tracy, 1983, 2).

To the analog we add surplus meaning. Perhaps the connotation to the title, *mother*, is that we should adore the Dao as we adore our earthly mother. Only via surplus meaning can the metaphorical symbol resonate within our soul with the connotation that we are in the presence of ultimate reality.

In sum, because the symbol in its metaphorical form cannot provide literal reference, it speaks indirectly by analogy. Each metaphor includes an analogy which says: the ineffable beyond is *like* something that lies this side of the beyond. More. The surplus meaning—like the voice speaking to Moses from the burning bush—enjoins us to remove our shoes because we're the presence of the Holy.

8 Theology as Freedom

In the case of Martin Luther, the transcendence of language due to God's ineffability takes a sharp turn. The mystery of *Deus absconditus* does not merely extend what we know from earth to heaven by way of analogy. Rather, human discourse and human reasoning are confronted by limitation, dependence, challenge. When confronted by our gracious yet impenetrably mysterious God, we must surrender our confidence in what we say and what we think.

We are familiar with Luther's Theology of the Cross, according to which the divine is revealed under its opposites. "The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness....it does [a theologian] no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross...."Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself" (Isa 45:15)" (Luther, 1957, 52-53). It is the hiding of the divine self that is key to our understanding that we lack understanding even in our understanding.

Neither human language nor humanly devised patterns of reasoning are in a position to evaluate let alone subordinate divine revelation. God defines Godself in the very act of revelation. This divine self-definition evaluates and subordinates what we mortals say and think. "Divine revelation critiques human logic, not the other way around" (Simmons, 2021, 325).

The net impact is this: the theologian gains freedom. The theologian becomes free to reassess all human discourse and conceptuality. The theologian is at liberty to reassess the validity of the logical conditions of commonly accepted conceptualization.

The champion of theological freedom is Andrea Vestrucci. On the one hand, the theologian learns from revelation what the limits of theological language and conceptualization are. "Theology cannot help but be constantly *coram Deo abscondito*, because it is human *verbum* constantly facing its limitation and dependence upon divine revelation. In a word, the concept of *Deus absconditus* is theology's self-reminding of being theology" (Vestrucci, 2019, 110).

Luther's logic is curious. Because God in Godself is ineffable and even counter-intuitive, then the theologian is incapable of providing univocal or literal appellations to the divine. Analogies break down before they can provide accurate reference.

Whatever the theologian says, then, becomes a constructive creation. Theology becomes a human enterprise, not literal speech from the divine mouth. Martin Luther revolutionized theology, according to Andrea Vestrucci. "This revolution is the result of Luther's effort of considering theology *coherently*, that is, as the product of human intelligence issues from the assumption of a message that is reducible to human logical structures" (Vestrucci, 2020, 376). The criterion by which we measure the relative adequacy of theological claims, then, is coherence, not reference. At least according to Vestrucci.

But, there's more. Because of the interaction of *Deus absconditus* with the history of the cross, we have learned that our mysterious God is gracious, loving, forgiving, and justifying. "The freedom of theology is the freedom of living and thinking about life as a celebration of divine grace" (Vestrucci, 2019, 296).

9 Conclusion

What distinguishes the human race in the long history of biological evolution is the capacity for language (Deacon, 2012). In this chapter we have been asking: does this marvelous capacity to speak lead the human race into Babel's confusion? Or, does it lead us beyond Babel to clarification, speculation, and even civilization?

When it comes to addressing God or describing God, any theologian who limits God-language to rational propositions cannot help but speak babble. The critical theologian must be aware that propositional speech is second order discourse. When it comes to God, symbolic speech makes up first order discourse.

Literally speaking, God is nameless. We can address God or refer to God only via symbols. Symbols evade literal appellation. They are multi-valent, not univocal. The result is that symbolic speech both connects us with God yet protects God from total disclosure.

Furthermore, symbolic speech transforms the subjectivity of the speaker while referring to its object, God.

Symbols of God evoke a transformation of the human soul. Divine symbols deepen and enrich the consciousness of the inner self. Coming to know God reorients the mind and inspires both self-transformation and world-transformation.

If one would demand that all human speech consist of univocal or literal propositions, then God-language would seem like babble. Yet, for the human soul willing to undergo transformation, God-talk marks a glorious event of grace.

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