

The Inscrutable God and His Detailed Law

by Theodore Plantinga

Most religious communities relish an element of mystery in their worship and service. One way to provide mystery is to present God as inscrutable, as so far removed from anything we know on earth that we can scarcely speak of him, let alone claim to understand him. Another way to provide mystery is to postulate a divine law (or set of laws) that is hard to fathom and interpret and implement, leaving a lot of responsibility lodged with the worshiper who is determined to be faithful.

Are these two types of mystery (inscrutable God and indeterminate law) likely to be found together in one religious system or tradition? That's the question I propose to explore in this brief essay, using Judaism and Christianity to make the issue more concrete.

When Christians study Jewish thought, they may be struck by a paradox, namely, that what is said about (God's) law is very detailed and specific, whereas what is said about God is maddeningly vague. And so some questions naturally arise: Why would the inscrutable God have such a detailed and specific law? And if he is so inscrutable, why isn't his law inscrutable as well?

These are difficult questions by anyone's standards. And since I speak from within the Christian tradition, I cannot be expected to offer an answer that will readily satisfy adherents of Judaism. Therefore it may be best to begin with the Jewish thinker who most fully articulates the theme of the inscrutable God, namely, Maimonides (1135-1204), who is well known for his opposition to anthropomorphism and to any kind of crude depiction of God that would do him an injustice.

The convictions Maimonides held on this score do not stem solely from philosophy; they also have roots in the Bible. I am thinking specifically of the revelation received by Moses at Mount Sinai:

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." [Exodus 3:13-15]

Here God seems to have two names or designations. One is historical: he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who were historical figures. He is then a God who has entered history at certain points. The other is exceedingly abstract: he calls himself "I AM."

The latter designation has given rise to interesting philosophical speculation, which I will not explore here. My point is rather that this passage is part of the basis for the line of thought we find in Maimonides, especially, to the effect that virtually nothing can be said about God. Even his name is problematic. In some Jewish religious communities the name of God must be avoided; curious circumlocutions and substitutes are used instead.

Part of the Maimonides tradition on this set of issues is what we call negative theology ("theologia negativa"). According to this approach to "God-talk," any quality we attribute to God is inadequate and does him an injustice because it gets its meaning from our experience of things here on earth. Using the example of intelligence, Seeskin explains:

It is not that God is more intelligent than we are, but that His intelligence bears no resemblance to ours. So the difference between God's intelligence and ours is not one of degree but of kind. God's intelligence is so unlike ours that it cannot be measured according to the same criteria. Similarly, God is not on the same scale as we are with respect to power, goodness, unity, or existence. In every case, Maimonides argues that God is radically unlike us, which is the crux of what is termed *negative theology*. [NOTE 1]

Even such qualities as "good" and "just" are thought to be problematic when this criterion is applied. Human language, it would appear, is bound by an earthly horizon, which makes it impossible for us to speak correctly of Almighty God, who transcends anything human.

But this does not mean that *nothing* whatsoever can be said. There is still the path of negative attribution to be considered. In other words, if we take any quality whatsoever, we can *deny* that God possesses it. This even applies to such qualities as goodness and justice. God is not good and just in the same sense that anything or anyone we have ever met on earth is good or just. In the context of Maimonides' thought, there is quite a preoccupation with the error of considering God to be corporeal, which might not seem as great a danger today as it was then. But the general point argued by Maimonides is a challenge for us today, for we are still very much inclined to picture God in our own image. The threat of idolatry has by no means vanished.

How could one possibly worship such a God, a God of whom one scarcely dares to speak, a God whose name may hardly be uttered? In the Christian tradition (think of Pascal) we have been fairly free in speaking of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- as opposed to the "God of the philosophers." But in the Jewish tradition even this historical identification has not overcome the strong fear of the misuse of the name of God. And so circumlocutions have been thought necessary.

A God who is so metaphysically refined that we can say nothing about him might eventually be hard to distinguish from no God whatsoever. Thus it should not surprise us that in some of the more liberal branches of Judaism one finds rabbis who express doubts as to whether God actually exists. In the light of these limits on what can be said about God, it should be recognized that the question whether God even exists is not black-and-white, demanding either a yes or a no by way of an answer.

For some, perhaps, there is an intermediate position possible: our God-talk may be so pathetically inadequate that theism and atheism can no longer be clearly stated as options. Perhaps physicists chuckle to themselves when laymen use the complicated terminology of atomic physics and attempt to enter discussions of matters of which they know virtually nothing; perhaps those same physicists deem it a waste of time to attempt to answer certain questions which they cannot help but consider puerile. And so, just as physicists may feel disinclined to respond to what they undoubtedly regard as stupid questions, some Jewish thinkers would prefer not to be drawn into any debate whether God "exists," as laymen like to say.

It may be difficult to worship a God who is not thought of as existing, but for many people it is possible to serve such a God by obeying the many laws attributed to him. And so Judaism turns out not to be such thin soup after all. Christianity may claim to offer the faithful more knowledge of God than

Judaism does, but Judaism clearly gives more guidance as to *how* God is to be served. After all, there are 613 commandments!

Now, some of those commandments are in effect obsolete because the temple has not yet been rebuilt. Again, there are some that cannot really be observed by people who live in countries other than Israel. Thus the working list is somewhat smaller than it might appear to be at first. But it is still impressive. And it makes Jewish life easy in the sense that you can always know what it is that you must do.

Kant would not approve. In his well-known essay "What Is Enlightenment?" he wrote:

Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. ... Have the courage to use your own intelligence! is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment. Through laziness and cowardice a large part of mankind, even after nature has freed them from alien guidance, gladly remain immature. It is because of laziness and cowardice that it is so easy for others to usurp the role of guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor! If I have a book which provides meaning for me, a pastor who has conscience for me, a doctor who will judge my diet for me and so on, then I do not need to exert myself. I do not have any need to think; if I can pay, others will take over the tedious job for me.
[NOTE 2]

For the believing Jew, the "tedious job" has been taken on by God himself. All that remains for the faithful to do is to execute the carefully formulated instructions -- with a little help from the Talmudic commentators, of course! Hence a Jewish believer can be very concrete in the practice of his faith without falling into thinking about God which Maimonides would deem crude or inadequate.

Yet Maimonides, as a philosopher, is also intensely interested in the question of the *rationale* for the commandments. Does each commandment indeed have a rationale that could be understood by us? And is it appropriate for us to seek that rationale? The philosopher in Maimonides presses him to seek the rationale, for we should not think of God's will as arbitrary.

But not all Jewish thinkers are of this persuasion. The tendency in Orthodox circles is to accept the commandments as simple givens needing no justification

or rationale. One is tempted to speak of "fundamentalism" here, for the idea seems to be: Don't ask questions -- just do it. Even so, the Orthodox philosopher Steven Katz tells us that the main idea we need to keep in mind is that the laws are aimed at establishing a relationship, as though pleasing God is like pleasing a woman who likes to have her man spend some money on her:

We don't keep the Torah because it is philosophically persuasive. We don't keep the Torah because it brings good health or because it leads us to be good citizens, although it may, in a secondary way, have such utilitarian consequences. Rather, the primary purpose of the mizvot is relational. With every mitzvah comes an act of relation. We don't just keep the mizvot; we attend to the *Mitzaveh* (commander), that is to say, we're not interested in performing a ritual; we're interested in establishing a relationship with the commander of the mizvot. [NOTE 3]

Micah 6:8 comes to mind here: "... what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Someone might ask: but what do justice and kindness and humility come to in everyday life? The Jewish answer is: the 613 commandments. But the Christian answer is somewhat different. Christians assign themselves a good deal of responsibility for working these things out.

In Christianity we seem to find the converse of Judaism on the points being discussed in this essay. Although there is some appreciation for negative theology in the Christian tradition, much Christian thought and popular piety would leave Maimonides shaking his head and worrying about idolatry. Here the term "fundamentalism" comes to mind again as standing for an anti-intellectual approach to matters of faith. Leon Roth observes: "Fundamentalism offends through its undue familiarity with God. Maimonides' theology seems so far to err in the opposite direction." [NOTE 4]

Some Christian feminism can be adduced here by way of example. While some of the feminists are basically agitating for more involvement of women in various roles in the churches, there are also some who wish to make God over, giving to him (or her) more feminine attributes. Maimonides would be horrified. And in my youth I recall hearing repeatedly, often at the beginning of a worship service: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." [I John 4:24] Some of the thinking of Maimonides is preserved in this emphasis: God was not a male in those days.

In the end, however, Christian thought must break ranks with Maimonides and be much more detailed about the nature and character of God. Consider John 14:8-9: "Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father'" Christian familiarity with Almighty God, then, is grounded in the Incarnation. In Christ God has made himself much more fully known than he did at Sinai when Moses stood before the burning bush.

But whereas Christians may sometimes seem to have *too much* to say about God and his nature and so forth, they can be surprisingly reticent about his law. The contrast between the 613 commandments of the Jews and the traditional Ten Commandments of Christians is indeed striking. And then, to make the contrast even greater, we have the recognition that there are basically just two commandments. We read:

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." [Matthew 22:36-40]

If law is just a matter of loving God and one's neighbor, the individual believer has a great deal of leeway in terms of carrying it out in his own life. Hence there are significant differences between believers as to just what a committed Christian life consists of.

But it could even be argued that there is really only *one* commandment -- the law of love. Paul writes: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." [Romans 13:9-10] Christian thought, then, is not legalistic -- especially when compared with Jewish thought.

It may be worth asking whether there are four basic types or patterns of thought, rather than just the two I have mentioned. Judaism has an inscrutable God and a detailed law. Christianity has a very general law which believers are responsible for interpreting on their own, but God is thought to be quite manifest and concrete in Christ. Could there be a religious community with both an inscrutable God and an inscrutable law? Perhaps. Believers within such

a community would probably not have enough in common to create a sense of oneness that would unite them in the long run. Some liberal forms of Christianity come to mind here, such as those that deny the divinity of Christ and leave Christian conduct largely to one's own invention.

What about the opposite possibility, i.e. a detailed conception of God (along Christian lines) and a very detailed understanding of the law? I suppose there is something of this possibility to be found within Christianity, especially in circles accused of legalism. Among such Christians, the Ten Commandments in effect become a much longer list, as many other duties are derived from them, and one's responsibility to interpret and apply the Ten Commandments is minimized.

Is there some sort of happy medium that can be recommended in conclusion? A happy medium or a compromise might seem a worthy goal in a diplomatic setting, but as I review the issue in the light of the considerations in this essay, I return to my Christian starting-point and affirm that our conception of God may include a good deal more detail than Maimonides would wish to see precisely because God has made himself known in redemptive history and in Christ. As for the law, I hold that there are Ten Commandments -- and also two in which the ten are summed up, and also that it's true that it all comes down to the love principle.

Still, everyday life needs more particulars, and so we have codes of conduct for various professional roles, and also our private codes in which we make our adherence to the Ten Commandments more specific. I usually distinguish between principles and policies here. A person who is truly committed to the Ten Commandments as a set of principles for Christian living will need to render those commandments more specific within the context of his own life and times. He will then make "policy" decisions which are not binding on all his fellow believers but which embody his own desire to do something concrete with the general principles to which he has committed himself.

In this regard we possess Christian freedom, as John Calvin also recognized. But freedom is not license. Hence the apostle's word of caution to the Galatians can help us too, and with this word I end my essay: "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Galatians 5:13-14]
[END]

NOTES

[NOTE 1]

Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed (West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, 1991), p. 29.

[NOTE 2]

] In *Philosophy of Kant*, ed. C.J. Friedrich (Modern Library), pp. 132-133.

[NOTE 3]

In Haberman, *The God I Believe In: Conversations about Judaism* pp. 83-4.

[NOTE 4]

The Guide for the Perplexed: Moses Maimonides (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1948), p. 52.