

God is Not Your Buddy

Reflecting on Friendship with God

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God is not your buddy. But God wants to be your friend.

Can there be friendship with God? Genuine friendship between us—sinful, flawed, finite human beings—and the almighty and eternal God, the Creator of heaven and earth? “God is *not* your buddy” is the thesis of this essay. In the following, I want to explain what I mean by this—and why, nevertheless, we can conceive of a deep friendship between God and humans.

How one can speak of God in a rationally responsible manner is a fundamental theological question since it is notoriously difficult to determine the meaning of the word “God.” After all, it’s not a proper name, nor does it indicate a specifiable, empirically verifiable, inner-worldly content. So in what sense should we use this most mysterious word in our language? In certain varieties of analytic philosophy of religion and, above all, in open theism, it has become common practice to speak of God in a univocal, unambiguous sense as a *person*. God is basically a person—just as we are persons. God differs from us in many ways, of course: God is omnipotent—we are not. God is omniscient—we are not. God is morally perfect—we are not. We are materially embodied, finite, and mortal—but God is not. Nevertheless, they say, God is a person in exactly the sense in which we would describe ourselves as persons: God is a spirit-endowed subject with mind and will, who can interact with other subjects and even intervene in history. God is an individual agent with a

first-person perspective.

This approach has the advantage that one can make well-justified statements about this God-person, for these can be compared to statements about other, finite persons. Thus, one can speak about God in a rationally responsible manner. What is meant by the word “God” falls under the generic term “person,” letting God be something like a subspecies to this category. Accordingly, species-specific differences—again using this biological metaphor—can be determined that only apply to God but *not* to us, such as: all-powerful, all-goodness, nonphysical, etc. At the same time, this particular way of speaking about God fits perfectly with the everyday existential piety of many Christians, especially those who try to follow the Bible as literally as possible and cultivate a close relationship with Jesus. Isn’t this exactly how God is described in Scripture, namely as intentionally acting and intervening in the world, as interacting with his people? Does God not give us signs and instructions in which he proclaims his will? Doesn’t God himself meet us in Jesus Christ as a person, as a human being among human beings? And doesn’t this Jesus want to be just that for us: a friend who goes through life with us and guides us to the eternal goal?

Most certainly. But be careful: Anyone who thinks this way—and *only* this way—runs the risk of thinking too little of God. God is *not* the buddy next door who comes by for a beer in the evening when we feel lonely or are looking for distraction or reinforcement! God is not someone who fulfills our everyday wishes. Nor is it God’s task to reduce the complexity of life to a bearable level for us. God is not validating but radically challenges our worldview over and over again. Thus, God does not relieve us of our duty to shape our lives autonomously and in free responsibility. It is humankind’s original sin to want to be like God and not to accept the limits of being creaturely. The reverse attempt, however, can lead to a similar result: claiming God for oneself, aiming to seize God’s name. This temptation likewise disregards the boundary between God and creature, disregards the essence of God and that of human beings. Whoever infallibly believes God to be only on his or her side in this sense will quickly brush aside all those who live, love, and believe differently. They will condemn as godless all those who do not fit into their view of the world.

In contrast, it should be remembered: God is the wholly other, the all-changing. “If you understand, it is not God”, says Augustine. *Deus semper maior*: God is always greater. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Protestant theologian murdered by the Nazis, once wrote that “before God and with God we live without God.” By this, he calls for a free, adult faith: to hope in God, to believe in

him as the one who sustains me and who wants only good for me—and yet whom I must never possess, appropriate, and instrumentalize, not even for self-stabilization or creating meaning in life. To love God means getting involved with the strange and mysterious, with the vastness—and hoping that wandering in the dark will someday become home. No, God is definitely not your buddy.

Therefore, for a good reason, the majority of the theological tradition has resisted understanding God simply as one person among other persons. The best thinkers in history have always tried to maintain a balance between God as a loving counterpart to whom we address our prayers and God as the origin of the world, who pulses through, pervades, embraces, and lures all creatures to the good. Perhaps the most famous, but in any case most profound, investigation of the idea of God comes from Anselm of Canterbury. At the end of the eleventh century, he defined God as the being “than which nothing greater can be conceived.” For him, God is *even* “greater than what can be conceived.” But this fact itself, that God is greater than can be thought, can be properly conceived. A central idea of the theology of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century is that God is not only the personal Creator of heaven and earth but God is *Being Itself*. All creatures, because they exist, share in this Being Itself. All that exists is, in some sense, divine in nature. Or let us take a great leap into the twentieth century: for Paul Tillich, God is that “which concerns us ultimately”; for Rudolf Bultmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, God is the “all-determining reality.” My understanding of these lines is this: God is the all-pervading ground of our reality, and as such, God is also the condition for the possibility of our thinking and speaking about this reality. And precisely this all-embracing, unique meaning of the concept of God must be considered in our speaking about God. God is not a thing among things which are available to us in our reality. God is not our buddy.

Already the traditional doctrine of the Trinity makes clear: God is more than just a person. God is neither a single person, nor a community of three individuals. God is in Godself love, as well as relationship, fullness of life, and all-embracing wholeness. In trinitarian terms: God is tri-personal, three-fold—and yet of one essence. From a trinitarian perspective, it is obvious that a univocal attribution of personhood to God must fail.

Does this mean that friendship with God is impossible because the distance is too great, the difference unbridgeable? One can also see it the other way around. It is precisely because God is so radically different that God can be the friend of all people, indeed of all creatures. Only because

of God's essential otherness can God be closer to us than we can ever be close to ourselves, without extinguishing our own personal status. The absolute transcendence of God is the precondition of the possibility of God's deepest immanence. God is the *non-aliud*—the non-other—is what the Renaissance philosopher, cardinal, and humanist Nicolaus Cusanus wrote in the fifteenth century. This is where God's deepest, most radical, absolute otherness lies: that God does not need to distance Godself from us to remain with Godself. Expressed in existential categories: The Divine is free to an extent that God does not have to be afraid, not even of losing Godself. God is powerful to an extent that he does not have to keep his identity stable in demarcation to ours. God can fearlessly affirm and love what is not Godself; God can give Godself away completely without losing his identity in the process. But this is only possible because God is not just a person among other persons, but rather *more* than a person: God is source and reason, meaning and goal of everything.

One final remark: This little essay is written from the perspective of a Catholic theologian. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council adopted a document on the divine revelation that is of the utmost relevance, authority, and current interest for the Catholic Church: *Dei Verbum*. The most beautiful passage there reads:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will: by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself (DV 2).

God does not reveal anything but Godself. God also does not dictate any sentences or instructions but—as it is said in the Latin original—proclaims the sacrament of the divine will, bringing into effect the ever-powerful sign of his love in his creation. This means more than just a volitional agreement between God and humankind. It means the assumption into the divine nature, the participation in the very life of God. This participation applies to all people, and it applies to all of creation. Only then, in this comprehensive framework, can the second sentence be understood that God speaks to us out of overflowing love as to friends.

No, God is not your buddy. God is the ground of your existence, is both vastness and home at

the same time. God is the other, the stranger, the always greater. God is the space in which we live and the goal towards which everything is created. God is not your buddy. But he wants to be your friend.

Question: Why is God *not* your buddy? Why does God nevertheless want to be your friend?

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