

Why Isn't God Red:
How Do We
Talk About God?

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I. Introduction

The question presented is “Why isn’t God red?” If one takes the question literally, one might ponder so why isn’t God red. How do I know God isn’t red? I have never seen God nor do I know anyone who has. I do not know what color God is. It is as God told Moses when Moses asked to see God. God answered

I will make all my beauty pass before you, and in your presence I will pronounce my name, ‘Lord’; I who show favors to whom I will. But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives (Exodus 33:19-20).¹

We do not *see* God but we do indeed have experiences of God’s presence. Take the following analogy on how we might see God. One might say ‘I can see the sun in the plants.’ Obviously, I cannot see the sun in the plants. However, if I have been in a dark cave for days and come out at night, I can tell the sun has been out because the plants are green. If there had been no sun, the plants would have died.² Likewise I cannot see God but I can the evidence of God’s presence in creation. Kasper refers to Wisdom 13:5 that speaks of how God is evident in the things he has created.³

Sometimes, we have images of God as an old man. He is depicted as an old man with long white hair and perhaps a shepherd’s staff. I see no red in this image. However, images like this are not paintings that God posed for. They are somebody’s image of what God *might* look like. God has existed forever. Hence, the image of the old man. Is God old? What does it mean for an eternal being to be old? We imagine God as old because it symbolizes wisdom and experience.

¹ All biblical citations are taken from *the New American Bible. The New American Bible*, St. Joseph’s Edition, New York, Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992.

² The example of the sun and the plants is found in Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982, 124.

³ The idea of Creation showing forth God’s activity in the world is part of the analogy of being. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*. Trans. By Matthew J. O’Connell. New York: Herder & Herder, The Crossroad Publishing Company. ©1984, printed 2005, 96.

So, I cannot say whether or not God is red. I cannot explain why God would choose to be any particular color. God is omnipotent and omniscient. He can choose what he is. Thus, the question “Why isn’t God red?” is a question without an answer. However, it does serve to open discussion on a very important question.

II. The Real Question

The question that is of real concern is how do we talk about God. When I talk about a friend, that person is someone I know well, I have talked with them, and I have seen them. So, I can tell you exactly how I would describe them. I describe them based on my experience of them. My *experience* of them shapes how I relate to them.

While I pray regular and in my prayer I “talk” with God, I would be lying to say *I see* God sitting next to me when I talk to him. I have experiences of God but those experiences are very different from my experiences of other people.

The term “God-talk” is used to describe how we engage in conversation about God with other people. Our “God-talk” is based on the relationship we have with God. It can sound like a term for theologians but in fact we engage in God-talk in every discussion about God. God is unique and this makes it difficult to talk about him. While I am a finite creature, God is infinite. In order to describe God, I must use human terms.

For example, the Old Testament and Christianity today refer to God as ‘Father’. We do not use the term “father” to signify that God is one’s biological father. Rather, God is called ‘Father’ as one who has watched over his people and taken care of them. We call God ‘good’ because we know he takes care of us. We call God ‘merciful’ because he forgives our sins. In fact, God is better at forgiveness than we are. Likewise, God is not just good, he is the paradigm for what it means to be good.

One could create, and theology does to some extent, a whole new vocabulary to talk about God. How would I share the meaning of these new words? The best we can do is to use analogies of human behavior and characteristics to talk about God. Thus, we use terms like good, wise, compassionate, and merciful to describe God but none of these terms capture the *full* essence of who God is. We can also use analogies like those above of the sun and the plant.

This use of “God-talk” based on experience is what creates the problem when a Christian tries to talk to an “outsider” about God, particularly with atheists. Our “God-talk” reflects our experiences and relationship with God. An atheist would say they have never experienced God.

Some say the Bible tells us everything we need to know about God.⁴ First, the Bible does not tell us everything about God. The Bible presupposes God’s existence.

One may ask “is it appropriate to use human and earthly terms to speak about God.” First, as Catholics we believe that creation is good because God made creation. It is good as God created it.⁵ We can see the goodness of God through creation. Furthermore, in his incarnation, Jesus takes on human nature. The fact that Jesus was fully human helps validate the use of human terms to talk about God. As Kasper writes, “Like all knowledge, the knowledge of God requires a basis in experience.”⁶ We all have experiences of God. However, we do not always have the ability to understand them as such. We need God-talk to help us open up these experiences to see how God is acting in our lives. Jesus himself makes use of analogies in his parables when he says the kingdom of heaven is like.

⁴ This viewpoint is part of the “Analogy of Faith.” It is typically a Protestant viewpoint.

⁵ In the creation story in Genesis ch. 1, God sees how good his creation is. See verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

⁶ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 79.

III. The Problem of Exact Language

In the past, proponents of logical positivism said we need exact language to talk about something. If it was impossible to talk about something in exact terms, then they eliminated it from discussion. This effectively eliminated all religious language as religion cannot be discussed in exact terms.

The proponents of positivism moderated their position when they realized it was impossible to talk about physical science in exact terms such as in quantum physics. We have come to realize that the meaning of a word today rests not solely on a tangible object but in how we use the word.

When we engage in “God-talk” it is never an exact science. How do we even use the term “God?” Is “God” a name or a predicate describing some type of behavior? As Christians, we use “God” as a proper name but for us the word also tells us something about ‘God’. When I speak of God, I immediately think of a “being” who is omnipotent, omniscient, good, caring, merciful, wise, etc. This is why some say we use “God” as a predicate to ascribe to ‘God’ some characteristic or behavior. When I call my friend by his or her name, the name does not ascribe particular behavior to him or her but *for me* hearing the name makes me immediately think of the characteristics I believe my friend to have. “God” gives us both a name and tells us about God.

The whole point of “God-talk” is to help us discover the truth about God. God cannot be dissected in a science laboratory. We find out about God from the Bible, our experiences of God, and in our discussions with others, sharing our experiences to arrive at a better concept of who God is.

Even with the Incarnation and the teachings of Jesus, God still remains something of a mystery to us. God self-identifies with us, revealing himself in the Incarnation. Yet God remains incomprehensible. God is infinite. We are finite creatures. As Kasper writes, “Knowledge of God’s incomprehensibility is therefore the beatifying fulfillment of the human person.”⁷ We realize who we are when we realize that God is beyond our understanding. Thus the need to use analogy and metaphorical language to discuss God.

The atheist may not have had a direct experience of God but they would likely have had an experience of goodness, wisdom, compassion, mercy, etc. Thus, by using analogies and metaphors we speak about God in terms those outside “Christianity” and those outside any belief in a God can understand. The terms *never* capture the fullness of God. Only a personal experience of God as ‘God’ can do that. Yet, by engaging in God-talk we can help one another find and appreciate our experiences of God.

IV. Conclusion

Clearly, then, it is necessary to talk about God in human terms. However, not all human terms are relevant to a discussion of God. Our original question asked “Why isn’t God red?” For me, I do not know whether or not God is red or not. Could God be red? For me, color is not an important attribute of God. I am not sure if God is any color. It is not an important question *for me*. As I define color, it has no bearing on my relationship with God so it serves no purpose to know what, if any, color God is. However, it is important to me to know God is good, wise, compassionate, etc.

Thus, it is clear that some rules of use are needed to facilitate how we talk about God. What attributes are useful in talking about God? It would seem the most basic criteria would be

⁷ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 128.

to establish relevancy. Is it an important thing to know about God, i.e. does it affect how I relate to God? For example, does the color of God have any relevance to a relationship with God? As I said above, for me it does not matter if God is red. However, if we are speaking of skin color as signifying race or ethnicity, there are people who might find it very relevant to know what color God is. For the Christian, race or ethnicity is irrelevant before God. It is inner being of the person that is important.

Another rule might actually seem to place a limit on God. Sometimes, we like to talk about God as being everywhere or being everything. God is everywhere as he is an infinite being. However, to say God is everything can be confusing. Does this mean God is both red and not red? What does it even mean to say that? If God is everything, he would be good and bad. This is a contradiction. One cannot be simultaneously be good and bad. Thus, we describe God as good, not both. Another example would be the question of age. Is God young or old? He cannot be both. God transcends time so age may not be relevant to God. So, while we believe and say God is everywhere and *in* everything, it is difficult at best to say God *is* everything.

Next, in rules of “God-talk,” we look for relational terms that tell us how God interacts with people. Thus we are interested in such characteristics such as loving, compassionate, merciful, wise, and trustworthy. We can also use analogies such as God is like the father in the story of the prodigal son.⁸ Likewise, we say Jesus is the light of the world⁹ not because he literally is light but because Jesus is the one who enlightens us about God and shows us the way to the Father.¹⁰

I cannot tell if God is red or not. I can tell you my experience of God is that of a God who loves me, cares for me, and helps me to make good choices. That is enough for me.

⁸ Luke 15:11-32.

⁹ John 8:12; 9:5.

¹⁰ John 14:1-6.

Bibliography

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Kasper, Walter, *The God of Jesus Christ*. Trans. By Matthew J. O'Connell. New York: Herder & Herder, The Crossroad Publishing Company. ©1984, printed 2005.