

From Thoughts About God

... To The Afterlife

(part 2 of 8)

Introduction

From God ... To The Afterlife

Concepts of God ... attributes and characteristics ... are important in the development of thoughts on the afterlife in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The understanding of Divine justice and mercy ... compassion and punishment ... and how God balances and prioritizes these are instrumental in afterlife beliefs.

From God ... To The Afterlife

We will explore the **development** of concepts of God in Judaism ... Christianity ... Islam ... to better understand life-after-death reward and punishment in each of these belief systems.

Issues:

- Are our beliefs about the afterlife compatible with our understanding of God?
- In Judaism ... Christianity ... Islam ... developed beliefs established vastly different criteria for “eternal” reward or punishment. Can the God who “revealed” these criteria (in scripture) possibly be the “same God”?

Part 1

Thoughts on God

“gods”

Judaism ... Christianity ... and Islam are spoken of as the three “Abrahamic” ... monotheistic ... faiths ...

But ... Abraham (Abram) ... came from Sumer (early 2nd millennium BCE) ... a polytheistic society where there were numerous gods.

These gods had power ... but they were not “almighty.” The gods were not necessarily moral ... they lived their own lives ... in relationship to one another ... and had their own problems.

The gods did not necessarily “care” for the people ... but controlled certain aspects of people’s lives ... rain ... harvest ...

The people wanted to placate the gods ... keep them from becoming angry ... This was usually done through rite and ritual ... sacrifice.

There was no love or personal relationship between the gods and mankind ... just an understanding that the gods could make things harder for humans if they were not kept satisfied.

The Gift of Abraham

But Abraham developed a relationship with his God ... over many years ... which would impact the understanding of the nature of God in Judaism ... Christianity ... and Islam. Abraham is identified as having a close relationship with God in Hebrew ... Christian scriptures ... and in the Quran.

Oftentimes ... this “gift” is stated simply as [monotheism](#) ... the belief in One God.

The truth ... however ... is much broader ...

There was an early ancient “worldview” that focused on fate ... and life as fitting a pattern that could not be easily affected.

But ... in the Abrahamic development ... a caring ... personal God ... could and did intervene in the lives of His people ...

And ... individual’s responses to God’s initiatives could change God’s plan ... actions ... and emotions. Life was now not simply directed by the gods ... [but affected by the relationship established between God and His people.](#)

The Abrahamic faiths ...

But ... do the three “Abrahamic” faiths understand ... God ... in exactly the same way? Do Jews ... Christians ... and Muslims ... worship the same God?

Jews have the “God of Abraham ... Isaac ... and Jacob ... the God of Israel.”

But did Abraham ... Isaac ... Jacob understand/ relate to God in the same way?

In Christian scripture ... Jesus claimed that the God he called Father ... was the “God of Abraham ... Isaac ... and Jacob” ... but Christians because of their later Trinitarian understanding of God (and “divinity” of Jesus) ... see God in a very fundamentally different way than Jews do.

Muslims see God as absolutely “One” ... and transcendent ... unknowable ... much closer to a Jewish understanding. Christians are not even viewed as monotheists ... God has no “partners” ... or “equals.”

Thoughts about G-d

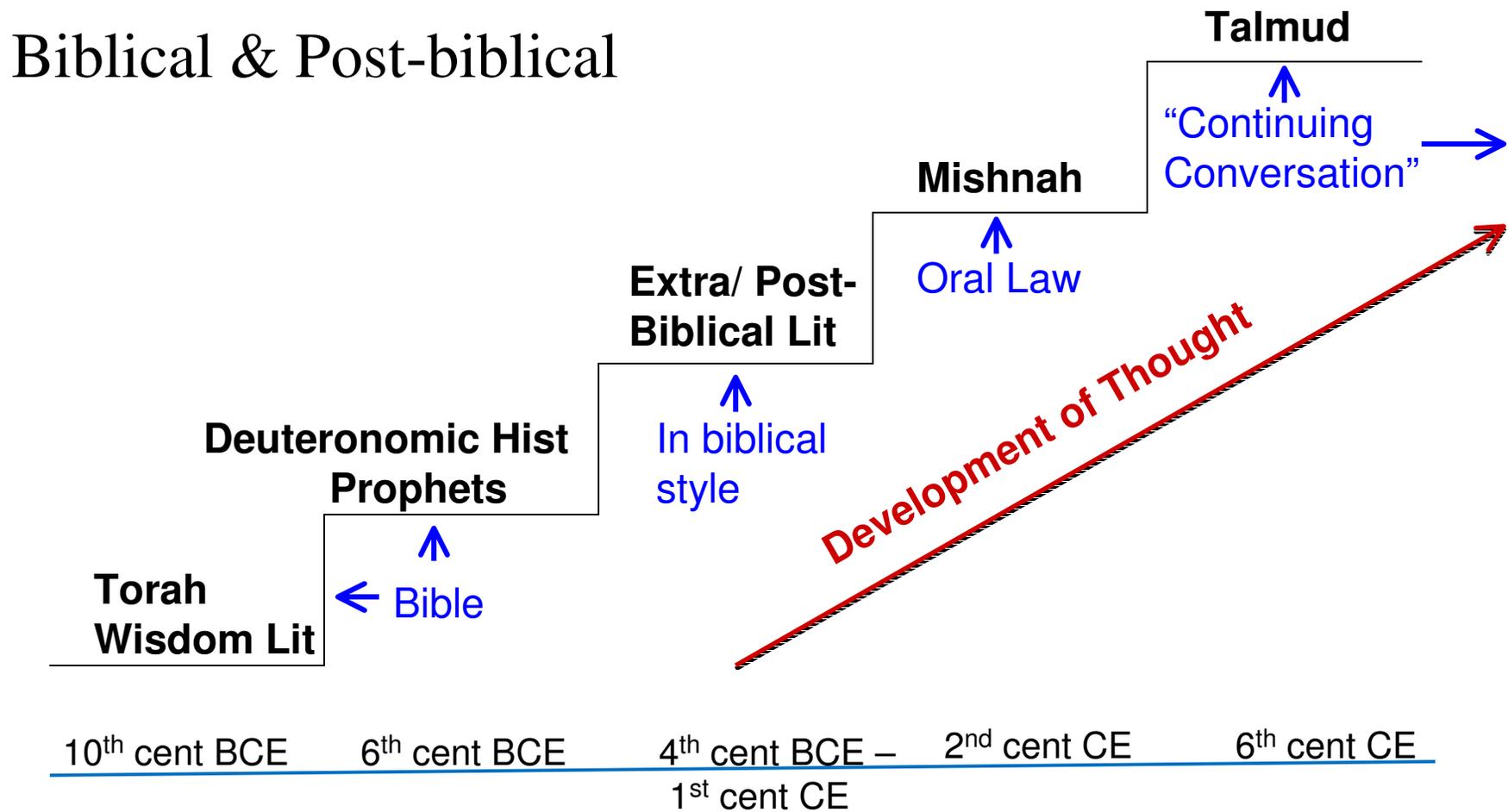


Judaism

God in earliest Hebrew scripture

In awe of God

Development of Jewish Thought



God in Nature

In the earliest Hebrew scriptural texts, the grandeur of God was readily seen in nature. The “earth” and the actions of nature (e.g., rain) sustained the people. There was a clear connection between God and his creation. God both created ... and sustains.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. “ (Psalms 19:1-4)

The “heavens” ... the “firmament” ... speak of ... and provide knowledge of ... God ... by their very existence ... without words.

Caring for Humankind

“God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:29-31)

“You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.” ... (Psalm 104:14-15)

All is from God ... for humankind. God is sustainer.

God ... or many gods?

Tribal God ... or Universal God?

Understanding God

The God of Israel is often referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ...

To Moses ... at the burning bush ... *“And G-d spoke unto Moses, and said unto him: 'I am HaShem; and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, as G-d Almighty, but by My name "HaShem" I made Me not known to them.’”* (Exodus 6:2-3)

(Name of God Hebrew: יהוה)

God Himself ... identifies Himself in this way.

But ... did Abraham ... Isaac ... Jacob all understand God in the same way ?

Was God saying ... I am the God of your people ... the God of your ancestors ... or I Am The One True Universal God?

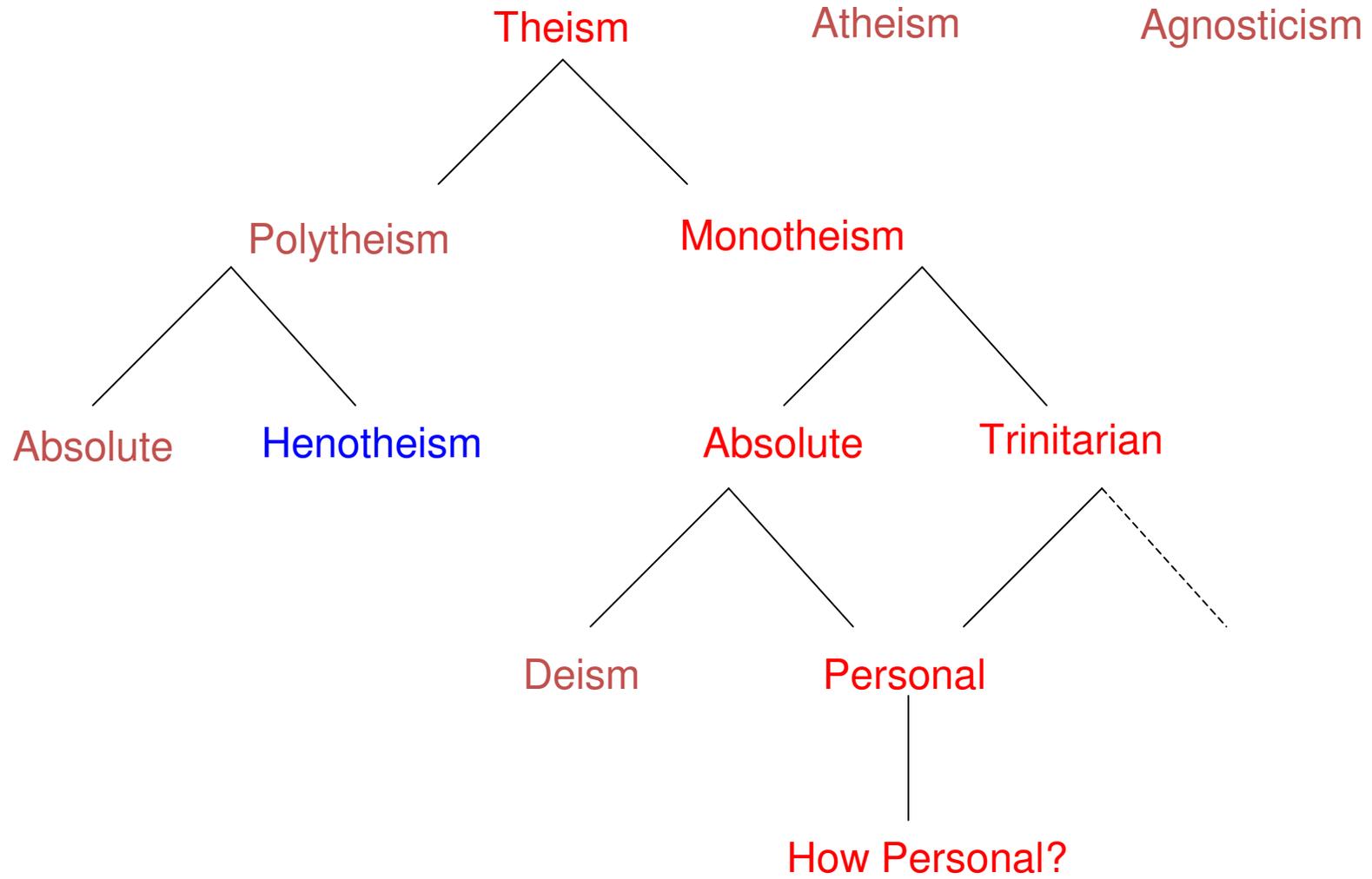
Henotheism

Henotheism is the belief and worship of a single god while accepting the existence or possible existence of other deities.

After Abraham ... Isaac ... Jacob ... the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt for 400+ years ... did they “remember” God after being in Egypt for this period ... exposed to the “gods” of Egypt .

- While the ancient Egyptian beliefs usually recognized many gods, worship was often focused primarily upon a supreme deity.
- *“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; **put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.**” (Joshua 24:14)*

What kind of god(s)



The gods

Henotheism ... even after the time of the Patriarchs ... after the time of the Sinai encounter ... ??

- *“For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the **gods of Egypt** I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.”* (Exodus 12:12)
- *“Who is like you, O LORD, among **the gods**?”* (Exodus 15:11)
- *“Now I know that the LORD is greater than **all gods**, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians.”* (Exodus 18:11) (Jethro)
- *“Whoever sacrifices to **any god**, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction.”* (Exodus 22:20)
- *“Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of **other gods**; do not let them be heard on your lips.”* (Exodus 23:13)

Henotheism?

The “First Commandment” ...

- *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before (beside) (besides) me.”* (Exodus 20:2-3)
 - before ... ahead of ...
 - beside ... along side ...
 - besides ... instead of ...

... “your” God ... a relationship with you ...

“One” God

The first of the Ten Commandments can be interpreted to forbid the Children of Israel from worshiping any other god but the one true God ... the God of Israel ...

who had revealed himself at Mount Sinai and given His people the Torah ...

however it can also be read as henotheistic, since it states that they should have "no other gods before me."

The commandment itself does not affirm or deny the existence of other deities *per se*.

A local ... tribal God

The God of Israel ... a tribal God ... of the mountains.

- *“Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of G-d, unto Horeb.”*
(Exodus 3:1)
- *“And this is the blessing wherewith Moses the man of G-d blessed the children of Israel before his death. And he said: HaShem came from Sinai, and rose from Seir unto them; He shined forth from mount Paran, and He came from the myriads holy, at His right hand was a fiery law unto them.”* (Deuteronomy 33:1-2)

... from Sinai ... from Seir ... from mount Paran ...

Choose ... a God

- “And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors - Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor - lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. (Joshua 24:2)
- “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; **put away the gods that your ancestors served** beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, **choose** this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:14-15)

Henotheism

- When the Jews reach the “Promised Land” they assimilate with the Canaanites (especially in the area of the Northern Kingdom of Israel).
 - The Canaanite pantheon consisted of El and Asherah as the chief deities, with 70 sons who were said to rule over each of the nations of the earth. These sons were each worshiped within specific regions.

Reference: *The Bible Unearthed ...* Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman

- *“For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.”* (1 Chronicles 16:25)

“God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.” (Psalm 82:1)

Idolatry

From Hosea ... to the people of Israel ...

The people have sinned against their God ... idolatry ... and God is angry.

- *Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. ... I saw your ancestors. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved. (Hosea 9:10)*
- *Every evil of theirs began at Gilgal; there I came to hate them. Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more ... (Hosea 9:15)*
- *I will pour out my wrath like water. (Hosea 5:10)*

A God of War

Protecting Israel ... enemy of my
enemies

A God of War ... Awe

*“There is none like God ... who rides through the heavens to your help,
majestic through the skies.*

*He subdues the ancient gods, shatters the forces of old; he drove out
the enemy before you, and said, ‘Destroy!’*

*So Israel lives in safety, untroubled is Jacob’s abode in a land of grain
and wine, where the heavens drop down dew.*

*Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord,
the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph!*

*Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread on their
backs.” (Deuteronomy 33:26-29)*

**God ... protector ... sustainer ... triumphant over the enemies of His
people.**

Protector of Israel

- *“The **Lord is a warrior**; the Lord is his name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power - your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.”* (Exodus 15:3-6)
- *“Sing ye to HaShem, for He is highly exalted: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.”* (Exodus 15:21)
- “But if thou shalt indeed hearken unto his voice, and do all that I speak; then **I will be an enemy unto thine enemies, and an adversary unto thine adversaries.**” (Exodus 23:22)
- *“Wherefore it is said in the **Book of the Wars of the Lord ...**”*
(Numbers 21:14)

A Merciless Warrior

- *“Thus says the (El Shaddai) **Lord of hosts**, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. **Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’”***
(1 Samuel 15:2-3)
- *“The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction.”* (Joshua 6:17)
- *“Rise up, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God!
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.”* (Psalm 3:7)

God

A God of Creation ...

A God of Nature ...

A God of the Mountain(s) ...

A God of War ... Protector of Israel

A Merciless God ... with those who are not His people ...

Where ... exactly ... is “Ethical Monotheism” ??

God of Abraham ...

From ... *The Gifts of the Jews - How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels ...* by Thomas Cahill

- “It was highly unlikely that Avraham became during the course of his life a strict monotheist, but what we can say is that Avraham’s relationship to God became the matrix of his life, the great shaping experience. From voice to vision to august potentate, Avraham’s understanding of God grew ever larger; but given the society out of which he came, this understanding remained – by our standards – a very earthbound one. Something must, after all these years of preparation, jolt him into a recognition of Just-Who-Is-Speaking-To-Him. For the God who calls Avraham to the Mountain Experience must no longer be seen merely as the ‘Mountain God.’ He is the opposite of the Sumerian gods with their patently human motivations. He is the God beyond the mountain, even beyond the sky, the unknowable God, whose purposes are hidden from human intelligence, who cannot be manipulated.”

Development of the God of Abraham

“This God gives and takes beyond human reasoning or justification. Because his motives are not interpretable and his thoughts and actions are not foreseeable, anything – and everything – is possible.” This God cannot be “figured-out” ... cannot be truly known.

“This emerging interpersonal relationship also has a deeper meaning in the development of religion. The religious center is no longer what it had been for the Sumerians and all other ancient cultures – interpersonal manipulation by means of ritual prescriptions – but a face-to-face relationship with God.” A new religion has taken shape.”

Although God speaks to Abraham ... there is a transcendence in the being of God ... that cannot be understood.

Toward Monotheism

- *“Thus saith HaShem, the G-d of Israel: Your fathers dwelt of old time beyond the River, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods.”* (Joshua 24:2)

Abram’s family ... of Ur of the Chaldeans ... was polytheist.

- *“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. The more they called them, the more they went from them; they sacrificed unto the Baalim, and offered to graven images.”* (Hosea 10:1-2)

Even after the Sinai event ... and the occupation of the land God promised ... the people worshipped the gods of the Canaanites.

From Abraham (19th cent BCE) ... to Moses (13th cent BCE) ... to Hosea (8th cent BCE) ... from polytheism ... to henotheism ... to idolatry ...

Monotheism

Monotheism has a long development ... greatly impacted by the relationships the Jews had with surrounding peoples.

Some argue today ... that monotheism did not predominate ... even in Judaism ... until the time of the Babylonian Captivity.

- Priestly creation story (Genesis 1:1 – 2:3)

Monotheism

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One

(Deuteronomy 6:4)

In Judaism, one of the most common names applied to God in the post Biblical period is "*Ha-Kadosh, Baruch Hu*" (The Holy One, Blessed be He)

Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh ... holy, holy, holy

... but a better translation ... *The Other, The Other, The Other*

God is “wholly other,” too different from created beings to be “discussed” with language and in anthropomorphic terms.