

# **International Handbook of Practical Theology**

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Terry A. Veling

# Theology of Religion

## 1 Introduction

Theology may be the least helpful discipline to explore the enduring presence of religion in human societies and cultures. After all, theology is a religious discipline and may be too closely attached or implicated in that which it seeks to study. Maybe disciplines such as philosophy or psychology or anthropology or sociology are better suited to address the question of religion – at least they can maintain a certain objective distance of ‘studying religion’, without necessarily being implicated or religiously oriented themselves.

On the other hand, maybe theology is well suited to address the question of religion in human cultures because it shares in the phenomenon it seeks to understand, without the stricture of science’s ‘objectivity’. Standing within a subject-matter of inquiry can often lead to better understandings than standing ‘aloof’ and objectively detached.

To stand ‘within’ something means we are implicated in our inquiry. This can often lead to better results of understanding than when we attempt to be distanced and analytical observers. My approach in this essay is not a scientific one – a ‘study of religion’ – my approach is a theological one, which means that religion need not only be studied from the ‘outside’, but can also be fruitfully understood from the ‘inside’.

## 2 The Smell of Religion

In the Australian film, *Kenny*, the title character operates a portable toilet rental company. In one of the scenes, he climbs into a large effluent-holding tank that needs cleaning. After some minutes he emerges and exclaims: “There is a smell in here that will outlast religion!”

Religion is one of the most complex words in the English language. All human history has carried the “smell” of religion – for both good and for ill. Religion is sometimes opposed to the word “secular,” often with the assumption that the secular world promotes tolerance and freedom, while religion promotes war and conflict. However, secular society has also played its part in promoting war and conflict. Think of the (now common) mantra, ‘the war on terror’, presumably aimed at defending freedom and democracy. As Walter Benjamin (1968, 256) suggests, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

In other words, neither the secular nor the religious world is free of stain or blemish, and it seems pointless separating the two as if in competing worlds.



While I appreciate many of secular culture's values (I do not, for example, want to live in a theocracy), I do not think that secularism is the bastion of all virtue and religion the source of all evils. There are many fine secularists out there promoting the wellbeing of humanity, just as there are many fine religious people promoting peace and goodness. As Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1990, 186–187) notes: “The separation of men into the religious and non-religious does not get us very far. It's not at all a question of a special disposition which some possess, and others lack.”

The fact that the two – the secular and the religious – have been placed asunder in our Enlightened age seems to me misguided – part of the problem rather than the solution. Indeed, it is interesting to consider that the word ‘secular’ was initially derived from religious language, framed, for example, within the understanding that the kingdom of heaven (*divinitas*) is directly related to the conditions of living on earth (*saeculum* or *humanitas*). According to this theological conception, the religious and the secular (heaven and earth, if you like) are directly related and implicated, rather than split into competing worlds. “Humanity is the knot in which heaven and earth are interlaced,” Abraham Heschel (1955, 103) says. Indeed, Heschel notes that religious language has always struggled with the claims of these two ‘realms’:

The life of man is embroiled in earthly concerns, but his soul opens somewhat to heavenly matters. He is therefore obliged to speak in two tongues, one entirely earthly, the other entirely heavenly. He must, perforce, use two types of idioms. Moreover, he must search for the place where heaven and earth embrace. Language is a ladder set on earth whose head reaches heaven – it is both all earthly and all heavenly. (2010, 234)

Religious people who neglect their earthly condition (and the earthly humanity of others) are probably not very religious at all. Indeed, this may be religion's greatest temptation – idolatry – which the Hebrew prophets constantly rallied against. Amos, for example, derides false worship: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21; 24). And Isaiah speaks of the true fasting that pleases God: “Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” (Isaiah 58:7–8)

In other words, a religious tradition that cannot connect with the world and humanity is probably worshipping something false. St John puts it best: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Jesus was no great lover of religion. Indeed, he was often a quintessential critic of false religion. His problem was not with sinners – those who may have lost their way for one reason or another – his problem was with hypocrites, people who heap-up burdens on others: “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them”

(Matt 23:4). Jesus admonishes those who announce their good deeds for all to see and prefers those whose actions are secretive. “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt 6:4).

Many of my young undergraduate students are suspicious of religious institutions that seem disconnected from their own experience and the world around them. I often hear them say, “I am spiritual, but I am not religious.” Or, if you like, “I am religious without being religious.” I admire their honesty. They feel a need and desire to affirm spirituality, yet they also feel a large disconnect between their own experience and what ‘religion’ has to offer.

I doubt this is something new. Sixty years ago, Heschel was already noting that religion can sometimes be its own worst enemy. Rather than blame secularism for the demise of religion, Heschel (1955, 3) says we need to look at the lack of creativity and relevance of our own faith traditions:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became *irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid*. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than *a living fountain*; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.

The ill health of religion is attributable to its dearth of creativity. Non-creative religious traditions lead to fundamentalism, irrationalism, and dogmatism – upon which the sources of war and conflict feed. Healthy religious traditions are attributable to the richness of creativity. Creative religious traditions lead to peace, healing, newfound wisdom – they draw on the sources of love and beauty.

Of course, it would be easy at this juncture to note that secularism also has its own ‘demons’ to face, that it has not lived up to its own ideals of peace, tolerance, and freedom. Levinas (2007, 121) puts this most starkly in his indictment of Western thought in the wake of the Holocaust and other tragedies of the twentieth century:

The history of modern Europe attests to an obsession with ... an order to be established on universal but abstract rules [...] while undermining or forgetting the uniqueness of the other person, whose right is, after all, at the origin of all rights, yet always a new calling. The history of modern Europe is the permanent temptation of an ideological rationalism, and of experiments carried out through the rigor of deduction, administration, and violence. A philosophy of history, a dialectic leading to peace among men – is such a thing possible after the Gulag and Auschwitz?

It seems there is no pure or faultless secularism or religiosity. The ultimate measure, for Levinas, is not whether one is secular or religious, but whether one is able to respond to the face of another – or, if you like, to my fellow human being – and, I would add, to all living creatures who share our planet. “I do not wish to talk in terms of belief and non-belief,” Levinas (1986, 18) writes.

*Believe* is not a verb to be employed in the first person singular. Nobody can really say *I believe* – or *I do not believe* for that matter – that God exists. The existence of God is not a question of an individual's soul uttering logical syllogisms. It cannot be proved. The existence of God [...] is the sacredness of man's relation to man through which God may pass.

Of course, even as Levinas dismisses bland religiosity, he nevertheless still refers to God. This word, which in the Jewish tradition cannot be pronounced, nevertheless retains a meaning for Levinas. In what sense? He writes:

I am thinking in effect of a God who is bored to be alone. It is Christian too. I do not say that it is uniquely Jewish. It is a God whose grandeur, whose justice and *rachamim* (mercy) you see everywhere. You see his humility; it is a God who comes down [...] who has not negated the finite and who has entered into the finite. [...] This means it is a God who has sent you the other human being. [...] It is the constitution of society [...] there is a human being sent toward the other human being. That is my central thesis and consequently it is this structure that is divinity. (1989a, 107)

For Levinas, the constitution of society (secularism, if you like) is dependent on the humility of God, who enters our world from on high and makes us mindful of (or sends us) the other person to care for. When speaking to Christian audiences, Levinas often referred to chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel: "in so far as you did this to one of the least". Of this passage he says:

The relation to God is presented there as a relation to another human person. It is not a metaphor; in the other, there is a real presence of God. In my relation to the other, I hear the word of God. It is not a metaphor. It is not only extremely important; it is literally true. I'm not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her face I hear the word of God (2001, 171).

### 3 Humanising Our World Is Divinising Our World

Many people seem to be able to appreciate the love of parent and child, or the love of brothers and sisters, or the love between partners – even the love of one's neighbour. Yet they struggle to appreciate the love of God. I've often felt that the ordinary loves of our lives are the very essence of God's love. As soon as we link human love with divine love, we divinise our world and humanise our relationships. Human love incarnates divine love, and divine love ignites or inspires human love. This is the theological understanding of religion, whereby divine and human love are interlaced and invested with each other, rather than alienated in separate and disconnected realms.

A person with secular sensibilities, it seems to me, is interested in humanising our world, and stands against all forms of dehumanisation. I imagine that a person with authentic religious sensibilities would share this vision for humanity. There is perhaps nothing worse than a spirituality that cannot accommodate humanity. Rather, it is our spiritual duty to become human. This "becoming human" is not a task we set ourselves to achieve; rather, it is a task given us by divine life. Everything

of God is ultimately concerned with everything of humanity. To hallow God's name is to hallow each other. "I consider the human person," Martin Buber (1965, 70) says, "to be the irremovable central place of the struggle between the world's movement away from God and its movement towards God." *Divinitas* can never be separated from *humanitas* but must always be related in their mutual concern. As it is with God, so too with us. As it is in heaven, so too on earth (Veling 2005).

It seems appropriate that the first book of the Bible is called *Genesis* or *Bereshit*. In the beginning God did not create religion, God created the world, which means that God created plants and animals and the starry sky and you and me. This is God's primary revelation – not religion. If religion means anything, then it means I am caught up in this bundle of life and that my existence is not solitary; rather it is relationally implicated. Religion is a matter of living relations between us. The duty of religious faith is to 'humanise' our world or to 'personalise' our world, to overcome the world of 'It' and welcome the presence of 'Thou'. This is also what it means to 'divinise' our world – hallowing each other and each created life as sacred and holy. The fact that I learn to say *You* – this is the religious.

## 4 Trapped in Immanence

Over sixty years ago, Buber (1957, 224; 226) perceptively wrote: "The theories of seeing-through and unmasking, both the psychological and the sociological, have become the great sport among men." As such, we end up in a world of mistrust and suspicion, rather than mutual recognition and dialogue.

In an insipid, narcissistic culture, Levinas helps us feel again *what it is to be addressed*. His writing comes to us as a constant prophetic appeal that is deeply shaped by the Hebraic tradition. According to this tradition, freedom does not reside in my authentic subjectivity; rather, freedom is *subjected* to an exteriority – the exteriority of God and the exteriority of my neighbour (Chalier 1995, 7). A self that is founded on autonomous subjectivity alone – free and above all constraints – is a 'self-sameness', an *egoism* (or even worse, a potential 'totalitarianism'). For Levinas (1969, 88) existence *for itself* is not the ultimate meaning; rather, it is existence *for the other*. The other addresses me and calls into question my existence:

Can the Same welcome the Other, not by giving the Other to itself as a theme (that is to say, as being) but by putting itself in question? Does not this putting in question occur precisely when the Other has nothing in common with me, when the Other is wholly other, that is to say, a human Other? When, through the nakedness and destitution of his defenseless eyes, he forbids murder and paralyzes my impetuous freedom? [...] This putting into question of the Same by the Other is a summons to respond [...] the responsibility that empties the I of its imperialism and egoism. (Levinas 1996, 16–18)

What matters is not so much the 'Here I am' that is the declaration and assertion of my existence, but the 'Here I am' that is the response of my existence to the call and

claim of the other. “The word I means here I am,” writes Levinas (1991, 114). The priority here is not with the I constituting itself, but with the call of the other who asks after me, who asks me to be, not for myself alone, but also for the “stranger, the widow, and the orphan.” This calling into question of my existence by the presence of the other constitutes my identity as a response-ability and answer-ability. As Adriaan Peperzak (1986, 211–212) suggests, “In the ethical ‘experience’, the ego of I think discovers itself as I am obliged ... not I think, I see, I will, I want, I can, but ‘me voici’ (Here I am).”

Levinas is converting the ‘I think, therefore I am’ of modern, Western thought into the ‘Here I am’ (Hebrew: *Hinéni*) of biblical, prophetic response. “The I loses its hold before the absolutely Other, before the human Other, and can no longer be powerful” (1996, 17). Relinquishing the power to say I, however, is not the annihilation of the I; rather, it is the election of the I as chosen and responsible before the face of God and neighbour. “I am,” says Levinas, “as if I had been chosen” (1993, 35).

According to Levinas, much of the religious soul in the West has been captured by a type of ‘immanentism’, whereby any talk of God’s otherness or revelation or transcendence seems offensive to our intelligence. We are allergic to transcendence. “But the paradox of faith,” writes Jacques Derrida (1995, 63) “is that interiority remains ‘incommensurable with exteriority’.” The inner world is no match for the transcendence of exteriority. If the event of religious faith is not to be dissolved into psychology, withdrawn into inwardness, deadened by sameness, reduced to the innate processes of socialization, or lost in an all-absorbing immanence, then it must be aligned with an elsewhere and an otherwise, with revelation. Levinas found an exit from self-enclosed being that allowed him to move toward being-open-to-the-other. What he perceived in this radical movement of transcendence he later named the ‘face’ – the one who is other than me and exterior to myself. With the revelation of the face, he realized that the world is not structured by indifference and impersonality, but by the “gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other” (1969, 24).

Revelation punctures the circle of immanence and arrives instead as a magnificent message. Especially for the prophetic traditions of Judaism and Christianity, attention to the voice of the other is always a pivotal moment in the announcement and advent of God. Levinas helps us realize again that we are personal, living, relational beings – that our lives are not so much self-sufficient and self-made projects; rather, we are answering, responding subjects.

Much attention in spiritual life is given to the interior life. No doubt this is important. Yet Levinas also brings a deep appreciation for the exterior life. He writes: “The exteriority of discourse cannot be converted into interiority. The interlocutor can have no place in an inwardness; he is forever outside. The relationship between separated beings does not totalize them; it is an ‘unrelenting relation’, which no one can encompass or thematize. [...] For no concept lays hold of exteriority” (1969, 295).

Revelation establishes a relation with exteriority. “This exteriority – unlike the exteriority which surrounds man whenever he seeks knowledge – cannot be trans-

formed into a content with interiority; it remains ‘uncontainable’, infinite, and yet the relation is maintained” (Levinas 1989b, 207).

Levinas privileges you before me, you above me, you in front of me. Paul Ricoeur (1998, 170) evokes similar associations: *Anteriority* – before me; *Superiority* – above me; *Exteriority* – in front of me. According to Ricoeur, these three references delineate the religious. It is interesting that he does not speak of *interiority* or within me. Our interior worlds will never be the full measure of all that lay outside ourselves, in front of us and beyond us.

Monotheism is not afraid or embarrassed to speak in the name of ‘thou’, ‘you’, the ‘Most High’, the orphan, widow, stranger. Monotheism is a vigorous and infinite exposure to what is other in our life – God, neighbour, creation – none of which originate in me or are purely internal to me. Exteriority is necessary if we are to experience what is required of us, or what we are called to serve and dedicate our lives to. Exteriority is necessary even to know that we are loved, that *another* loves me. Our twofold lives (call and response, commandment and obedience, being chosen and choosing) are directly attributable to the monotheistic insight that “the Lord our God, the Lord, is one” – unique, irreplaceable, original, existing – the singular one who binds us in relation rather than the all-absorbing one who assimilates us in sameness. Levinas (1998, 31) writes: “Forty centuries of monotheism have had no other goal than to liberate humanity from their own obsessive grip.” “*Shema yisra’el!*”

The miracle of exteriority is the miracle of having another to love; it is the miracle of relation, the miracle of living in each other’s presence. “In ethical and religious terms: you will have someone to love, you will have someone for whom to exist, you cannot be just for yourself” (Levinas 1998, 113).

All of life – each and every life – is tied to another life. We do not exist – cannot exist – on our own. We are bundled together in life – with all that is living and shares time with us. We are bundled together with every living creature, with all the natural world. We are bundled together with friends and family, with neighbours and strangers, with the rich and the poor, with the just and the unjust. We are bundled together with writers and artists, texts and traditions, saints and prophets. We are bundled together on this beautiful blue earth, under a night sky – the wheat and the chaff together. And in the midst of all this life, there is an abiding mystery – there is “my relationship to you” (Veling 2014).

## 5 God Is Personal and Relational

Commenting on his translation of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann (1970, 26) writes: “God cannot be spoken of, but God can be spoken to. God cannot be seen, but God can be listened to. The only possible relation with God is to address him and to be addressed by him, here and now.” For most people of faith, God is not a theory or a problem, a treatise or a dogma, a speculation or a doctrine, a *this* or a *that*. God is the one who hears our prayers, more than the one we talk about. It is more impor-

tant to speak to God rather than about God. “Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt 6:26). For most people, God is their deepest and most secret hope, the one they talk to, the one they pray to, the one who listens and understands. In speech, as also in prayer, “we do not just think of the interlocutor, we speak to him” (Levinas 1998, 32).

Amidst the hardships of life, God is the miraculous one. God can do what seems impossible, can change what seems hopeless, can soften even the hardest heart. God is personal, relational, mysterious, and intimate.

The world is propelled by many impersonal forces, forces that we ourselves have made, forces that make the world go round – economic systems, political structures, laws and jurisdictions, programs, and agendas – what St. Paul calls “the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this age” (Eph 6:12; 1 Cor 2:6).

To speak of life’s inherent personality is difficult. John Macmurray, a Scottish philosopher writing in the 1930s, raised his voice in the name of personality, yet he always found his task frustrating. “It is a shallow civilization we’ve got,” he wrote in a letter to a friend, “people don’t seem to know what I mean when I talk about a *personal* life. ‘What’s the use of it?’ is what they ask” (1992, xi). Speaking of the personal life, he writes: “It is amazing how blind we are to this simplest and commonest of all our fields of experience, and to the way it determines and conditions all the others. The last thing we seem to become aware of in our conscious reflection is one another and the concrete ties that bind us together in the bundle of life” (1992, 153).

To think about personality – to write and speak of it – is difficult because personality doesn’t like to be called an ‘it’ at all (Veling 2013). Personality is not a concept, something that can be conceptualized or pinned down (or even less, something that can be utilised), because personality refuses to be treated as a ‘thing’. Nevertheless, Erazim Kohák (1984, 126) attempts a definition of sorts, saying that personality “is the decision to treat the Person, the Person-al mode of being, as the ultimate metaphysical category.” He goes on to say that personality is concerned with relationships between us, relationships that are marked with respect and responsibility for each other and for the world in which we live. Personality reminds us that moral and interpersonal categories of love, care, and goodness lie at the very heart of life.

According to the Russian religious philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, most of us live somewhat unthinkingly in the context of social arrangements and cultural norms that shape the way we live in the world. Yet personality is the exception to all of this:

In human personality there is much that is generic, belonging to the human race, much which belongs to history, tradition, society, class, family [...] much that is ‘common’. But it is precisely this which is not ‘personal’ in personality. That which is ‘personal’ is original [...] Personality is the exception, not the rule. The secret of the existence of personality lies in its absolute irreplaceability, its happening but once, its uniqueness, its incomparableness. (1944, 23–24)

That which is personal is original, which is to say that human personality is not interchangeable, but rather incomparable and unique. Berdyaev calls this the secret of

existence that belongs to each and every person. It is a secret because no human personality can ever be fully known by systems of thought, or subsumed by social processes, or reduced to any other form of contingency or conditioning.

Levinas (1993, 117–118) cites a Talmudic passage that plays on the image of minting coins: “Behold man, who strikes coins with the same die and gets coins all alike; but behold the Holy-Blessed-Be-He, who strikes all men with the die of Adam and not one is the same as another.” Human beings are not like minted coins, interchangeable and alike; rather, human beings are incomparable and unique. This incomparableness reveals the trace of God in humanity.

Personality is the exception, not the rule. Personality asks us to think exceptionally rather than routinely. Personality requires an almost saintly attention to the often unnoticed – the singular one amidst the multitude. There may well be a hundred, but there is also the one. Personality asks us to act with the exceptional in mind, rather than according to customary norms or conventions. Personality represents a great difficulty for anyone who seeks all-encompassing theories or all-embracing standards. Even before the law and the court of justice, there is always the exceptional one. Personality is not made to measure or made to fit. Rather, it is immeasurable and cannot be contained.

“The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). This is a key principle in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Like a good rabbi, like a person well-schooled in the Torah, Jesus was always sensitive to the exception before the law. Jesus gave preference to the errant one, rather than to the righteous or law-abiding one. He spoke of leaving ninety-nine behind to go in search of the one who had strayed (Matt 18:12). He preferred the exceptional one rather than the well-placed or well-positioned one (Luke 18:9–14). He often came to the defense of the one accused before the law, as with the woman “caught in adultery” (John 8:1–11). He “welcomed sinners and ate with them” (Luke 15:2).

Liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez, maintains that human beings are most prone to inflicting violence upon others precisely when the other person is considered as anything but human – indeed, as a ‘non-person’. History abounds with examples, and the times have not changed very much. We continue to depersonalise and dehumanise our fellow human beings. “The majority of peoples today are still non-persons,” Gutiérrez says, “they are not even considered as human persons” (1992, 272). I am often reminded, for example, of a striking image from a civil rights march of the 1960s, where African American men are walking down the streets with placards declaring, “I am a man.”

Catholic theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx (1987, 174) tells us that “the great symbol of the human as *imago Dei* is the one permissible image of God that is not an idolatry.” To disparage the human person or any living creature is to make a mockery of God, rather than to respect the image of God. I recall attending a Passover meal with a family in Jerusalem. One of the readings during the meal was the following passage from the Psalms, which made quite an impression on me:



Their idols are silver and gold,  
     the work of human hands.  
 They have mouths but do not speak,  
     eyes but do not see.  
 They have ears but do not hear,  
     noses but do not smell.  
 They have hands but do not feel,  
     feet but do not walk,  
     and no sound rises from their throats.  
 Their makers shall be like them,  
     all who trust in them.  
 (Ps 115:4–8)

God is not to be identified with dead and lifeless things, with idols that have no soul, no sense of the human, no living *personality*. God is not a faceless, impersonal God, but the God who is face-to-face, the God of the living. The personal and the relational have everything to do with the holiness of life.

“To sense the sacred,” Abraham Heschel says, “is to sense what is dear to God” (1965, 49). The concerns of God are personal. If not, then I don’t know how we can speak of God’s relationality, or God’s communication, or God’s justice and mercy. These concerns are either matters of personal concern, or empty ‘matter-less’ theories. It is difficult for systems and constructs to capture these concerns because much of our systematic and abstract thought is empty of personality. Our ways of thinking and systematising often take their shape in the impersonal worlds of detached thought and rational knowledge. We always think about, about, about ... and what is personal eludes us. Personality can only be experienced in relational encounter, yet most of our lives are distracted by the structures and routines of impersonal existence. It takes an attentive soul and a responsive awareness to embrace God’s personal concerns.

The concerns of God are personal. They are concerns that are ever focused on the lost and the last, the unnoticed and the little one. In every crowd, in every bureaucracy, in every managerial and administrative system, God sees the personal one, and lifts this one up, beyond the dark forces of impersonal being. Even when thronged by the crowds, Jesus never failed to notice the one who stands out, the one silenced and shunned by the crowds, like the blind beggar sitting by the road (Mark 10:46–51).

The concerns of God are personal. They are the concerns of dignity – the dignity of each human person and every living being – not as pieces in a system or players in a grand scheme – but as personal, living entities – unique and irreplaceable. God’s concerns are the concerns of loving relationships, whereby we nurture friendship and respect – hallowing each other and each created life as sacred and holy.

Attention to the beauty and singularity of personality magnifies, rather than diminishes, our apprehension of the Divine. There is a holy spark in every living creature and every human being. Can we say that the ocean has personality? I’m sure a seafarer would say so – not only of the ocean, but of the wind as well. The geologist

and the sculptor know the personality of rock and granite. The farmer and the gardener know the personality of soil and plants. The conservationist knows the personality of rainforests and wetlands. Indigenous people have long taught us that there is spirit and personality in all living creatures – in earth and sky, in land and ocean, in the natural ecologies of life that sustain us all.

As Martin Buber (1970, 57–58) notes, personality also finds expression in the natural world. “I contemplate a tree,” he writes. In doing so, “I can assign it to a species”; “I can overcome its uniqueness”; “I can dissolve it into a number.” In all these ways, “the tree remains my object and has its place.” However, Buber continues, “it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree, I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an *It*. The power of exclusiveness has seized me.” Personality is concerned with all that addresses and reveals itself to me in its “thou-like” originality.

If we could let go of our arrogance, perhaps we could see that there is friendship in creation. Think of birds, for example. They are perhaps one of our shiest creatures, born of the air and distant to us, which is perhaps why I especially love it when they draw close and display amazing trust across the barrier of our strangeness, as though there were some primal part of them that recognized creation’s friendship. I love this capacity for friendship expressed in the wild and the untamed. Communion in creation is a wonderful gift, if only we could listen and be attentive, if only we could believe that there are, as George Steiner (1989) reminds us, “real presences” in life, real signs of vitality and personality.

God’s personal love means that people of different creeds, people of different nationalities, people of different social and economic backgrounds can share friendship. It is not that the differences between us do not matter; indeed, they are the basis for the infinite variety of relationships that can be shared in our interpersonal lives. Yet when we cling to our differences or guard them in fear, we lose sight of God’s love and are living instead in a world of labels and name-calling: you are this, you are that; they are this, they are that. Love helps us to find joy in living together, to seek mutual understanding, to share experience, to express and reveal ourselves to one another. This is all that is required of us – to put down our swords, surrender our defenses, and share in the spirit of friendship which is the essence of the personal and spiritual life.

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