

seems to share some of these attributes. This chapter will thematically specify the teachings from different traditions.

The Impossibility of Understanding God

The human inability to fully understand God is captured by Exodus 3:14 when it says: Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh. The full verse is:

And God said to Moses, ‘Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.’ He continued, ‘Thus shall you say to the Israelites, Ehyeh sent me to you.’

Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh is translated variously as I Am that I Am, or I Will Be What I Will Be. This phrase has now become a common refrain, implying that God cannot be defined. And that is a rather common teaching in most religions, implying that God can be known only to God. Rabbi Isaac the Blind (twelfth century), one of the first well-known Kabbalists, even repudiates apophasis by depicting *deus absconditus* (the Hidden God) as “that which is not conceivable by thinking,” and not “He who is not, etc.”⁵⁹⁷ In *Sha’are Orach*, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla (thirteenth century) elaborates on the difficulty of knowing anything about God:

The depth of primordial being is called Boundless. Because of its concealment from all creatures, above and below, it is also called Nothingness. If one asks, “What is it!” The answer is ‘Nothing,’ meaning: no one can understand anything about it. It is negated of every conception. No one can know anything about it—except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anyone other than it. Therefore its name is ‘I am becoming.’⁵⁹⁸

The *Qur’an* (72:26) explicitly debars the possibility of human perceptivity reaching such apprehension: “He (alone) knows that which is beyond the reach of a created being’s perception, and to none does He disclose aught of the mysteries of His Own unfathomable knowledge...”

The *Qur’an* (31:27) also points to the impossibility of a human effort yielding any fruit in capturing God’s infinite knowledge: “And

if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea (were ink), with seven [more] seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted: for, verily, God is almighty, wise.”

Also frequent are instances where scriptures extend praises to, while acknowledging the unfathomable infinitude of, the Lord. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (p 488) provides such an example: “O Lord, Sustainer and Cherisher, You are infinite, unfathomable and endless.”

The feeling of wonder and awe is expressed in the *Dead Sea Scrolls* with the following words: “Who can fathom the designs of Your heart? Apart from You nothing has existed, and without Your will nothing will be; yet none can understand Your wisdom nor gaze upon Your secrets.”⁵⁹⁹

GOD IN THE UPANISHADS, RIG VEDA, AND BHAGAVAD GITA

He truly knows Brahman who knows Him as beyond knowledge; he who thinks that he knows, knows not. The ignorant think that Brahman is known, but the wise know Him to be beyond knowledge.

—*Kena Upanishad* 2.1-3

Who knows this truly, and who will now declare it, what paths lead together to the gods? Only their lowest aspects of existence are seen, who exist on supreme, mystical planes.

—*Rig Veda* 3.54.5

All this universe, deluded by the qualities inherent in nature, fails to know that I am beyond them and unchanging.

—*Gita* 7.13

Insert 13:1
