

God, Consciousness and the Problem of Anthropopathism:

Theological Musings of the Late Shmully Moskowitz z”l

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An old friend of mine was buried last week. I haven't seen him for a few years and did not call to say goodbye. I had heard he was sick but didn't think he was going to die; pneumonia doesn't generally kill 50 year old men, but, I guess, sometimes it does.

I am not going to use this post to eulogize him; many have [done this](#) and some of the eulogies are even available [online](#). (I will throw in, however, that Shmully was one of the smartest and funniest men I ever knew.) Instead, I will take the opportunity to describe one of our last conversations and the important theological insight that he taught me. As the post is written in my words, and I will not have the opportunity to run it by him, I hope that the post accurately reflects his thinking.

A few years ago, when I was in Israel interviewing Israelis for the Torah Mitzion kollel I ran in Atlanta at the time, I spent Shabbat in my old neighborhood in Ma'aleh Mikhmas. Shmully was renting a house there at the time, and we got

¹ Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

together for a *seudah shlishit* at a mutual friend's house. The topic of God and religion came up, it often did with Shmully, and somehow we got to speaking about anthropomorphism. (I will explain how we got onto that subject at the end of the post.)

For those who are unfamiliar with the term, anthropomorphism means imputing human physical characteristics to something not human, in this case God. For example, people who imagine God as an old man with a big grey beard would be describing God anthropomorphically.

Anthropomorphism was considered by Maimonides, among other Jewish philosophers, as a grave sin, as it reduced the Almighty to human form. For Shmully and I, these ideas were rather old-hat. We were both trained in YBT (Yeshiva Bnei Torah, popularly known as Rabbi Chait's Yeshiva), a yeshiva strongly influenced by Maimonidean thought, and being "on the look-out" for anthropomorphism was in our blood; (as Shmully was the son of [Rabbi Morton Moskowitz](#), one of Rabbi Chait's early friends and colleagues, Maimonidean philosophy was probably in his mother's milk.) Shmully, however, said to me that he believed that even most Maimonideans haven't really wrapped their heads around the problem.

At first, I thought he was referring to the related problem of anthropopathism. For the jargonly-uninitiated, anthropopathism refers to the imputing of human feelings to the non-human. I was surprised, I said, that he thought that this concept was so little understood. It had been drilled into us at YBT that all descriptions of God having feelings, whether it was love for Israel or anger at sinners, were

metaphorical, so it would be hard to imagine that this was the nuance so many of his fellow were not grasping. “What is it,” I asked, “that you think we run-of-the-mill Maimonideans aren’t getting?”

Here is Shmully’s response. Imagining a body is the most obvious “gross” anthropomorphism. Emotions are the next step up, as it makes intuitive sense to assume that the creator of the universe does not have “feelings”. However, there is a more abstract kind of anthro-projection at work that is difficult to notice. When we discuss God creating, for instance, or God’s providence, we inevitably imagine an organized, purposeful mind making a conscious decision. The mind has a thought and a will and decides to do or not do something. Although it is inevitable for humans to imagine this, it is also a form of anthro-projection, as we imagine the organization and function of our minds in the “mind” of the Creator. “Imputing consciousness to God is also a form of anthropopathism,” Shmully argued.

This, he said, is the import of Maimonides’ claim that all knowledge of God is negative knowledge. We cannot really say that God has a “will”, or that God “runs” the world. All such statements are filtered through human mental projection. Although some language about God remains necessary for any philosophical or religious discussion on the subject, all claims must be understood to be poor approximations of the real idea.

The key example we were discussing was God as creator. Although one can say that God created the world, all a Maimonidean could mean by this is that the world is in existence due to God in some way inexplicable to us. God is the ultimate cause of the world; anything more than this inevitably muddles the picture.

Although this point should have been obvious to someone who has read Maimonides' discussion of God upwards of a hundred times, I found (and still find) the idea almost too abstract to wrap my head around (as Shmully correctly claimed about me at the beginning of the conversation). What struck me more than just the abstractness of the concept, was the amazing way that it solved a particular intellectual problem faced in discussion of modern religions.

The way we got to the issue of anthropomorphism was by way of a point I was trying (unsuccessfully) to make about modern religions. Shmully had been recently studying up on some eastern religions (I don't remember which) and I said that it seems to me that one major dividing line between western and eastern religions is the concept of God. For Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God is the force behind the universe. For Hinduism and Buddhism, it is an unconscious unifying force (Brahman). I argued—pontificated—that Freud discussed this difference in *Civilizations and its Discontents*, claiming that the former religions project father-figures onto the world, whereas the latter religions project the womb-experience onto the world.

It was in response to this that Shmully stated that I was making too fine of a distinction between the two sets of theologies. Since even God-based religions must admit that their God cannot be “conscious” in the human sense, assuming they do not subscribe to anthropopathic thinking (some do, of course), the distinction between western theology and eastern theology is overdone.

Years later, I still think about Shmully's principle of abstract anthropopathism and its many applications. How does one think about revelation and divine providence

without imagining consciousness? It was a lot to digest over a couple of ḥallah rolls and hummus, and I still considering the implications.

This was only one of the many conversations I had with Shmully over the years.

Shmully, my friend, you will be missed.