

PREDICATE THEOLOGY IN MODERN JUDAISM

by Ian Ellis-Jones

Predicate theology, as it is known, has contributed to a new understanding of the nature of God and religion. This “school of theology” was initially developed by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. Kaplan, a religious naturalist, rejected all traditional forms of theism, along with all notions of supernaturalism, and asserted that God was the sum of all natural processes that allowed a person to become self-fulfilled as a human being. Kaplan’s ideas were popularized and further developed by one of his former students Rabbi Harold M Schulweis.

In predicate theology God, as opposed to the “qualities” of God, is essentially unknowable; thus, the emphasis is on “godliness” and those qualities or virtues that are “godlike” or “divine”. In his book *Evil and the Morality of God* (1984) Rabbi Schulweis has written that “the humanly comprehensible qualities of goodness, love, intelligence and creativity are godly ... they themselves are worthy of adoration, cultivation, and emulation in the lives of the believers.”

Mordecai Kaplan spoke in terms of God, not as a person, but as “the Power” or “the Process”. In *Questions Jews Ask* (1956) Rabbi Kaplan wrote, “God is the Process by which the universe produces persons, and persons are the process by which God is manifest in the individual.” Rabbi David A Cooper, author of the best-seller *God is a Verb* (1997), writes: “What is God? In a way, there is no God. Our perception of God usually leads to a misunderstanding that seriously undermines our spiritual development.” Cooper goes on to say, “God is not what we think It is. God is not a thing, a being, a noun. It does not exist, as existence is defined, for It takes up no space and is not bound by time. Jewish mystics often refer to It as *Ein Sof*, which means Endlessness.” Further, writes Cooper, “The closest thing we can come to thinking about God is as a process rather than a being. We can think of it as “be-ing,” as verb rather than noun. Perhaps we would understand this concept better if we renamed God. We might call It God-ing, a process, rather than God, which suggests a noun.”

One of predicate theology’s modern exponents is Rabbi Harold S Kushner, author of the best-seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), who has written:

“Predicate theology” means that when we find statements about God that say, for example, “God is love, God is truth, God is the friend of the poor,” we are to concentrate on the predicate rather than on the subject. Those are not statements about God; they are statements about love, truth and befriending the poor, telling us that those are divine activities, moments in which God is present..... They are not things that God does; they are things that we do, and when we do them, God is present in our lives.

Similar views are expressed in Humanistic Judaism. Erich Fromm, one of the most respected humanists and social philosophers of the 20th century, and author of the best-seller *The Art of Loving* (1956), saw God as standing for “the highest value, the most desirable good”, a “symbol of man’s own powers which he tries to realize in his life”, the “image of man’s higher self, a symbol of what man potentially is or ought to become”. In other words, God is an image, an idea, a symbol of what we human beings can ultimately become - a view shared by many modern day Unitarians.

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