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God as a Person Who Resolves All Issues Automatically

C.S. (Clive Staples) Lewis wrote the novel "Till We Have Faces" to make the point that the mere presence of God the person answers all big questions or makes them irrelevant. It resolves all issues. I appreciate this view, for reasons I explain below. Yet I disagree. The simple presence of a person, not even God, does not automatically resolve all big issues. We still have questions, and still have to seek. I think God wants it this way.

Lewis implies that he speaks for standard orthodox Trinitarian Christianity, and I think he is correct: "Jesus is the answer"; "Christ is the answer". I leave to Lewis and churches to explain how the mere presence of the Christ deals with questions. I still disagree with both Lewis and the churches.

Below, I give reasons why we might think that the mere presence of a person resolves all issues, then explain why I still disagree. My alternative view is simple. Get what you can from belief in God and the message of Jesus, then use your brains to work it all out as best you can. You will not figure it all out, so, at some point, you do have to trust God. Trusting God is not the same as thinking his mere presence resolves all issues.

I am quite sure that if Jesus appeared before me now, or if God appeared before me now as a person, that I would shut up, do what I was told as long as it was not egregiously immoral, and that would be the end of that. I am human, and I am susceptible to awe. But my humanity does not make this issue go away. My human weakness does not mean there is not a real question here. We still have to think about why the mere presence of God does not automatically resolve all issues even if it would awe us into silent obedience.

Psychologists and students of religion are correct that one of the big contributors to ideas of God is our authority figures among real humans, in particular our parents. God is our parents writ large. Jesus often called God "father". We do get ideas of God from authority figures. Still, students of religion are wrong to reduce God to parents. That explanation for God does not approach what is most important about God and what we feel apart from using our parents to get at God.

Take for granted that students of religion are partly correct about authority figures as models for God. When we were children, and we squabbled, worried that our broken bike would never be the same, or wondered why Grandma died, then our parents reassured us. Their mere presence reassured us. When we screw up at work, and our boss comes to visit us, his-her presence reassures us even if he-she says nothing about our screw up. People feel reassured by the presence of a priest, and, the higher the rank, the greater the feeling of reassurance.

All that is fine but it is not accurate in the case of God. As Lewis would insist, emotion is not spirituality. Our parents can reassure us emotionally but we need a bigger sense of security for spiritual issues. Our parents can make us feel better about Grandma dying but that does not explain why she died and what happens to her after she dies. God is our parents writ large but he is greater than that. Because he is greater than that, it might seem the mere presence of God does satisfy the need for spiritual comfort. Yet that is not true. In fact, just because God is greater than our parents writ large, the reassurance that we might get from the mere presence of God, however great, does not solve our spiritual issues any more than the emotional reassurance that we get from our parents can solve our spiritual issues. God has to resolve our issues spiritually, and, for that, God-as-parent-writ-very-large can't do the job.

By the way, as long as we had good authority role models, and we don't make mistakes about the feeling of security we get from using them as models for God, then I think it is just fine that we do use childhood authority figures as role models for God and that some of the security we feel from God is based on good childhood relations to authority figures. On the other hand, if you had bad relations with parents and authority figures, try not to let that spoil your relation with God.

Parents are more than emotional reassurance, they also make the rules, and they don't always explain the rules. In the end, that is how it was for us as children, and it usually worked out for the best. God too is a rule giver and does not often offer explanations, so we take the same attitude toward God as rule giver that we took toward our parents. Their presence as authority figures resolves the issues in that we have to do what they say. In the case of our parents, at some time, we grew up. We saw for ourselves what the rules were all about and why it turned out best using those rules. We can become adult parents ourselves. In the case of God, that doesn't happen. We don't see what it is all about and how the rules make it turn out best in the end. We can never grow up to be God. So, again, while we can use good parents as role models, we cannot expect to transfer that whole relation from our parents to God and we cannot expect it to satisfy us. The presence of God cannot answer our questions in the same way that growing up to be rule givers like our parents could satisfy our questions. Even if we stay children in our relation to God, it is not the same as when we were children with our earthly parents.

Besides, I don't think God wants us to stay children in that sense. He wants us to be grown up children. Grown up children do not think the mere presence of their parents, the mere presence of Grandpa and Grandma, resolves all issues. When we were kids and didn't know about bills, the mere presence of our father might have meant a treat such as a chocolate bar. When we grow up, we know the mere presence of our parents-now-become-Grandpa-and-Grandma doesn't pay the bills even if they still give chocolate to our kids, their grandchildren. When we grow up, God wants us to work to pay what bills we can.

In real life, where some, but not too many, people each hold partial power in different spheres, power is somewhat hierarchical, and most people feel that they don't have much power themselves, people seek a particular relation. People seek to be students of a mentor or clients of a patron. The goal is wealth, security, and power at least as much as average. People do not seek answers to questions but do seek

security and advantage. The mere presence of the patron reassures them they will get that. People seek the biggest most powerful patron they can get. The biggest most powerful patron we can get is God. So the presence of God resolves all issues for us that count. In Palestine of Jesus' time, the model for patron was temple priest, high ranking soldier, estate owner, or government official. For us now, it is likely corporate CEO, president of the school, head of our church, or government official.

If we want to think of our relation to God as client to patron, and our issue as security, then the mere presence of God does resolve our issue. As long as God is willing to appear before us, then he continues to accept us as clients, and so we are in good standing and secure. I hope we don't think of our relation to God in this way. I think Jesus wanted us not to think of our relation to God this way even when Jesus talked about God as land owner and king. Here I don't go into what our relation with God should be. As long as it is not client to patron, and our chief issue is not security, then the above model doesn't hold, and the mere presence of God does not resolve all our issues.

In the Tanakh (Old Testament) story of Job, God never gives Job an explanation. People think God gives Job an explanation but God does not. Finally God simply says, "I am amazing. This is the way it is. I am that I am. You are too stupid to understand me. I can't give you an explanation that would make sense to you. It is going to happen whether you like it or not. It will all work out well in the end. Either you believe me and trust me or you don't. If you do, you will get along better." I think Lewis would take this to mean that the mere presence of God resolves all issues. If I were Job, I would not push God too hard for an answer, but also I would not think God's assertion made questions and wondering irrelevant.

Jews do not think of their traditional relation to God as only legalistic, or primarily legalistic, but legalism is enough a part of their relation to God so that legalism can be used to make a point here. God issues commands; God gives laws; Jews follows the laws, as much to the letter as they can; if Jews follow well enough, God rewards them; if Jews do not follow well enough, God punishes them; some of the laws make obvious good sense, such as the general idea of the Sabbath; some of the laws do not make obvious good sense such as "don't eat shrimp"; but they are all still laws, and they have to be followed anyway. If this is the essence of the relation to God, then the mere presence of God resolves all issues.

I also hope this bad legalism is not the essence of the relation of people to God. This relation is like that of weak citizen to all-powerful irrational dictator. When the dictator shows up, you do what he says, and that is that. While Jesus respected the Law, he did not see it this way. Traditionally, Christians ridiculed this kind of legalism, although, to me, some Christian churches, such as the Calvinist churches, rest on this kind of legalism. Here I take Christians at their word and assume this narrow legalistic relation is not the essence of the relation of God to people. In that case, the mere presence of God cannot resolve all issues. We are free to seek the spirit of the laws and to wonder about particular laws and particular situations, as Jews have done in practice almost always.

The fact that God is a person is one of the central ideas of Hebrew (Jewish) religion. As a person, we can relate to God in ways that we cannot relate to abstract ideas such as "the Word" or "final cause". As the above examples show, relations with persons are more complicated and confusing than relations with

abstract ideas. Persons can be parents, authorities, dictators, and friends. One aspect of relations to a person is that the mere presence of a person can re-assert the relation, make inquiries not to the point, and so resolve issues. "I'm here for you; that should answer your questions". Husbands and wives say this to each other, especially after a spat or after one finds fault with the other. A standard scene on TV is friends, brothers, or sisters, making up after a spat with a handshake or a hug, without worrying about the trivial issue that started the bad spell in the first place. The face of a friend melts our heart and makes us love him-her all over again despite the crumpled fender, the drunken kissing of our spouse, or the missing pot stash.

Lewis had in mind something more like great awe when he wrote the mere presence of God resolves all issues but Lewis might accept this kind of personal presence as one way in which the mere presence of God resolves all issues. We renew our relation to a person and so we renew ourselves as persons. I like this. I hope this aspect of the total relation between God and people plays a big part. Still, I don't think it resolves all issues. The personal relation between God-as-person and each human-as-a-person helps us greatly but it does not by itself answer questions. In some relations between people, questions still have to be resolved. An accused person is a person, the judge is a person, and they might even be good friends, but that does not make the judge automatically acquit and forgive the accused. Something else is at stake too and cannot be overlooked. Maybe I can forgive my buddy for trying to kiss my wife once briefly but I can't forget that he chased her for half-an-hour at the party. Even for simple incidents such as eating all my ice cream without permission, we need guidelines about what we should do in terms of forgiving and forgetting. I can see how the mere presence of God makes it clear that I have to live by his rules, and I hope his mere presence means that he forgives me and we are "good to go". But that still does not answer all questions for everyone. We still wonder what happened and what that means for how we behave toward each other and toward God in the future.

I think Lewis also wrote, somewhere, that people come in two kinds. The first kind says "your will be done" to God while the second kind says "my will be done". The first kind submits totally to God, as in idealized Islam, while the second kind asserts his ego over at least some of the world. The first kind goes to heaven while the second kind goes to hell. Accepting that the mere presence of God resolves all issues is like the first kind of person who gives in totally to God. Not accepting that the mere presence of God resolves all issues, even when we are willing to do as God says, is like the second selfish kind of person who goes to hell. Contrary to what people usually think, it takes a lot of training and courage to say "your will be done" to God and really mean it. I have a lot of sympathy for the few people who can really say this from the bottom of their hearts. I see what Lewis was after.

But it is not as simple as this. Saying to God "I am happy to do as you say when I can know what you say but I still don't understand what I should do in every situation, I still have a lot of questions, and those questions bear on what I should do" is not the same as saying "my will be done". Saying "life is hard and complicated, and I wish I knew more" is not the same as saying "my will be done". Saying "you made me with a brain and with my own sense of right-and-wrong, so I want to use them to understand how things work and what to do" is not the same as saying "my will be done".

If God only wanted us to do his will, he would simply appear in all his glory, and everybody would do his will out of fear or out of hope for reward. That is not resolving issues; that is imposing will. That is not what God wants. God wants us to do the right things for the right reasons. If God made his will totally clear in every case, then people would follow it, but for the wrong reasons. To get us to do the right things for the right reasons, God has to: give basic principles, leave a lot of situations vague enough so we have to think them out, make a lot of situations (but not all) clear enough if we use his principles to think them through, and then let us alone to do what we need to do. Some principles God gives us through his prophets while others he gave us through our evolved sense of right and wrong. God does all that. We have to do the rest. Doing the rest is part of what “your will be done” means to me. Sometimes in trying to do the rest for ourselves, we go overboard and assert our will too much. We can recognize that and back off without damning ourselves to hell.

Now, the mere presence of God as a person would mean not that all issues are resolved but something along the lines of God saying to us “I am glad that you tried so hard, and you didn’t do a half-bad job. If you would like to keep trying on your own, I will be glad to give you as much more help as I think you should get. But if you would like to rest for a while, I can arrange that too.”

The idea that the mere presence of God resolves all issues does not lead us to give our will and submit our will to God in the ways that God wants. It leads us to negate our intellects, hearts, senses of right and wrong, judgment, and proper sense of obedience. It leads to abjectness that is offensive to God. It negates our personhood. It keeps us from doing the right things for the right reasons as persons as God wants us to do. It leads to people pretending they submit entirely to God while really using that as a cover to assert their own wills, as with religious terrorists. Lewis had the right idea but he carried it too far. We are not able to do it all entirely on our own but we should try as much as we can, and we will not try as God wants us to try if we sit around waiting for him to appear to resolve all issues.

I trust God in many arenas. God set up the world and he evolved us so that we, on our own, can mostly get along in the world, do the right thing for the right reason, find the world interesting, and contribute to the world. The principles that God gave us are usually enough. Only sometimes is the world too hard or too easy. When we die, God will explain as much as he thinks we need to know. When we die, God will do with us what he wishes. Things might not work out well on this planet but God will not blame me alone for the failure. I don’t worry about issues that are too big for me to handle.

What is the difference between trusting God as I do versus thinking the mere presence of God is enough to resolve all issues? This is one of those “either you get it or you don’t” situations. I can trust the captain of a ship, commanding officer, or my spouse without thinking they really can handle anything that comes up or that their mere presence is enough to resolve all situations. God can handle anything that comes up although I don’t expect him to do so in my favor. The fact that, after I die, God will explain what he wants me to know does not mean God resolves all issues for me by mere presence. It only means that, in this life, I know when to shut up, quit asking more questions, and start working hard. I think this sense is different from what Lewis and traditional Christians have in mind. It is enough for me.

I am not entirely sure why Lewis and orthodox Christians want the mere presence of God to resolve all big issues. Believing this does help people to sustain faith in Jesus and God. I would like all orthodox Christians to think about this: Not only Christians but almost all religions think of their gods as persons, and think their gods resolve all issues automatically by mere presence. Despite what Muslims say, they think of Mohammad as a "little god", think he is present in ceremonies and when people pray, and think that his presence resolves all issues. That is why some Muslims think they need nothing other than the Koran, and burn other religious books. Despite what the Buddha said, most Buddhists think of the Buddha, and all bodhisattvas, as gods, worship them, and think their mere presence resolves all issues. Hindu Bakhti is based on the idea that the god manifests him-herself to us, and his-her mere presence answers all questions. This general tendency is why students of religion see authority figures, parents, as the underlying basis for belief in gods.

Which real presence really does the job? Which real presence is really there? Which are phonies? Why does one real presence do the job but the others do not?

You make more progress if you stop thinking about mere presence and instead focus on the issues that God wants us to wrestle with.

Added Note.

After I wrote the above, I realized something additionally. Orthodox Trinitarian churches, such as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox, and sometimes Lutherans and Anglicans, make a big deal out of the Eucharist, and I don't fault them for that. In orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, Jesus is really present in the Eucharist. When people participate in the Eucharist, they are in the real presence of Jesus, and they really take him into their bodies. The Eucharist makes people feel really good. It makes people feel right with God. It reaffirms faith and trust in God. It makes people feel as if the existence of God and Jesus is enough. I am not sure this is what Lewis had in mind when he wrote that the mere presence of a god answers all issues well enough.

I wrote a separate note on the Eucharist.