

I AM WHO I AM

MYSTICISM OF GOD'S NAME AND THE QUESTION OF "WHO AM I"

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ABSTRACT

The paper interprets, in an original way, a connection between the Biblical name of God "I am who I am" and the mystical search of human identity. It presents God as the "author", "director" and "player" in His world "drama", while His human "co-actors" are not cognizant of their true identity as they are fully identified with their roles. According to the author, the idea of imitation of Christ points mainly to the discovery of this lost identity by following the question of "Who am I".

Key words

Mysticism, name of God, imitation of Christ, Self-enquiry

1 Where is Charles Bridge in Prague?

Imagine that a friend is calling you on your cell phone. He's just arrived in Prague and has a few hours of free time to spend and is in a hurry, "Hurry up! Where's Charles Bridge? What's the shortest way for me to get there?" In order to help him, what will your first question be?

This is not a catch question, just reply with

the first thing that crosses your mind. Obviously, it will be something like: "Where are you calling from?" or "How far have you got?" Alternatively, "Where do you want to set off from?"

Similarly, when someone calls an ambulance, the main thing is to respond to the questions quickly: "Who are you? Where are you calling from?", and then to tell them what has actually happened, despite the urge to start with what is happening at the moment.

And now let us assume that someone is urgently calling the Lord for help. If this individual had been listening well – which is hard for him, because something is bothering him – the first questions that he would have

heard, would have still been the same: "Who are you? Where are you calling from? How far have you got?"

You can raise the objection: "After all, the Lord must know this very well, so why would He ask these questions, moreover in a situation when one is sick?" The answer is: "Since His very question provides great relief to us all, actually the greatest that God is ever able to offer!"

How is this possible? Is the main concern of God not what is actually happening to us? Not really! That is not the cause of our misery at all! The real cause lies in how far we have come, from what distance we are calling Him, and finally, the crucial point – who we consider ourselves to be – in essence, who we actually are.

One may assume that there is no one more lost than the person who does not know where he or she is, who is completely lost. Only when one realises where one is, so that you are able to stick a pin on the map at the spot, does one have a much better chance of finding your way.

One can even say that if you could truly ask the fundamental question "Who am I?", you could find the key to knowing the answer to every other single question. Even if you aimed very high, such as to ask "Who is God?", this is also where the question "Who am I?" leads you, in fact, even by the shortest way.

However, this fundamental question is nothing new. It influenced our present destiny as early as three thousand years ago. At that time, God's help was needed not by a single individual, but by a whole nation, which was

groaning under foreign rule, lost in a foreign country.

2 God's drama

The whole history of the Israeli nation is a drama in which God is the main character. Initially, He is merely an "author", later also a "director", and eventually enters the play as the main "actor", and He also finds His life's "role" in it.

What exactly do we mean by a *role*? The word comes from an actual roll of paper with the text on it that actors would receive to know what their respective roles were. There were often only basic points on it and so an actor had to improvise for himself. Later, the role was identified with the person whose task was described by this role. In fact, the concept of a person arose from the theatre. Originally the concept meant a mask that had a hole in it for sound *per-sound* – hence *per-sona*, i.e. *person*. Like the role, the mask is also identified with the person it represents.

Thus, the actor has a role to play and the mask (nowadays, more a costume) signifies what appearance he is meant to have. However, let us return to God's drama. In the past, as well as today, genuineness and impressiveness are displayed by individual actors, not knowing that God is covertly present in each of them. They play out their life's roles, thinking that they themselves are the persons they are dressed to play, separated from others and from God. They have no idea that the original, the real Actor in them is no other than God Himself, now long forgotten, hidden behind the mask of a human face and

deeply rooted in the human role.

After all, they ended up here in the real world. The real world is no stage whatsoever! After all, they have their own head, hands and feet, their own thoughts, pain, and joy. They are hungry and thirsty, rejoicing in food and property. So, why the fuss about "Who am I?" "I'm a human, of course!" Certainly that is true, but it's only because no one would ever suspect that, on the stage of God's drama, to *be* a human is to *play the role* of a human *wearing a mask* of a human.

Should anyone manage to catch a glimpse of this fact, even just for a moment, he would previously have had to overcome another difficulty – in addition to his life role, there are other social roles to be played in human life: for example, one is a rabbi, whereas another is a beggar, another a widow or a queen. And as their social roles become firmly intertwined with their basic life's roles, then it undoubtedly really seems as if one has nothing in common with the other deep down inside.

Apart from assigning the actors in God's drama their life's roles and human masks, God-the-Director also assigns names to the actors. They have these in order to distinguish them from each other even more easily: you are as strong as a lion, your name will be Ariel, and you, in turn, are as meek as a lamb, your name will be Rebecca. Then, no one even suspects that he or she has been given a name that is *not his/her name*. A person immediately turns around on hearing this name, only proving how attached he/she has become to a name.

3 Who are we?

However, participants in God's drama are not only individuals but also entire nations. If an entire nation bursts on to the scene, then it must also be able to be distinguished. It must have its own identity. Initially, it is sufficient for its members to know each other by their names. Later, however, as their number increases, they need some common cultural symbol. Such a natural symbol may, for example, be a *totem* – a raised object people collectively look up to, often located at some frequently visited gathering place, named collectively after this place.

A totem is just a mere item. For the Israelites, it was supposedly dangerously close to the golden calf. But, an idol, in general, was forbidden! Therefore, an alternative option of identity became a priority for them, and that was a *common ancestor*. Every Israelite believed in his pedigree that had to extend somehow as far back as one of Jacob's sons. In this way, it was stipulated to an Israelite who was his neighbour and who was not, at least physically. Let us once more return to God's drama. If an Israelite had not realised that God was within him, would he ever have thought of God being in his neighbour as well, or even some day also in a man who was not his neighbour at all? Not directly, but via a mediator, this was surprisingly possible!

For the Israelites, from a common physical forefather there was only a small step to even more advanced identification – to a spiritual identification – and that is the mutual God. Thus far, they had no idea of God's presence in each human, so God showed up on the scene as another person –

with the advantage of being the same for everyone. This is how God Himself enters into His own drama. At first very distantly, but at this point visibly. Or is He instead dragged into it, being unable to resist out of love? Difficult to judge, it progresses slowly. From a completely hidden author, God-the-Creator manifests Himself partly as a director, as an empowering God, with the miraculous power to intervene and change the way the story goes at the last minute, whether at His own discretion or in response to an impassioned plea for help from the participating actors.

4 You are our God

“Who are we? We are the ones who have claimed allegiance to you.” To whom? “The one God, who is not an idol, nor does He have to look like a person or an animal. He who has no face is surely untouchable and that is why He is the mighty God! When foreign priests turn up with another god, we have two options for them: if their god has some form, then it’s an idol, and that makes it the kind we reject. Alternatively, they turn up with a god without a face or form and then we will try to convince them he is actually our God, and they will join us...”

Therefore, a nation espousing a single God must necessarily be favoured, if it persists in its trials and does not lose faith. Dramatically speaking, until such a nation betrays its God. From this point, the whole of the history of the nation of Israel is a riveting drama of loyalty and betrayal, of courage and cowardice.

“Lord, who are you? You are the one who chose only us.” What does it mean to be cho-

sen? To be paid particular attention to, to be showered with love. This is actually a continuation of a child’s relationship with its parents. Of course, to be “the chosen one” does not necessarily result in exceptionality, since after all, almighty God can surely pay special attention to everyone... However, this is once again shrouded in ignorance! And so the child has the impression that at that moment he or she is the only one in the world beloved by the father. And it is not only a child who has that kind of impression...

That makes the entire drama of God even more real, more genuine: not only have I no idea that God is within me, but I even rejoice that the single, great and immensely distant God pays attention solely to me! Greater tension can hardly be created. It is only now when God’s drama gains the proper momentum.

5 True name of God

Nevertheless, the Israelites had the most difficult problem in learning what the name of the true God was. There were two ways of solving this: either admit that a single God can have many names, as, for example, is acknowledged in India to this day. However, it would be difficult not to confuse Him with foreign idols: “Idols, after all, have their own names and having the name of some idol coinciding with the name of our God, that’s something we could not bear!” So there was only one option left: to find an exclusive name that belonged to no idol. That is exactly what the nation of Israel opted for.

However, who would dare to defend the

knowledge that the name of God can be declared a unique name? And most importantly, who would guarantee that someone else would not come up with a better name, causing a split in the whole nation? That would be a great excuse, after all...

Fortunately, God really loved His little children, as they still were at that time, so He offered them a truly regal solution: "So you don't know my name? Then, why don't you ask me, if you trust me?"

Do you see how God's play naturally works? Indeed, like hearing Dad speaking to his kids. But it was not that easy... In the next scene of His drama, God complained: "None of you wants to listen to me! Are any of you listening to me at all?"

And that brings us slowly to the climax of the *Old Testament's* act of the drama: Who would dare to address the distant God to ask Him what His real name is? The real name, this means who God is. The real, the shortest question is: "Who are You?" Who are you really? Not what I think of you, what you seem to me, how I would like you to be, but who you really are. Alternatively – Lord, I want to get to know you. I am deeply interested in you, because I love you deeply.

God, the author of the drama, knows very well that this role will be played in an endless number of reruns, both here on Earth and anywhere else and that it will never grow old. However, God-the-Director found things a lot more difficult back then. For the purposes of the nation of Israel, God had to cast this role for a single man and He was not sure whether it would not end up in being howled down, as he had to choose from rank amateurs, not

from the professionals. It surely could not have been any other way, because all his former premieres had thus far ended up as failures, and this one had a slim chance of being the first successful one.

6 This is how it was

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned."

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush,

"Moses, Moses!"

And he said, "Here I am."

Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings. (...) Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should

go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM". And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'."

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" (...) But Moses said to the Lord, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." Then the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else."

Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. (...) He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. (see Exodus 3:1-7; 3:10-14; 4:1; 4:10-16)

7 Ingenious simplicity

In the blend of stories and legends of the *Old*

Testament, a wonderful message was unexpectedly being revealed. Not only did Moses hear it from God, but he also succeeded in delivering it to the entire nation. The *Old Testament* states quite clearly what God chose for Himself in reply to Moses's question about His true name: The answer was, "I AM". Or, in the extended version (perhaps from a different source), it was "I am that I am" or, in the modern English version: "I am who I am."

It was brilliant and yet so simple. No one had succeeded, nor ever would succeed in building an idol to compete with the "I am" simplicity of God. An idol always had to have something extra, some specific quality, and this "extra" was always its weakness.

No other name can be compared to God's "I am", since anything else is derived from "I am": "I am" will always be the first. There is "I am" at the beginning of the whole world. And when we go back to God from anywhere in the world, every journey to Him must somehow end up in the intimate experience of God's "I am".

To record God's name "I am that I am" in the Hebrew back then, only four consonants YHWH [*Yahweh*] sufficed. For the ease of correct reading, vowels began to be marked in the Bible much later. For the people of Israel, this true name of God is so sacred that, from as early as the second century BC, nobody even dared to pronounce it. To this day, "*Adonai*" has been used instead. Respect is a beautiful thing. That is why it makes sense even to people today.

8 I am not a mere character

Initially, God, coming out of anonymity and revealing who He really was in His own drama, did not appeal to everyone. Only those who were able to experience God's presence, to really meet Him, could fully grasp the meaning. It was as if God was saying:

"For you, now I am here your God because I entered our common drama, but from the beginning till the end of time I am the only one who is. Remember, in our drama, I am not a character, but the one who is acting it. You only see my mask, only hear the words of my role intended for you to understand. However, I am none of those things – I am the only one who is."

For the people of today, it is also something very difficult to grasp, because they themselves do not comprehend it either. Just like the Israelites in past times, each of us has adhered to his or her role and has identified with our own role so deeply that we believe that the same holds true for God. God is great, powerful, loving, jealous, forgiving... But these are all just additional roles of a father or a mother which we project on to Him! The true God is just who He is. The other things are just how WE want to see Him because that's the way we want to see things.

And what if we do not want to see it this way? This is even more common today. As the abundance of traits traditionally ascribed to God becomes a hindrance, we become scared and reject God Himself: "How could God be jealous? That's a clear case of selfishness!" And yet, we really do not mind God Himself, but only His all too human mask,

which He put on in the Old Testament times, and moreover, only out of His love.

9 A distant God

If God had revealed Himself immediately as not being the one man considered Him to be, at that actual moment He would probably have lost His authority which was firmly associated with His paternal role. If He had been free to say something like:

"Look, I'm not just your dad, I'm everyone's dad. And actually, that's also just your imagination. To be a father, I would have to be a human like you."

But this is taboo! Intimate confessions and authority are mutually exclusive, especially to children who have not yet come of age to be able to play the role of a father or a mother themselves. Back then, the whole of the Israeli nation were children of God.

Therefore, Moses needed to go to Mount Sinai again, this time under all the people's eyes. Even then, he encountered God in intimate proximity. However, in the people's eyes, the very same scene observed from afar looked quite different:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of

a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. (...) The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them." (see Exodus 19:16–19; 19:20–22)

Such a role had to be played by a distant God! No intimate confession, but a huge detachment. No burning bush within arm's reach, but an inaccessible mountain top. No name quietly whispered, but resounding threats. Only then did the nation of Israel come to believe in this God, only then was His paternal authority resumed. But at what cost? At the cost of immense alienation, ranging from future violence and bloodshed among the faithful and the unfaithful Israelites, to the blood spilled on the cross by Jesus, to the present day mass loss of faith.

Thus, the true name of God will remain hidden behind a patriarchal mask that He is going to wear for many other acts to come in His drama.

10 The toughest role

Neither did Moses reach the Promised Land. He was only allowed to see it. It seems that although he knew who God was and was able to listen to Him carefully, he was only allowed to peek into the Kingdom of God, just as into the Promised Land. He was still not at home

there. Nevertheless, Moses was a great and respected teacher.

Let us recall how hard it was for the Israelites to cope with the fact that in their drama neither God-the-Author nor God-the-Director had any shape or form, although they had an admirable advantage over neighbouring nations. However, it was impossible for them at that time to comprehend and to be able to experience the fact that even God-the-Actor did not have any form or shape.

However, God's drama continues. Will anyone accomplish more? After more than a thousand years, the time is finally ripe for God-the-Actor Himself to appear directly on stage as a loving and suffering human. A burning bush or a mighty voice from above, once these attributes belonged to God, the distant God. Now, however, the time has come for God to play the role of a close God, a God capable of sharing joy and sorrow with a human – capable of looking like a human, able to laugh and cry like a human, in short, to be human.

Why is it that not everyone is like that? It has moreover been stated that God is covertly present in every human. How we look, what we do and who we consider ourselves to be are mere masks and roles played by one common actor in God's drama. So what remains? Why is each one of us not God directly?

Because we do not want this at all! It would be too little for us to be just "the one that is". Instead, a human prefers to identify with his or her role in life, with the man or woman he or she was born to be and gradually to identify with other social roles. In addition to those roles, a human also identifies with

a property, knowledge or skills and with many other things. We cling to them, not being able to let go, we ourselves being completely forgotten in all of this. We can make sense of it with the original sin or count on letting all our attachments go one day in Paradise. But who knows if we wish to go there at all, if a kind God confiscates all our toys? Let's face it: which one of us at this very moment feels like giving everything away and asking for nothing in return?

And so, unlike all the roles God and people had learned to play up to the present time, this new role was absolutely exceptional. It was a tremendous challenge: the person who accepted it, could not forget all the way down the line who he or she really was, could not blend in with the role. The individual had to prove to be both one hundred percent God and one hundred percent man at the same time, without any tricks, either spiritual or physical or anything in between.

So who was going to attempt this? At first, it would be an unknown man from Nazareth, who had been teaching people wisdom and love, who had healed the sick, although he could have done more. All the people who Jesus loved managed to play only their own roles: the fishermen played fishermen, customs officers played customs officers, Israelites played those who hated the Romans, and the Romans those who condescendingly ignored it. And no one was allowed to be robbed of his or her role, as such a person did not believe that he or she was capable of playing any other role. Even when Jesus tried to take a sick man's role off and offered him the role of a healthy man, He was denounced

by the man! It was only Jesus who was never attached to His role. He was unhesitatingly willing to swap the role of the respected and beloved teacher for the role of a condemned criminal, and finally, willing to give up His very life's role on the cross, if God's script went that far.

It was the total devotion and detachment from His own role which enabled Jesus to know absolutely who He really was, that is never to forget His Father, the writer and the director of the drama. And it was also supreme love which bonded him with His beloved Father and reminded Him, even during the hardest moments:

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Phillip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Phillip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. (see John 14:6-10)

It seems that not even Jesus' closest disciples could comprehend immediately who they had before them. Even the intelligent Phillip apparently failed to grasp the point. At that time, how could he have recognised that He was God? Indeed, He looked like an ordinary person! He had all the human thoughts, all the human emotions, suffered like a human,

loved like a human. How was it possible that He was God Himself?

This is the key to understanding the mystery of Jesus: "How is it possible that He's a man like us, and also God at the same time?" And yet, it's quite simple: unlike all the others living in oblivion, Jesus knew that He was God! He realised and experienced deeply without any doubt that now He was indeed a man, but it would not take long before He would be back again in perfect unity with His Father – the eternal author, the director, as well as the actor in God's drama.

11 Follow me

In the beginning, we stated that the actuality and impressiveness of God's drama are enabled by the actors not knowing that God is present covertly in each of them. All the protagonists are, ergo, lost in their own world, forgotten in their own play. But what happens if one of them is fed up with it? What if, in desperation, one of them dials the emergency line to God one day to hear His words: "Hello! Answer me! Who are you really – not the one who you are playing? Where are you calling me from? How far have you got?"

However, that's either simply what no one hears, or is unable to answer. How far has one got in one's own role? Was the role always so strictly assigned? And if, at least for a moment, one ventures off course, who would one really be?

Or quite simply: What would have happened if you had not been afraid to ask the basic question "Who am I?", and to follow this idea

as far as you possibly could?

The first thing that would have pulled us up short is that we are unsure about the definiteness and changelessness of our roles. First of all, of those social roles: I am a father and have two children... I am a medical student with only two semesters to go... This is true, but could it not be different? Even then, we would feel exactly the same as before!

By keeping a distance from one's role at least for a moment, one is able to look around and stop being lost. "Then who am I really? Is there actually something like a fixed point?"

That is already the first success. And now let us try to attack the life role as well: "Would it do me any harm if I managed to empathise fully with someone else? If I, figuratively speaking, swapped or exchanged my cross with him? Would I like to play a homeless person or an abused child? Playing his or her life's role means being him or her one hundred percent, with no escape. And why not? Am I so satisfied with my own role? Really?"

That is when we either get frightened and run away, or bear it and our attachment to our role eases off even more. If we stand the test, we feel free and suddenly want to fly, give everything away, hug everybody...

And this is when we try to stake everything: what about doing it like Jesus did – to love the Father deeply and to experience the role of a man at the same time, being aware beyond any doubt that this man is a mere character in God's drama! To be aware of it every single moment, every single day, mindfully and clearly, with enormous kindness. Including even the crucifixion, if it is in the script... What

would be the result? A change? A miracle? Or even nothing at all?

For the answer, we have to go back to the beginning once again, when a friend calls us to ask where Charles Bridge is. We suggest that the fundamental question, "Who am I?", holds the key to every answer. Even if we aim very high, such as asking, "Who is God?", this is also where the question "Who am I?" would lead us, and even by the shortest cut.

They say in jest that Moses wandered about so long because he had forgotten to pack the map and consequently was embarrassed to ask for directions. After more than three thousand years in our present act of God's drama, we already have that map. Even an excellent one, and to the Promised Land of the one who is called "I AM". At least, it is worth seeing, or perhaps even being at home in this land.

So let us attempt the first step: "Who is God?" But we've just disclosed it! He is the only author, the only director and the only actor in God's drama and is called "I AM".

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