Friendships occur between many different relationships, each looking a bit different. There can be friendships between brothers and sisters, comrades, parent-child friendships, and even, for what I will argue, friendship between divinity and mortals. Aristotle classifies a friendship between man and god as a friendship of superiority and accordingly must have proportional affection. The one in the higher state must be loved by the other more than he himself loves. This gives the relationship the appearance of equality, which is a key characteristic of friendship. But it is quantitative equality that is important for Aristotle’s friendship. In these relationships there develops a gap in regards to virtuous character, or wealth between the two, thus dissolving their friendship (Aristotle, 152). Aristotle said that “this is most obvious in the case of the gods, since they are most superior to us in all good things” (Aristotle, 152). Theologians in the monotheistic traditions have argued for centuries that friendship with God is possible. I will discuss four in these traditions, the first three being as-Ghazali, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Merton. These theologians either explicitly or implicitly incorporate Aristotelian concepts into their theologies. The fourth, Jürgen Moltmann, dismisses Aristotle’s concept of friendship. Though these arguments ultimately fall short of Aristotle’s problem of the superiority and inequality of the gods, there can still be a way talking about a friendship with God using a metaphorical theological language.

According to Aristotle, there are three different types of friendship: utility, pleasure, and complete or virtuous friendship. The friendship based upon a utility love seeks not the good in
the other person, but the good that the other provides for oneself. Aristotle said, “These friendships, then, are also incidental, since the person is loved not in so far as he is who he is, but in so far as he provides some good or pleasure. Such friendships are thus easily dissolved, when the parties to them do not remain unchanged; for if one party is no longer pleasant or useful the other stops loving him” (Aristotle, 146). Friendships of utility are most common among the elderly and business colleagues. In these friendships taking pleasure in the other person’s company is not important and thus they rarely spend time with one another.

Friendships of pleasure are accordingly based upon the pleasure that one receives from the other. Aristotle stated, “Friendship between the young seems to be for pleasure, since they live in accordance with their feelings, and pursue in particular what is pleasant for themselves and what is immediate” (Aristotle, 146). As with the friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure are fleeting. What one finds pleasure in changes and as these pleasures change so does one’s relationships.

The final category is the complete or virtuous friendship. This friendship is between “Good people, those who are alike in their virtue: they each alike wish good things to each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in themselves” (Aristotle, 147). Friends of this type seek the good in the other. Aristotle later qualifies this as wishing the good in the other insofar as they remain human and do not become gods. Virtuous friendships are rare and they are lasting. Friendships of this type “require time and familiarity” (Aristotle, 147).

For Aristotle, two key concepts of friendship are affection and equality. Affection can be seen as the beginnings of friendship but is not unique to friendship (i.e. one can have an affection for chocolate cake but cannot be friends with chocolate cake). For Aristotle, “There is nothing so
characteristic of friends as living in each others company” (Aristotle, 149). In order to spend much time with each other friends must have an affection for each other otherwise their time spent will not be pleasurable. The second concept is that of the equality. Friends must “get the same and wish the same to each other, or exchange one thing for another, such as pleasure for benefit” (Aristotle, 151). Equality in friendship will be the most difficult concept to get around coming to the possibility of a friendship with the divine. God and humankind are qualitatively different and one could say quantitatively different in regards to the amount of resources, knowledge, power, and virtue. For Aristotle, there is the possibility for friendships among unequals, but they may only be friendships of utility or pleasure, making it difficult for a virtuous friendship with God.

And now we come to the question of friendships of superiority. These can be characterized as friendships between parent and child, master and slave, king and subjects, and gods and mortals. According to Aristotle, “all friendships involving superiority, the affection must be proportional as well. The better, that is to say, must be loved more than he loves” (Aristotle, 152). With this proportional affection the quality among equals can be had thus friendship is theoretically possible. But the equality that Aristotle has in mind is quantitative equality. “This becomes clear if a large gap develops in respect of virtue, vise, wealth, or something else: then they are no longer friends, nor do they even expect to be. This is most obvious in the case of the gods, since they are the most superior to us in all good things” (Aristotle, 152). Although difficult, friendships of superiority can occur because there is a fundamental, or natural, equality among humans. But for Aristotle, there is too great an inequality between mankind and the gods.
It has primarily been the Judeo-Christian tradition that has developed the concept of friendship with God. Early on in the Jewish Scriptures, it is said of the early patriarchs, Abraham and Moses, that they were friends of YHWH. In the Christian Scriptures, Jesus was “a friend of sinners and tax collectors” (Luke 7:34). In his last night, Jesus said to his disciples in John 15, “greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Friendship with God has been important in the Judeo-Christian tradition for a couple of reasons. One is that it is seen as a goal to strive after in one’s spiritual life. Second, it is seen as spiritual intimacy with the Creator. It is a return to the perfection of the Garden of Eden. Lastly, it offers a connection to something outside of oneself. The prospect of a friendship with God has brought solace to numerous followers in the harsh realities of this world.

So what have theologians done to get around the Aristotelian roadblock to friendship with God? David B. Burrell has found the connection of two medieval theologians, one Muslim and one Christian, to Aristotle and their response to him. The first is in the Sufi tradition. Al-Ghazali defines the relationship between God and man as creator and creature. God, as the one, free creator, is the beginning of all activity, and a lover of his creation. As one loves God and follows the correct path, God’s love then transforms his or her heart. God removes successive “veils”, so that one can eventually “see” God, leading to intimacy with God. At this point of intimate encounter, according to al-Ghazali, friendship with God is possible (Burrell, 50-53).

Thomas Aquinas makes a similar move, as noted by Burrell, but in Aristotelian terms. Emphasizing the creator-creature relationship, God makes the initiative with his gift of charity. This gift enables one to respond to God’s invitation of friendship. It also orders all of one’s
virtues in such a way that his or her whole life is a response to God’s invitation (Burrell, 49). In Aquinas’ Trinitarian concept of God, the Holy Spirit acts as the primary mover in one’s life so that one would be “acting by the very activity of God” (Burrell, 49). It is in the shared activity and exchange of love that Aquinas finds as the basis for making friendship with God possible.

Working from a Thomistic (and thereby Aristotelian) anthropology, the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, sees contemplation as the point of friendship with God. He says:

For a man to be alive, he must exercise not only the acts that belong to vegetative and animal life, he must not only subsist, grow, be sentient, not only move himself around, feed himself, and the rest. He must carry on the activities proper to his own specifically human kind of life. He must, that is to say, think intelligently. And above all he must direct his actions by free decisions, made in the light of his own thinking. These decisions, moreover, must tend to his own intellectual and moral and spiritual growth. They must tend to make him more aware of his capacities for knowledge and for free action. They must expand and extend his power to love others, and to dedicate himself to their good: for it is in this that he finds his own fulfillment (Merton, 11-12).

Leaving the problems of this type of anthropology aside (especially concerning the mentally handicapped or a person in a coma), Merton continues on to say that contemplation, then is the “summit” of one’s life (Merton, 15). It bridges all knowledge and freedom and love with God, its source and beginning. Merton further says:

Contemplation is a mark of a fully mature Christian life. It makes the believer no longer a slave or a servant of a Divine Master, no longer the fearful keeper of a difficult law, no longer even an obedient and submissive son who is still too young to participate in his Father’s counsels. Contemplation is that wisdom which makes man the friend of God, a thing which Aristotle thought to be impossible. For how, he said, can a man be God’s friend? Friendship implies equality. That is precisely the message of the Gospel (Merton, 17).

He disregards Aristotle’s acceptance of the inequality between man and the divine. According to Merton, then, it is in contemplation that man and God can be equals and thus friends.
Moving further away from Aristotle, the Protestant theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, dismisses his exclusive ideal of friendship where “birds of a feather flock together.” Moltmann sees Jesus, the “friend of sinners,” as breaking the Aristotelian concept of friendship only being among equals. This is not a fair critique of Aristotle, because he actually does allow for friendships among unequals to occur, though with restrictions. Moltmann sees friendship as open; disregarding titles, professions, gender, or social status. This open friendship, according to Moltmann, is based upon affection and respect for the freedom of both parties in the relationship. He says, “There is room enough in God’s freedom for human freedom. In the world government of God there is the possibility of human impact and participation” (Moltmann, 37). One can participate with God through prayer. So for Moltmann, “Prayer and answer are what constitute human friendship with God and divine friendship with human beings” (Moltmann, 38). Prayer and answer occur with mutual affection and respect for freedom. The inequality of God and man is not a problems for Moltmann’s conception of an open friendship that can occur (and maybe even read as should occur) among unequals.

No matter how many intelligible responses to Aristotle that arise, the fundamental inequality of God and humans will always be there. Theologians have continually and will continue to wrestle with the paradox of the transcendence and immanence of God. Because of this inequality, one can never have a friendship like that of one between humans, whether they are alike (i.e. in social status, gender, etc.) or not.

Must we then throw out the centuries of work developing an idea of friendship with God? Not if we understand the language of theology. Simply stated, anything said of God is a metaphor. The very definition of ‘God,’ means that s/he is completely other and indescribable in
our terms of gender, virtue, knowledge, and our experience of the world. A statement such as “God is free,” depends upon one’s own experience and knowledge of freedom. So if God is beyond one’s own experience, then all once can really say is, “that which I conceptually wrap up in the arbitrary name ‘God’ seems to be similar to mine and other’s experience and knowledge of what being free is like.” And so, friendship with God becomes a metaphor for a spiritual experience of shared activity and affection.

Given Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship, friendship with God would be impossible. But taking into account the spiritual experiences of virtuous activity, contemplation, and prayer, something like friendship occurs. There is the exchange of pleasure and affection, and there could even be what seems to be momentary equality with God. There is a give and take in the freedom of God and the freedom of humans. Further there is a sharing in the common good. All of the above could be classified as characteristics of friendship and could be classified as characteristics of a spiritual intimacy with God. And so, until someone discovers a better metaphor, “friendship” with God is a possibility.
WORKS CITED


