

AGAINST THEISTIC PERSONALISM: WHAT MODERN EPISTEMOLOGY DOES TO CLASSICAL THEISM

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Abstract. Is God a person, like you and me eventually, but only much better and without our human deficiencies? When you read some of the philosophers of religion, including Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, or Open Theists, God appears as such a person, in a sense closer to Superman than to the Creator of Heaven and Earth. It is also a theory that a Christian pastoral theology today tends to impose, insisting that God is close to us and attentive to all of us. But this modern account of God could be a deep and even tragic mistake. One God in three persons, the formula of the Trinity, does not mean that God is a person. On this matters we need an effort in the epistemology of theology to examine more precisely what we can pretend to know about God, and especially how we could pretend to know that God is person.

When saying the Lord's Prayer, a Christian addresses a prayer to God which is a succession of requests almost like a rosary: "Thy will be done, Thy Kingdom come, Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil." And yet, who other than a person would we make such requests to? When talking to an animal ("Heel!") or a machine ("Are you going to work now or what?"), we act *as if* these were people, but we know that isn't the case and would indeed be very surprised to get a reply other than a bark, a *miaow* or a programmed machine reply. Thus a prayer addressed to God by a Christian seems to imply something regarding the nature of God, namely that He is a person. And this seems also to mean that relations between God and His creatures are interpersonal.

Let us call this theory "theistic personalism". It can be found in both the most common religious practice and in the sophisticated philosophy of religion or theology.

It seems to me that God being a person is one of the most significant assumptions in pastoral theology today. Sermons insist on the proximity of God and often compare divine love to family tenderness between parents and children. Christian religious discourse encourages us to address ourselves to God, to “live in His presence” — an oft-used formula — or to place Him “deep within our heart”. There is a certain sentimentalism in advocating that we should pray to the God-person rather than to a transcendent, absolute, eternal, unchanging and impassive God. Prayer enables us to “enter into communion with God”, so we are told, and there is talk of a “dialogue with the Creator” or “meeting the Lord”. Recently I heard a priest finish his sermon by saying: “During Lent, let us live intensely our relationship with God through our daily prayers and let us hear His addresses to us which he asks for us to listen to”. The actual possibility of the religious experience thus seems to involve such a relationship and therefore that God *should be* a person, and even a person who would ask me to listen to Him. On the radio, a few years ago, we used to hear this song by an American singer, Joan Osborne, which said:

What if God was one of us?

Just a slob like one of us?

Just a stranger on the bus

Trying to make His way home?

A person is familiar to us because we are all people. If we are in the image of God, then this would mean this kind of sharing between the Divine person and human beings exists.

That God is a person is not just an implicit theory in the most common pastoral theology today — it is also an evident fact for contemporary philosophers and theologians like Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga or William Hasker and also those who support “Open Theism”. Their *theistic personalism* has *even* led them to renounce fundamental doctrines of classical theism such as divine simplicity, immutability and impassibility or that of a divine eternity understood as existing outside time itself. These doctrines were however those of theologians of some importance like Saint Augustine, Boethius, Saint Anselm, Maimonides or Saint Thomas.

Let us consider simplicity. If God is simple, then He does not possess the attributes we assign to Him, but is identical to these attributes. If a person has properties we attribute to them such as wisdom or beauty, for example, that

person is not identical to the properties possessed, because others may possess them too. For Aquinas, God is almighty or perfectly good because He is all-powerful and of perfect goodness, and not because He possesses a quality that others possess or may possess. God is not therefore made up of His attributes. He is simple. This is such a fundamental doctrine that Saint Thomas dedicated question 3 of the *Prima Pars* of his *Summa Theologiæ* to it, immediately after proving the existence of God and before his ideas about the attributes of God.

However is it possible to *simultaneously* say that God is simple, not composed and that He is a person? Firstly, a person is not simple — people have attributes like wisdom and beauty, for example, which can be both acquired and lost. Secondly, certain attributes of God seem incompatible with the status of a person, such as immutability or eternity, understood as existing outside time. A person changes by becoming aware of events and trying to improve things. That person is therefore within time, not eternal and above all not outside time. How could God be emotionless? If we have an interpersonal relationship with Him, then He must surely sympathize and suffer with us or be moved by our misfortunes and so forth.

Let us attempt to characterize theistic personalism's main claims.

1. A person is a being with an essentially mental life made up of mental states such as thoughts (mental representations) or desires.
2. Human beings are linked to their bodies in a contingent (and temporary) manner.
3. God as a person is immaterial but has thoughts (representations) and desires, such as those which may be attributed to a person (according to a dualist theory of the person which firmly distinguishes between the mind or mental dimension and the body or physical dimension).
4. The difference between a human being and a divine person is that God does not have the limitations of non-divine people when they think and desire something.

Swinburne puts it like this at the start of his book *The Coherence of Theism*:

By a theist I understand a man who believes that there is a God. By a "God" he understands something like a "person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the

proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe”¹

I would now like to compare Swinburne’s views with what I read as a child in my catechism textbook:

Question. What is God?

Answer. God is an eternal, independent, immutable and infinite spirit, who is present everywhere, sees everything, can do everything, who created and governs all things.

What difference is there between this classical catechism (written by M. l’Abbé Cheriou in the XIXth century, even if I am not quite as old as that of course) and Swinburne’s ideas? In my catechism book, there was no question of God being a person. The fact that God was a spirit in fact implies that He cannot be a person. But what difference does it make if we use the notion of a person to discuss the nature of God? Surely it is more tangible. Surely we gain in proximity. One might say to a child: “You see, my little dear, God is a person, like you or me, but He is the Creator. He is eternal, absolutely free, able to do everything; He knows everything; He is perfectly good while we have our limitations, don’t we? Well God doesn’t!” If the child says that God is therefore like his grandfather then all that needs to be added is: “Oh, that’s even better!”

Is it really however possible, without thinking twice, to understand God as a person? And even if we say that He is a person without any of the defects of the other people we know. Brian Davies claims the following:

The formula “God is a person” is ... a relatively recent one. I believe that its first occurrence in English comes in the report of a trial of someone called John Biddle (b. 1615), who in 1644 was brought before the magistrates of Gloucester, England, on a charge of heresy. His “heresy” was claiming that God is a person. Biddle was explicitly defending Unitarian beliefs about God, already in evidence among Socinians outside England.²

How could something once considered heretic, according to Davies, become such a fundamental part of both the most common pastoral theory and the theism of certain of the most reputed religious philosophers and theologians?³

1 Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon Press, [1977] 1993), 1.

2 Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Continuum, 2006), 59.

3 E.g., John Schellenberg says that “theism ... develops its entire understanding of the divine from the idea of personhood”, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge*

It should be noted that Davies situates the birth of theistic personalism in the middle of the XVIIth century. My hypothesis is that it is not at all contingent to consider that this theistic personalism was a contemporary of the appearance of a certain philosophical conception, which was to be a great success, though disputed. This concerns what it is to be a human being. Let us suppose that someone wonders “but what am I then?” In the middle of the XVIIth century, the response is now “A thing that thinks”. And if that person should ask “What is that?” the reply is: “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also which imagines and has sensory perceptions”. I am citing Descartes in the second of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. A human being is a mind united with a body, but what makes a human being is the mind. This theory is quite new at this epoch. It replaces another: human beings are rational creatures, beings made up of an immaterial soul and a material body, which together form a unique substance. There is a considerable difference — a human being was an object made up of two metaphysical parts — a soul and a body. It has, mainly with Descartes⁴, become a mind, a conscience, a self. And so, human being is now, like God, a spirit! This is how Swinburne explains it:

A person is a being who has (or, when fully developed, will have) powers (to perform intentional actions, that is, actions which he or she means to do), beliefs, and free will (to choose among alternative actions without being compelled by irrational forces to do one rather than the other); when the beliefs and actions include ones of some sophistication (such as using language). I shall assume ... that humans do have free will and so are persons. Ordinary human persons exist for a limited period of time, dependent on physical causes (their bodies and especially their brains) for their capacities to exercise their powers, form beliefs, and make choices. God is supposed to be unlimited in all these respects, and not to depend on anything for His existence or capacities.⁵

Swinburne begins by defining a *sort* of being: people. These are characterized by having a cerebral life, which is intentional, and of their own free will. People are therefore thinking beings with wills. We are submerged in an assumed dualism. Swinburne distinguishes between two kinds of beings: people and God.

to Belief in God (OUP, 2015), 21. It is at least historically very debatable. And even today, there are still theists who do not think at all so.

4 I am aware that there were other philosophers and theologians long before Descartes to be tempted by this conception of man, as a spirit, a consciousness, a self. But Descartes is the first to have had such a success!

5 Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (OUP, 2008), 6.

The difference is independence regarding physical causes. Man depends on these while God does not.

Let us therefore summarize the approach of theistic personalists. What do we know about human beings? They think and can make free choices, their time is limited, they are dependent on their bodies and they have moral defects. What do we know of God? To reply, it seems enough to abstractly extrapolate from the notion of a person to one particular person, who also thinks and makes free choices, but without the cognitive and decision-related limitations which humans, with their temporal limitations, manifest. God is a “zero-defect person” who requires no corrections. This approach is characteristic of *theistic personalism* and considers God to be a *superlative person*.

One arrives at a position of theistic personalism by at least implicitly following the tradition of modern Cartesian and Lockean epistemology, and more specifically the notion of the person that this tradition promoted. That is why I am talking about theistic personalism rather than personalistic theism. Philosophers who adopt theistic personalism start from the notion of person, not from God. And they conceive God as a super-person, a person without all the defects of human persons. For them there are two kinds of persons: God (or the divine persons in the tri-personal God) and human beings. They are both characterized by a mind. But in the human case, the mind is connected, altogether contingently, to a body, and happily not in the God case.

When Swinburne considers what makes a person, he characterizes it through a kind of thought experiment⁶, free will and also the limitations de-

6 There is a passage by Swinburne which exemplifies perfectly the temptation to start from what we, human beings, are, and to arrive, simply by suppressing our defects, to God as a person: “Image yourself, for example, gradually ceasing to be affected by alcohol or drugs, your thinking being equally coherent however men mess about with your brain. Imagine too that you cease to feel any pains, aches, thrills ... You also find yourself able to utter words which can be heard anywhere, without moving any material objects. However, although yourself gaining these strange powers, you remain otherwise the same ... Surely anyone can thus conceive of himself becoming an omnipresent spirit” (Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 106–7). Paul Helm says this example is “hilarious” (Paul Helm, “Anthropomorphism Protestant Style”, in *Whose God? Which Tradition? The Nature of Belief in God*, ed. Dewi Z. Phillips (Ashgate, 2008), 139). It is as if Swinburne’s method was taken in a book untitled “Becoming God in ten lessons”, with the first lesson on “omnipresence” (because it begins with something quite easy). Why not try also to imagine acquiring perfect goodness and omniscience the same way? I let the question to know if the appeal to imagination in the passage is not purely rhetorical, because, in fact, we imagine simply nothing, I am afraid! (See the critique made in Peter van

rived from our own body. Being a person means being a *consciousness*. Personality is being able to reflect about mental states, thinking about oneself, examining one's own desires or forming free moral judgements. As Swinburne attributes his own theistic personalism to all theists, he even suggests that his notion of the person is what Aristotle and the Medieval philosophers would have described as the difference between rational souls and sensitive souls, between human beings and animals.⁷ This is highly questionable. Neither Aristotle nor Saint Thomas characterizes human beings through the consciousness they have of themselves. For both of them, the specific difference of human beings is rationality and not at all consciousness. The concept of the person adopted by Swinburne is, typically, that of modern philosophy, a post-Cartesian concept which has invaded modern thought. Swinburne states that:

It is because God's essential properties all follow from the very simple property of having pure, limitless, intentional power, that I claim that God is an individual of a very simple kind; certainly the simplest kind of person there can be.⁸

For Swinburne God is "the simplest kind of person there can be". The psychological notion of a person is decisive here rather than the notion of simplicity proposed, in a traditional way, by Aquinas. In Aquinas's account, simplicity means that there is nothing potential in God. God is *actus purus*. The notion of person does not appear at all! Swinburne explains that God is this superlative person who exists free of any metaphysical necessity: He is perfectly free, all-powerful and omniscient. But, this has nothing to do with God as a pure act, with no potentiality, which is absolutely simple and eternal (and not just without beginning or end), as in the (Athanasian, Augustinian, Anselmian and) Thomist tradition. In this tradition, God is not described as a being with intentional power, however pure. For theistic personalists, the notion of intentional power is however directly linked to the idea of a conscious experience which is also characteristic of human beings. The result is a deeply anthropomorphic account of God.

Inwagen, *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 19–21) This passage shows adequately that a theistic personalist pretends that God is a person like us, but far better, far omnipresent, far omniscient, etc.

7 See Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 103.

8 Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Clarendon Press, 1994), 154.

The claim that God is a person is thus not at all a simple way of reformulating classical theism, as Swinburne suggests. It is instead a whole other form of modern theism. It results from the role attributed to an epistemology in which the mind is understood as the consciousness of the self. It is that which would be proper to thought, will and, indeed, free will. After having explained that the doctrine of divine simplicity in the works of Irenaeus, Augustin and Anselm is paradoxical, and that Thomas sadly suffers from residues of Platonism, Swinburne claims that the unity of divine properties follows on from their inclusion in a sole simple property, namely always this “pure, limitless, intentional power”⁹.

Theistic personalism would thus result from a theory whereby epistemology — thought as a theory of cognitive and intentional experience — is the foremost philosophy. We need to base our thought thereon, *even when considering the nature of God*. And so, if God is a person without the limitations of human beings, He behaves and must behave like a *decent* person. He should be benevolent and love all beings, which leads to the assumption that He changes and suffers. As for the moral justification of God, it must be shown that he is good, just, as a good person is. This idea also assumes that He is not a “hidden God” because a loving God could not despair of His creatures. He must therefore be attentive to what happens to human beings and there must be in the divine plan a reason for evil in the world. Evil, as John Hick¹⁰ or Richard Swinburne¹¹ claim, has to become an appropriate means of achieving the best possible end.

How may theistic personalists defend their ideas against the sort of critique proposed here, saying that, finally, this theism results from the modern notion of person? They could perhaps express their views thus:

— You basically claim that theistic personalism, of which you make Swinburne the figurehead, is based on a modern conception of the person as consciousness, which is in reality epistemological and psychological. You consider that this leads to a conception of God, which you present as being anthropomorphic, let us say. Finally, this conception questions certain fundamental doctrines of classical theism (simplicity, for example, but we could

9 See Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 162.

10 John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 [1966]), 372.

11 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Clarendon Press, 2004), 252.

suppose also timelessness). However isn't that very theism rather difficult to defend with its notions of divine simplicity and existence outside time, which are bristling with paradoxes? Let us consider the theory that God does not possess attributes like goodness but *is* rather Goodness itself as it is claimed. As Alvin Plantinga puts it: "If God is a property, then He isn't a person but a mere abstract object; He has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or life" before adding that "so taken, the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake"¹². Who can understand anything about the doctrine of divine simplicity or that of divine immutability? If this is the case, then isn't exporting in theological matters an epistemological conception of Man as consciousness rather a good thing? To return to prayer, you have not explained how we may address requests to God if He is not a person. In the Bible, surely God replies to prayers. If you reread the episode about the Exodus of Hebrews from Egypt, surely God's answers to Moses' prayers is the basis of the story! As Richard Swinburne said "If God had thus fixed His intentions 'from all eternity' He would be a very lifeless thing; not a person who reacts to men with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening because He chooses to there and then"¹³. Christians are personalists because they pray, and expect the compassion shown by Christ from God himself. Another episode of the Bible, which would be otherwise inexplicable, was when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life because his family asked Him to; and Jesus cries because Lazarus is dead. Is He without emotion? Without counting all the occasions when Jesus sympathized with the sick and healed them. In these cases, God surely thinks one thing and then thinks another. He changes like we do. Otherwise how could He take a decision? And if He cannot take a decision, how could He be free? In reality, you are obsessed by this idea that psychophysical dualism is an unacceptable modern philosophy theory. And this therefore means that Man cannot be defined as a consciousness. I wonder if you have not a fixation on that supposed "modern mentalism" in epistemology, which is quite probably more your own invention than a historical reality.¹⁴ (Perhaps this comes from your reading of Wittgenstein, and his so-called private language argument, and your

12 Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Marquette Univ. Press, 1980), 47.

13 Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 221.

14 Would it not be the same as the traditional accusation among the Thomists of nominalism (of Ockham), which would gradually have gained all philosophical thought, and would be the basis of our modernity?

refusal of a certain account of the human being as a consciousness.¹⁵) But you are wrong: God really is a person in the sense that He is a person without a body and zero-defect, a pure mind, as Swinburne, Plantinga, Hasker and many others say or suggest, and as the most common pastoral theory today also rightly supposes. After all, is it not a good thing for a Christian to seek to be close to the Lord and wish to have a dialogue with him?

Let us return to Swinburne's passage quoted by this objector: "If God had thus fixed His intentions 'from all eternity' He would be a very lifeless thing; *not a person* who reacts to men with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening because He chooses to there and then"¹⁶. It is true that the question of whether God suffers — whether He shares the suffering of His creatures and sympathizes with them — has invaded contemporary theology and generally, when discussed, the verdict is that, yes, He suffers. In fact, this is simply orthodoxy now for a lot of Protestant and Catholic theologians, including Karl Barth or Hans Urs von Balthasar, but also philosophers, and among them Nicholas Wolterstorff¹⁷. Of course, God suffers!, they say.¹⁸ Classical theism is said to not provide an adequate reply, and this has led to a new understanding of God as a person with the same attention for others as human beings but, of course, *far better*.

What can be said in defence of the thesis that God is not a person? In this subject there is, however, a classical claim, expressed by Saint Anselm in Chapter VIII of the *Proslogion*: "How, then, are You merciful and not merciful, O Lord, unless it be that You are merciful in relation to us and not in relation to Yourself? In fact, You are [merciful] according to our way of looking at things and not according to Your way. For when You look upon us in our misery it is we who feel the effect of Your mercy, but You do not experience the feeling." It is because we are people — though perhaps not in the sense of

15 See Roger Pouivet, *After Wittgenstein, St. Thomas*, tr. by Michael S. Sherwin (St. Augustine's Press, 2008).

16 Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 221, my italics.

17 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love" in *Philosophy and the Christian faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

18 For a critique of this assertion, which has become obvious to many, see Herbert McCabe, "The Involvement of God", *New Blackfriars* 66, no. 785 (1985); Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

the dualism defended by Swinburne, Plantinga or Hasker — that God is merciful. But it is not because *He* is a person.

If we can expect a little sympathy from our fellow creatures, because they are persons, does it make sense to wait for the same from God because He is also a person like them? Are we, I mean we human beings, in an ontological and above all *psychological continuum* with God, which would give sense to this expectation of God's sympathy for us? Does God display the characteristics of benevolence and love at the highest levels while these are present in human beings to a much lesser degree? No, because there is no *common standard* between God and ourselves. God is Goodness itself. He is not a good person and not even a *super-person*. In the same way He is not *a* being or *the Supreme Being* either, but He just IS ("He Who Is", as He himself said, *Exodus* 3: 14), without any qualifiers.

God is not a psychological consciousness, as we are supposed to be according to Modern philosophers. But He is not more a moral agent, as we are actually.¹⁹ He is not the best among moral beings. As Herbert McCabe put it:

It makes perfect sense to say both that it is not in the nature of God to suffer and also that it is not in the nature of God to lack the most intimate possible involvement with the sufferings of His creatures. To safeguard the compassion of God there is no need to resort to the idea that God as He surveys the history of mankind suffers with us in a literal sense — though in some spiritual way.²⁰

Psalm 103 says: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy". This is a metaphor; we have not to take it as a literal description of God's deepest thoughts! The metaphor is useful for our understanding of what we are in our relation to God as creatures, not to characterize God's personhood. Psalm 102 says: "For He hath looked down from the height of His sanctuary". But do we wonder if He has a good view from that height? Then in Psalm 103, God remembers that Man is but dust. Does that mean that He has a good memory, much better than our own, given that we forget our keys sometimes or do not remember to say "Happy Anniversary" to our loving wife (or husband)? If it is a metaphor to say that God looked down from the

¹⁹ See Davies, *The Reality of God*, chap. 4: "God's Moral Standing"; Brian Davies, "Is God a Moral Agent?", in *Whose God? Which Tradition? The Nature of Belief in God*, ed. Dewi Z. Phillips (Ashgate, 2008); Paul O'Grady, *Aquinas's Philosophy of Religion* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 133.

²⁰ Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (Continuum, 2005), 46.

height of His sanctuary or that God remembers, it is *also* a metaphor to claim God to be sympathetic or even loving to people. It is another metaphor to say that God is never distant or uninvolved regarding His creatures — simply because we only exist because of His act as the Creator. We know that the victims of evil are never without God, even if saying this to a victim is no consolation. This probably provides no explanation of evil either.²¹ But why should we succeed in explaining how God can be led to accept that there is evil in the world? Why should we pose the problem of his moral integrity? “My point is, Brian Davies says, that God seems to permit what good people would not permit and that this, to say the least, puts an enormous question mark over the view that we have evidence for him being good as people are good”²². What we call “the problem of evil” could lead us to doubt that God is a person without all our defects, and not to try to understand how evil could find a place in the providential plan of God as a person.

In God, being, knowing, loving and creating are identical: this is the doctrine of divine simplicity. In God, being and doing are the same thing. This is why the model of the person as consciousness who is capable of thought and making decisions after examining what could justifiably be believed or be best to do is a metaphor. But it could even be a *bad* metaphor; or a *deceiving* metaphor. Especially, if we do not understand it *is* a metaphor. It seems untrustworthy as it derives from an epistemology which itself can be greatly criticized for its ideas about the nature of human beings who are understood as being consciousnesses. This is clearly the case if the metaphor leads to what was considered, according Brian Davies, heresy.

How would it be possible to save the Divine person from blame regarding the existence of evil in the world or even claim that a God-person could exist when evil exists in the world? Of course, Saint Augustin, Saint Anselm and Saint Thomas were not ignorant of thought on evil, but it was not central as it is considered now by philosophers of religion, but also by theologians. The fact that evil is a *problem*, and even *the* problem for theists, and that it is so decisive an issue that the philosophy of religion is interested in it, as Swinburne, Plantinga and many others think, result from this anthropomorphic account of God as a person. The idea of an anthropomorphic God came about when the distinc-

21 See Davies, *The Reality of God*, 234–35.

22 Brian Davies, *Thinking About God* (Wipf & Stock, 2010), 224.

tion between God and His creature became the difference between the unlimited and the limited in the exercise of thought and will. This personalization of God provided a certain perspective on issues supposed to be central to thought about theism. Thus, Swinburne can say in the introduction to *Providence and the Problem of Evil*: “The theist maintains that God ... could not achieve some of his good purposes except by means of a delay before they are achieved, and these and other good purposes except by means of allowing evils to occur”.²³ God, as a person actually, organizes things by reflecting on how to achieve it at best. Like you and me, God has means to achieve His ends.

Another case of anthropomorphism would be John Schellenberg’s idea of a hidden God.²⁴ God remains hidden to many human beings who cannot have any knowledge of Him. It would be wrong of an omniscient and all-powerful God to remain hidden to anyone at all but a perfectly good God cannot do anything wrong. The right conclusion seems to be that this God is in fact non-existent rather than hidden. But the hidden God argument refers to the God-person again, the God who thinks and wants things exactly like a person, since He is one, but without the limitations. It would be bad for such a person to remain hidden. Finally, one would have to doubt the existence of this hidden God. But should we not especially doubt the fact that the Christian God is a person who would hide? Is “Hidden” a term that can qualify God in the sense in which it qualifies a person?

Also is it not even slightly strange to claim that *a person*, if God is one, is infinite, the creator of the world, almighty, omniscient and absolutely good? Swinburne claims God to be a person without a body who is eternal, free and capable of doing anything: a person who knows everything, is perfectly good and is the appropriate subject for human praise and obedience, is the Creator and the basis for the existence of the universe. However this so called “person”, simply, is *not* a person at all. The adjectives used to characterize Him are superlatives but they are still totally unsuitable for characterizing a person. Totally false and unsuitable adjectives do exist such as “fake” in the expression “fake passport”. A fake passport is quite simply not a passport. In the same way as a

23 Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 2.

24 See Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*. Schellenberg’s argument seems to me to be valid in the case of personalist theism (or theistic personalism), but I do not think it is so powerful against classical theism of Saint Athanasius, Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm and Saint Thomas. It presupposes a Swinburnian God!

fake passport simply is not a passport, so a person who created the world or is all-powerful cannot be a person, even and because when that person is perfect. Speaking of God as a person is giving into theological confusion.

Conversely there is nothing absurd in saying that God is *personal* but not a person.²⁵ Firstly, it is possible for God not to be a person without that meaning He has no intelligence, will, omniscience, freedom and love. This means that God is *distinct* from His creation. Secondly, saying that the Christian God is personal amounts to refusing pantheism and panentheism. Thirdly, saying that God is personal does not mean claiming He is a person, but that Jesus Christ is the son of God and the son of Man. Christ is not a person *among others* but a *person* of the Trinity. However He is not God *because* He is a person; Christ is a human person with a human nature but nevertheless He is the Saviour, He is God and is not a human being. So, the inference from a personal God to God as a person is not necessary. Davies says: “to deny that God is a person as we are persons is no more to say that God is impersonal than denying that he has a body is to deny that he can be truly referred to as a father”²⁶.

Is it not that the anthropomorphism of theistic personalism is linked to the clear demand in Swinburne’s work (and many other philosophers) that God be *comprehensible*? And for that, He needs to be a person like us (which also assumes that we are understandable too in the sense of the term adopted by Swinburne, but it is another problem). Also, as Brian Davies puts it:

God as talked about in the mainstream of Judeo-Christianity is incomprehensible, unimaginable, and quite unlike human beings. He is also unchangeable and the Creator of all things — this meaning that nothing but God exists uncaused. On this view God defies classification. And to talk of Him as a person in Swinburne’s sense is nonsense or idolatrous.²⁷

This judgement seems severe. However, no one doubts that we do not have an experience and knowledge of God which could be compared to those we have of the world around us. No-one doubts that, apart from the rational evi-

25 See Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Marquette Univ. Press, 2016). I interpret Stump’s book as showing not only that we can but we must understand the relationship between man and God as personal — especially through Christ — but I do not believe it implies that God is, metaphysically, a person. To move from one to the other is, in my opinion, the error of theistic personalism.

26 Davies, *Thinking About God*, 152.

27 Brian Davies, “A Timeless God?,” *New Blackfriars* 64, no. 755 (1983): 217.

dence of God's existence, our knowledge of Him consists of what He is not rather than what He actually is.²⁸ Our knowledge of God remains shrouded in profound mystery, as one readily grasps in reading in any catechism what is said of the Great Mysteries of faith.²⁹ With reference to Dionysius's *Divine Names*, Saint Thomas commented that no name or complex explanation (not even simple intuition or a science derived from the process by which conclusions become principles) which are attributed to God suffice to describe Him totally.³⁰ This would mean that identifying Him as a person is deceiving. By giving too much importance and value to the epistemology of the conscious subject in our understanding of God, this leads us to claim a kind of clarity that is not the right one. It must be clear that God is mysterious, and not that he is a person without our defects. This epistemology and philosophy of the mind, which appeared in the XVIIth century — with the philosophical success we know about — is not at all the norm for intelligibility of the nature of God.³¹

Let us return finally to the question of prayer with which we began this article. Despite the arguments proposed against theistic personalism, if we pray, ask things from God above all, and if those prayers are petitions, God indeed

28 The classical reference is Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 3, prol. On this passage, Denys Turner says : "Nothing is easier, to begin with, than to see that, in his discussion of the divine simplicity in question 3, what is demonstrated is not some comprehensible divine attribute, some affirmation which marks out God from everything else, but some marker of what constitutes the divine incomprehensibility, as distinct from the incomprehensibility of everything else." (Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (CUP, 2004), 41) We do not know how "other" God is. That is what makes God unknowable for us. We have no common scale to determinate how far He is from what we understand. But if you say that God is a person you have such a scale.

29 Aquinas says that "in this life we do not know what God is [even] through the revelation of grace, and so [by grace] we are made one with him as to something unknown" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 12, 13 ad1). Turner's commentary is: "For even if in truth Christians do know by grace and revelation what the philosopher can never know — and they do — such knowledge as faith teaches us can serve only to draw us into a darkness of God which is deeper than it could possibly be for the pagan; it is deepened, not relieved, by the Trinity, intensified by the incarnation, not dispelled." (Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 43)

30 See Saint Thomas, *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus*, I, 3, § 77. See also Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2004).

31 This in no way implies the thesis of divine ineffability! Between theistic personalism and apophatic ineffabilism, there is the traditional possibility of saying what God is not rather than what He is.

must be a person. But not at all! If our prayers do have a meaning, we surely are addressing a loving and personal being. But it does not mean that God is a person. As Brian Davies put it, “given that the course of creation derives from His will, and given that Christians are instructed to ask for things from God, it would seem natural to turn to God as one who is able to bring about what one desires”³². So, to pray is a perfectly rational behaviour. But why God, as the one who is able to bring what one desires, would be a person because we pray Him? Why address him would *suppose* it to be a person as we are, a temporal agent acting in things in the universe but without all our defects? That God knows and understands our desires, and that He wants something for us, does not imply that He is a person. And I hope that what I said in the previous pages provide at least some reasons to think why He is not a person.

When we pray, there even would be no point in asking *a person* for the things we request of God, because we pray to ask for that which we can ask no-one else, and especially no person on Earth for. We do not pray to God in the same way that we would ask something from a person who is able to offer it to us, or instead of asking what we want from that person. For anyone who thinks that God is the Creator, omnipotent, and that nothing in the world is done independently of His will, it is perfectly reasonable to pray, and to ask Him. But, it is precisely that one does not think that God is the kind of person that one has to convince to do something.

Sure we can pray for an excellent grade at an exam, or that the university council gives us a promotion. But then we do not expect God to do exactly what a person would do for us to have the exam — to give us the right solution of a problem of mathematics. We do not expect God to do exactly what a person would do to help us to have a promotion — to convince a committee that we merit it. We ask God because the help of a person seems not enough, or that the person who could help us needs herself God’s grace. We are not confident that our fellow persons would do the right think without this grace. If someone prays for the healing of his child, it is not because he believes that the medical doctor is unable to save his boy or his girls. (He can even be convinced that the doctor is the best, that he has not the defects of the other doctors.) It is neither that he thinks that God is a super-doctor, better in medicine than the doctors he knows. If God is asked, it is because he is not a person at

32 Davies, *Thinking About God*, 316.

all, but absolutely different from anyone to whom he could ask for help. God is not prayed as a person, even not as a person without the limitations of human persons, but in a sense because he is not a person and not at the place of other persons. As Thomas Aquinas says:

For we pray not that we may change the Divine disposition, but that we may impetrate that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers in other words “that by asking, men may deserve to receive what Almighty God from eternity has disposed to give,” as Gregory says (Dial. i, 8). ... We need to pray to God, not in order to make known to Him our needs or desires but that we ourselves may be reminded of the necessity of having recourse to God’s help in these matters. ... Our motive in praying is not that we may change the Divine disposition, but that, by our prayers, we may obtain what God has appointed.... God bestows many things on us out of His liberality, even without our asking for them: but that He wishes to bestow certain things on us at our asking, is for the sake of our good, namely, that we may acquire confidence in having recourse to God, and that we may recognize in Him the Author of our goods.³³

Clearly our reasons to pray are not the kind of reasons we could have to ask a person for something he can provide us! A prayer is a causal action on a person. But there is no causal action on God, which has the least meaning! It is also why Aquinas says:

By praying man surrenders his mind to God, since he subjects it to Him with reverence and, so to speak, presents it to Him. ... Wherefore just as the human mind excels exterior things, whether bodily members, or those external things that are employed for God’s service, so too, prayer surpasses other acts of religion.³⁴

Herbert McCabe says that “maybe the way we understand God is ‘whatever makes sense of prayer’”³⁵. When we pray the doctor to do something for a child, we are not praying in the same sense than when we pray God for the healing of a child. It is likely that there is an analogy between the two uses of the term “to pray” in the first and in the second situation. But the analogy is not grounded on the identity of nature — they would share personhood — between a medical doctor and God. Our prayers do not *alter* God, they do not make him do something that he would probably not have done otherwise, or

33 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, IIaIIae, 83, 2.

34 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, IIaIIae, 83, 2, ad. 3.

35 McCabe, *God Still Matters*, 217.

change his mind. Yet this is what we expect from a prayer made to a person. That we in the Lord's prayer say "Thy will be done" shows it is certainly not a question of changing a person's opinion or of telling him what it would be desirable to do. It is that we are not addressing ourselves to a person, Zeus or Apollo, who are very special persons, but to God.³⁶

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It seems to me that here we have no good arguments to say that God is a person simply because He is personal and is not a material reality. This way of expressing oneself is linked to a very controversial doctrine, the psychophysical dualism, in the domain of philosophy of the mind. It has damaging consequences in rational theology as soon as one asks oneself about the divine action, the problem of evil, the question of petitionary prayer, and so on. At the very least, a serious doubt about the attribution to God of a personality, in the usual sense, could be a good method when we approach these themes.

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36 That God is not a person does not change the fact that Jesus, the incarnate God, is a human person. This is nothing but the doctrine of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ has two natures. But let him be man and God does not make that God is a person. That the Son is a person of the Trinity, and the Father a person of the Trinity too, as is the Holy Spirit, is also a different question than whether Jesus is a person, in the sense discussed in this article.

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