

## DOES LIVING CHRISTIANITY SUPPORT PERSONHOOD THEISM?

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The great majority of discussion in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion concerns *personhood theism*.<sup>1</sup> This is theism of a kind that holds God to be a *person*. When the existence and attributes of God are enquired into, the assumption that God (if such there be) must be a person is generally held fixed. This is so regardless of whether the philosopher in question is writing from a theistic, atheistic, or agnostic perspective. So, in a canonical statement of mainstream analytic theism, Swinburne says that God is ‘a person without a body (i.e. a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship’ [23, 2]. Meanwhile, Mackie, whilst disagreeing with Swinburne about the existence of God, is quite clear that it is about the existence of a person that the two of them disagree [14, 1]. As a non-personhood theist, I agree with Mackie to this extent: there is no such person as God.

In what follows I will not argue directly for non-personhood theism. Instead I will undermine the support routinely summoned to support personhood theism. This is interesting for reasons other than the intrinsic importance of the subject matter, since – when confronted by a denial of divine personhood by an apophatic theologian, say, or a proponent of a nonclassical conception of deity – personhood theists have tended to appeal to living religion in support of their position.<sup>2</sup> We cannot, it is claimed, make sense of the practices or key beliefs of religious believers ‘in the wild’ without interpreting them as believing that God is a person. Hence if we are really to be engaged in philosophy of *religion*, as distinct from some purely intellectual game concerning a god of the philosophers, our focus ought to be on personhood theism. This line of defence is noteworthy, since it has been a frequent line of criticism of analytic philosophy of religion, increasing in intensity of late, that it is insufficiently attentive to lived religion [10] [21] [4]. In the defences of personal theism offered by several philosophers we have a counter-example to summon to the defence against that charge.

Unfortunately for those who would like to believe that there is nothing fundamentally amiss with philosophy’s engagement with living religion, the appeal to religion by partisans for personhood theism is very much a mixed blessing. I argue below that the aspects of religious practice and belief to which appeal is made fail to support living religion. Moreover the reasons that philosophers have been mistaken

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<sup>1</sup>The term ‘personal theism’ has been used for the same doctrine. I will use ‘personhood theism’ instead, because I do not wish to deny that God is *personal*. See Adrian Thatcher on this, [24].

<sup>2</sup>A useful philosophical overview of apophaticism is [22]. On alternative conceptions of deity see [2].

about this are instructive: insufficient attention is given to the detail and context of religious practice, and the language of believers is understood in an overly literal fashion, in abstraction from its basis in religious life. In other words, the exact criticisms commonly made against the mainstream of analytic philosophy of religion in relation to living religion are shown to be upheld in that mainstream's very attempt to engage with living religion.

The lessons of the paper, then, are twofold. If philosophers of religion wish to continue to focus their concern on personhood theism (of course, I would prefer it if they didn't), they incur an unpaid intellectual debt: either show how personal theism is implicit in religious life, or else supply reasons for *revising* our conception of God in the direction of personhood.<sup>3</sup> And secondly, whilst it is certainly long overdue that the mainstream of philosophy of religion attend to the religious lives of real human communities, that it pay attention to the lighting of candles and the bending of knees, rather than resting content with a purely abstract and cognitive view of what religion consists in, it needs to do this with more sophistication and discernment than it has generally managed up until now.

The main work of the paper is to criticise two arguments for personhood theism from living religion. So as to not to be vulnerable to the charge of caricaturing the mainstream, I have opted to discuss versions presented by Brian Leftow and Alvin Plantinga respectively. Before that, it is worth giving a brief overview of personhood theism and possible reasons for rejecting it.

## 1. PERSONHOOD THEISM

One is a personhood monotheist just in case one believes that God is a person. Personhood polytheism holds that there are several gods, each of whom are persons; personhood henotheism holds that one person is foremost and deserving of allegiance amongst the plurality of personal deities, and so on. In what follows I'll concentrate on personhood *monotheism*, which I will call simply personhood *theism*, because that is where analytic philosophy of religion has directed its attention when talking about divine personhood. Conceptual elucidation of personhood theism will involve further unravelling of at least one of the concepts *God* and *person*.

There are two main ways of fleshing out a conception of God within the philosophical tradition of concern here: in terms of God in Godself, or in terms of God's role with respect to creation. The first approach is exemplified in Perfect Being Theism (PBT). According to PBT what it is to be God is to be a most perfect being (or a most perfect possible being); the PBTist philosopher on this basis typically proceeds to describe the attributes possession of which follows from divine perfection – the account is usually of an omni-God, prominent amongst whose attributes are omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence [18] [17]. The second approach works not from God's intrinsic nature, but from God's purported effects. Call this the God's effects view (GE). A philosopher taking a GE approach might take what it is to be God to be the reason why there is something rather than nothing (for example). She will typically go on to infer divine attributes from God's role in creation, as does Aquinas in the opening questions of the *Summa Theologiae* (STh, 1a, qq. 3-26) but because she does not take our competence with the concept God to involve a grasp on any intrinsic feature of God she is perhaps more able to adopt

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<sup>3</sup>In other words, in terminology that is becoming standard elsewhere: those who wish to keep the focus on personhood theism need to motivate either a project of conceptual analysis or of conceptual engineering [3].

a significant doctrine of divine ineffability than the PBTist [16]. We'll see below that such a doctrine can cause problems for divine personhood.

It is the concept of *personhood* of which understanding is particularly important if we are to assess the claim that God is a person. At the time of the medieval flourishing of theologies in the Abrahamic traditions (Aquinas, Maimonides, Ibn Sīn), the operative understanding of personhood was that supplied by Boethius: a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. Accordingly, talk of God as a *person* would have been unthinkable (subtleties around trinitarian theology notwithstanding<sup>4</sup>) – reason is the form of intelligence proper to material beings (of whom God is not one), nor is God an individual substance, in virtue of the doctrine of divine simplicity, for to be an individual substance is to be one of a kind, whereas God lacks the differentiation between form and matter which this would involve. This ought to be kept in mind when assessing claims about the antiquity of personhood theism.

Of more moment in current debates is a conception of personhood going back to at least Locke and finding application in debates about the metaphysics of personal identity. On this view one is a person if and only if one is immanently capable of possessing a mental state. The adjective ‘immanently’ here is intended to take account of sleep, if one thinks that those who are sleeping and not dreaming do not possess mental states (a question that will turn on whether one holds that all mental states are conscious), and perhaps of patients in reversible comas and so on. This view might be thought more friendly to divine personhood, since talk of God’s desires, knowledge, anger, love, and so on is present in both scripture and present religious practice. Surely God’s possession of mental states is required to make sense of this. Moreover, doesn’t the fact that we address God in worship, or that God can be spoken of as responding to prayer imply that God is understood as possessing mental states, and so is a person? Arguments of this sort will detain us below.

If personhood theism is the doctrine that God is a person in the sense of possessing mental states, why would anyone reject it?<sup>5</sup> From within religious traditions one consideration is the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS). In Aquinean context this is taken to flow from reflection on God as the creator, the thought being that any coming together of distinct existences in God would stand in need of explanation, incompatibly with God’s being the only reason for the existence of things over and against nothing (STh 1a, q3, a7). Here is not the place to assess DDS, but its apparent implications for personhood should be stressed. According to DDS God lacks any form of constitution. In particular there is no mereological composition in God, no coming together of form and matter, no distinction between potentiality

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<sup>4</sup>It is important to be clear that when Aquinas discusses the question ‘whether the name “person” is fitting to God’ in STh 1a, q29, a3 he is concerned to defend the use of the word *personae* in trinitarian theology, not the applicability of *persona* to God as a formal object in the absence of trinitarian considerations. Note also whilst seeking to maintain that personhood is predicated analogically of the trinitarian hypostases, Thomas explicitly denies that Father, Son and Spirit satisfy the Boethian definition of personhood (ad. 4). I don’t find the resulting position convincing (it seems to me, Aquinas presents a case for understanding the relevant language metaphorically, not analogically). Regardless of that, Aquinas isn’t saying anything of use to the personhood theist.

<sup>5</sup>Note that an atheist can accept it – at least in the semantically ascended form “God”, if it refers at all, refers to...’, if she thinks that ‘God’ is a singular term and doesn’t allow that sentences containing empty terms might be true – God *is supposed* to be a person, she might think.

and actuality, or between existence and essence. God is therefore impassible and cannot be affected by or interact with creatures. Nor, it might further be argued, is it easy to see how God can stand in mental states if DDS. Do these not involve some kind of mental complexity? And isn't this ruled out by DDS?

Focus on one important class of mental state provides a motive for dissenting from divine personhood. Amongst the mental states attributed to God within personhood theism are propositional attitude states: belief that, knowledge that, grief that, and so on. However grasp of propositions is for us inseparable from possession of a language in which those propositions can find expression. Why should we suppose it could be otherwise? What would be the criteria according to which we could make that judgement? Now language is intrinsically social and practical; it is an activity engaged in by creatures relevantly similar to ourselves. God is no such creature and we cannot take God to be a language user. To suppose otherwise would be to suppose that God *knows how* to do something, that God possesses an aptitude, has been initiated into some skill. But this is to think of God as too much like us [9]. So we oughtn't to attribute propositional attitude states to God. So we shouldn't take scriptural and traditional language attributing these states to God literally. But now if we don't take language about those states literally, why ought we to take language attributing *any* mental state to God literally? Treating the cases uniformly, we conclude that God has no mental states, and therefore that God is not a person.

There is much that could be said to expand, and criticise, these brief arguments against divine personhood, and my purpose in presenting them here is not to win converts. The point is rather that the fortress of personhood theism is not impregnable, quite apart from the relatively recent nature of the language of divine personhood<sup>6</sup> and the presence of clearly non person-based conceptions of deity outside Western religions and apophatic strands within those religions. Faced with a conglomeration of factors threatening to undermine personhood theism, one option to shore it up is to turn to religious life and thought, to show that the characteristic practices of the monotheistic faiths assume divine personhood, and on that basis that any attempt to explicate belief in God within these traditions which does not deliver divine personhood must be inadequate. Our attention now turns to two versions of this project.

## 2. WORSHIP

Brian Leftow writes about worship in the context of opposing naturalistic pantheism, where this is the view that God and the universe, understood naturalistically, are numerically identical [13]. Leftow maintains that anything playing the 'God-role' in our lives (and so, anything eligible to satisfy the concept *God*) must deserve worship. Something deserves worship only if:

- (1) It is *conceptually appropriate* to worship that entity. If I worship my coffee cup I have (on Leftow's way of seeing things) missed something about the nature of worship, since my coffee cup is not a fitting object of worship. Says Leftow: 'At a minimum, to be conceptually appropriate for worship, an item must be able to be aware of us addressing it and to understand enough of our address for there to be a point to it, and be sufficiently superior to us in some way to deserve a worship-attitude.' [13, 71]

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<sup>6</sup>Brian Davies remarks that the first English occurrence of 'God is a person' was in the 1644 report of the heresy trial of John Biddle [6, 65].

- (2) The entity is worthy of worship. The biblical God satisfies this criteria. Satan does not.

There is much to grumble at here. In particular I would want to ask hard questions about the suggestion that *superiority* is part of conceptual appropriateness to worship: one is never just superior to something (the word does have an intransitive use, but then it means ‘snobbish’ – presumably *that* is not what is meant here), one is superior in some respect.<sup>7</sup> An espresso machine is superior to a filter as a coffee maker; Celtic are superior to Queen of the South as a football team. Are we to suppose that there are salient respects of comparison between God and creatures? Are we not then vulnerable to the lines of criticism against religion issuing from Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, and well expressed by Monty Python’s parody ‘Oh Lord, oooh you are so big. So absolutely huge. Gosh, we’re all really impressed down here I can tell you’[20]?

But I won’t develop these thoughts here. Rather I want to look at the case for divine personhood implicit in Leftow’s attack on naturalistic pantheism. Leftow thinks, plausibly enough, that the impersonal naturalistic universe does not satisfy the criteria in (1) for being a conceptually appropriate object of worship. The universe cannot be ‘aware of my addressing it’ nor ‘understand’ my address. So much the worse for naturalistic pantheism, thinks Leftow. Anything that fulfills the God-role is going to need to be *something like a person*, conscious and understanding. I say ‘something like a person’ because anticipating a reply to an objection along the lines that pantheists might personify an intrinsically non-personal universe, Leftow writes,

A pantheist might reply that theists, too, personify God, because God is not a person in any ordinary sense. They do so because otherwise it is very difficult to talk about Him. But then (pantheists might say) aren’t I hoist with my own petard? I think not. If God is a person of an extraordinary sort, He is still a person. If He is not a person, still He is personal. Even the most anti-anthropomorphic theists, so long as they do not simply subside into negative-theological silence, admit that God knows, God wills, and God is good, in some legitimate sense of these terms: Even Aquinas’ theory of analogy tells us that these are really, literally true of God, though the way these properties are realized in God—the sense in which they are true of Him or what it is in God that satisfies these terms’ senses—is ultimately beyond us.’

This liberality is ill-advised in Leftow’s own terms, for in arguing against the naturalist pantheist initially, he has insisted that conceptually appropriate objects of worship must be ‘aware’. This is an application of mental-state talk, pushing us towards divine personhood, understood in a Lockean fashion. An attempt might be made to resist this conclusion by trying to present an account of how awareness might be attributed analogically to God, but since Leftow is elsewhere committed to divine personhood, I take it that he will be happy with understanding his argument from conceptual inappropriateness as an argument for divine personhood. It is on those terms that I will engage with it.

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<sup>7</sup>For similar reasons I oppose the Perfect Being Theism mentioned above. One is never simply perfect, one is a perfect *F*, for some sortal *F*. And a *being* is not a kind of thing (I have told you nothing about something in telling you that it is a being). The logical grammar of the word ‘perfect’ is being set aside in this deployment.

Why are only persons conceptually appropriate recipients of worship? Because, as we saw above, worship is being understood as *address*:

[W]orship is a form of address: when we worship, we say things to what we worship. We sing hymns to God; we pray to God; we declare to God our belief in Him. We do not intend this as some sort of psychological self-help, or for moral improvement. The point of the practice is for these words to be heard and understood.

Appeal is being made here to a human practice, worship, and in order to assess the strength of the appeal we will need to attend to the details of the practice. It is hazardous to pass judgement on the ‘point’ of some practice without evidence; indeed, why should there be a *point* to the practice of worship beyond the practice itself?<sup>8</sup> In actual fact, in any case, there can be a point to addressing something which is not a person; consider Burns’ *Address to a Haggis*. Puddings are, however, impersonal, whereas the theistic opponent of divine personhood typically holds that God is neither a person nor impersonal (but rather that God is not the kind of thing of which personhood is predicated intelligibly<sup>9</sup>), so we should perhaps not draw too much on this or similar examples. We might, however, question whether it is always the case that prayer is not intended for ‘self-help’ or ‘moral improvement’. I certainly was taught, in a Catholic Christian context, that prayer changes us, rather than God, and have entered into it on that basis.<sup>10</sup>

There are, in other words, many questions left open by Leftow’s declaration that worship is a form of address, intended to be understood by a person. It is certainly not a conceptual truth. I now want to suggest that it is not even a truth, that there are cases of worship that are not forms of address. Limiting ourselves to western Christianity we might ask ourselves: is censing an altar a form of address?, what about hands being raised in a charismatic prayer meeting?, dancing during a pentecostal service?, the lighting of a candle before an image of Mary? Do these involve ‘words’ that might be ‘understood’? Obviously not; yet they are absolutely typical acts of worship. The temptation to ignore the wide array of bodily acts of worship (and of supplication, expression, contemplation... it is a mistake to think all liturgy and prayer is *worship*) in favour of sayings and singings may have its roots in the assumption that liturgical actions are always a way of saying something that *could* be said in words: so the priest censing an altar, for instance, is saying (perhaps on behalf of the community), ‘we value what happens here’, or ‘we worship Christ, of whom this is a symbol’. A good deal of popular apologetic material around ritual has taken this line.<sup>11</sup> But this reduction of the meaning of prayer to that which could be communicated sententially is at best highly questionable, as is the suggestion that a given act of prayer must have some sentential content. Think about other forms of human expression. Does a piece of music have to *say* something? Some philosophers think so, others do not. What about a kiss? It is haywire to think that what is going on when somebody kisses her wife is that she is saying ‘I love you’, albeit in a less verbal way. That is how we might interpret it to a child who observes two people kissing, but that is because the child does not yet inhabit the set of practices within which a romantic kiss makes sense. That the two people love each other might be a precondition for the kiss being honest (just as all

<sup>8</sup>Note that this has nothing to do with realism/ non-realism debates about God. In terms of classical Christian theology, for instance, the liturgy is an anticipatory participation in the eternal worship offered by the Son to the Father. It would be very peculiar to ask after the *point* of the life of the Trinity.

<sup>9</sup>On this, see McCabe [16, 8-9].

<sup>10</sup>Compare here Aquinas at STh Iii,q83, a2,ad 2.

<sup>11</sup>See, for instance, [25], which continues to be re-issued.

religious beliefs, or hopes, or fears might be preconditions for an honest prayer); it simply doesn't follow that the kiss is a way of saying 'I love you'. More than that, it seems like the person who offers a sentential analysis of a kiss is missing something, that they have an impoverished grasp of humankind's symbolic possibilities. We ought not to assume that a kiss admits *any* analysis, but yet it makes perfect sense to us in proper context, just as it is. Just as kisses, so with censings.

It could be objected at this point that the recipients of romantic kisses are persons. This is, of course, true, but only helps the personhood theist to a very limited extent. Firstly the example draws attention to an important feature of the uncontroversial satisfiers of our concept of personhood, namely that they are bodily. Similarly the body is the principal means of human communication, not just in kissing, but in uttering, writing, and typing words. The suggestion that interactions of the same sorts we ordinarily call *addressings* can be present in the case in which one party is not corporeal needs to be shown. Secondly, we can shift the example, following Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, to somebody kissing a photo of her beloved [26]. This, no more than the live kiss, requires sentential interpretation, and the depicted person may not even be alive (and the kisser may not even know whether the person is alive) – yet it is a perfectly meaningful action. Ritual actions which are in no way addressings are part of everyday human life, need not have persons as their objects (or any object whatsoever), and this is apparent even before consideration of the particular case of religion.

'But', the personhood theist might contend, 'I can allow that some, perhaps even a lot, of what goes on in Christian liturgy and prayer doesn't take the form of addressing God. It's just that some of it *does*, and on that basis I claim that only the attribution of an implicit personhood theism to those engaged in prayer renders this intelligible'. Certainly much Christian liturgy involves saying and singing things which are directed towards God<sup>12</sup>. But if we set to one side the idea that prayer is talking to God, it ought to be striking how different from ordinary cases of talking to someone, let alone having a conversation.

First, the register of language used in liturgy and in private prayer differs from ordinary speech, this is every bit as true of the spontaneous prayer at a charismatic meeting ('Lord we just exalt your name') as it is of the Roman Missal ('consubstantial with the Father'). Shift in register is often an indicator of a shift in locutionary force ('I confer on you the degree of bachelor of arts') or of the type of addressee ('You're a very cutey doggie, yes you are'). Collective worshippers speak or sing in chorus, in a manner rarely observed otherwise off of sports terraces, and the level of uniformity is greater even than then, and the use of ritual words unparalleled. This is simply not like talking to a person in our ordinary lives.

Nor is private prayer much like a personal conversation, however frequently the comparison may be made.<sup>13</sup> Here, of course, I may use words exactly like those

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<sup>12</sup>We should be careful here, in a way the literature usually isn't, in distinguishing saying things to God *qua* God and to *Christ*, of whom everything which is true of human beings in virtue of their humanity is, according to Christian orthodoxy, true (DS 148). Christ is on these terms a person (and is addressed liturgically). Nothing follows about whether God, *qua* God, is a person.

<sup>13</sup>Traditionally there has been thought to be a distinction between meditative and contemplative prayer within the Western Christian tradition. Only the former is verbal, yet the latter is considered, at least in some sense, more desirable. This distinction appears to me fertile for discussions of divine personhood, but here I'll ignore contemplative prayer, focusing on forms of private prayer more favourable to Leftow's position.

I'd use talking to a friend ('I'm feeling off colour today, and things are a bit crap at work'). When talking to a friend, however, I have to say the words aloud<sup>14</sup>, otherwise I may communicate with her by writing, or by sign language. What I cannot do when talking to my friend is say the words 'to myself' in my internal monologue. By contrast this is a form commonly taken by prayer to God. Still more marked is the difference between conversing with my friend and, what we might call, conversing with God. It is, in the usual course of things, entirely straightforward, and a matter of publicly accessible fact,<sup>15</sup> whether my friend has replied to me, what she has said and which conversational moves this leaves open to me if I am to be a co-operative participant in the conversation. On the contrary, what we call 'hearing the voice of God' is typically a matter of careful discernment. As I have said elsewhere,

God's speaking to the praying person is not public; watching somebody in the act of prayer is sufficient to understand this. Hearing the 'voice' of God is, for the believer, an often painful introspective process, which involves distinguishing thoughts, desires, and impulses taken to come 'from God' from ones taken to be of no religious significance. To make these observations is in no way to undervalue prayer, but rather to recognise that it cannot be categorised as a series of exchanges within a community such that God could be identified as a discrete agent with a distinct sphere of influence. [9, 15]

God's speaking to us is an important image in many religious traditions and it is no more my purpose to undermine it here than it was in the quoted paper. Rather I urging something like what Wittgenstein had in mind when he counselled returning words to their ordinary from their metaphysical use [27, 116]. To understand what it *means* for God to speak we have to attend to the actual practice of prayer, and its place within the life and theology of religious communities. We cannot hastily make the inference from God speaking, or from us speaking ('addressing') to God for that matter, to the metaphysical claim that God is a person. And when we calm our haste and look at the lived reality of liturgy and prayer what ought to strike us is how *different* these are from the ordinary exchanges of human persons.

The difference is reinforced when we consider Leftow's saying, of worship, that '[t]he point of the practice is for [these] words to be heard and understood'. We can assume safely that some kind of appeal to metaphor or analogy will be applied to an articulation of the intention that God *hear* our words; God is not an animal and does not have senses. What, however, about God's *understanding* those words? In passing, even in the case of ordinary human conversation, it seems wrong to say that a speaker's primary intention is that her words be *understood*<sup>16</sup> (even as austere a philosopher of language as Grice takes the intended perlocutionary effect of assertion to be that the hearer *believe* the content of the assertion). It is better to say that the hearer's understanding of the language, and therefore of an utterance, is presupposed, rather than intended, by a conversational participant. Still, in the

<sup>14</sup>This is not to buy into an exaggerated idea of a private, 'inner', domain accessible only through language. My friend may see perfectly well that I am unhappy, sometimes in cases where I do not realise this myself. If I want to *say* that I am unhappy to my friend, however, I must use a public medium: sounds, inscriptions, sign language.

<sup>15</sup>I am discounting, as I think one should, concerns about zombies, the problem of other minds and the like here. I believe, perhaps unfashionably, that Wittgenstein's private language argument is decisive against this family of worries, but that is not a matter for this paper. [27, 243-71].

<sup>16</sup>This seems akin to saying that in making a chess move I intend that my opponent understand the rule which licences that move.

case of addressing one of our fellow human beings (in the normal run of things, as a co-operative participant in the conversation, speaking in a shared language) we take it that our utterances are understood. In fact our practices of addressing do not make intelligible sense in the absence of the assumption that we are addressing *persons*. For it is persons who understand language.

Haven't we finally arrived at a firm base in the life of prayer for belief in divine personhood? For surely our practices of prayer presuppose that God will understand them. One the contrary, this is far from obvious once we pay attention to the actual practice, and doing so lights up another area of profound difference between praying to God and conversing with a human person. The person praying is not concerned that God will not understand her. It does not matter in which language she speaks,<sup>17</sup> whether she speaks aloud or 'in her head'; she needn't worry about speaking up to be heard, and she doesn't need to modify her register to aid comprehension. If God is a being that understanding one's prayer, why do we never do anything to facilitate that understanding? That is why we usually do; indeed we come to understand what it is to understand through the successes and failures of our attempts at communication. The grammar of understanding has its place within situations in which communication might conceivably fail, in a material world which is both the condition of and a potential barrier to communication with other persons.

'So what?', the reply is likely to come back. The need to avoid misunderstanding in communication is a function of our usual conversations being with finite persons. God is an infinite person, omnipotent and omniscient, and cannot fail to understand us. It is surely right to say that it would seem out of place to say that God can *misunderstand* prayer, but to infer from this that God understands prayer is to assume that one and one only of the pair  $\langle$ understands, misunderstands $\rangle$  must be applicable to God with respect to each act of prayer. However this overlooks the possibility that to say either that God understands or that God misunderstands is a category mistake, a failure to recognise that God is not amongst the objects of which understanding might be intelligibly predicated. Internal to the Christian tradition itself is the conviction that 'your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'<sup>18</sup> whatever I am doing when I pray I am not informing God of facts about the world and its needs of which he was previously ignorant: 'your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things' says Matthew's Jesus, contrasting what he holds to be the proper attitude towards prayer with that of the Gentiles, who strive, for food, drink, and clothing.<sup>19</sup> Doesn't this mean that God, as presupposed in the practice of Christian prayer, is indeed a person, since in order to be a knowing subject one must be a person?

It certainly is important to the practice of petitionary prayer that God is taken to know intimately our needs and desires, but it is not obviously important that what we call knowing in God is *propositional* (and so the kind of state which is definitive of personhood. God's knowledge of creatures is described in key scriptural passages in terms not easily suited to a propositional reading, 'Before I formed you in the

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<sup>17</sup>I mean here, that we are never worried that we might speak in a language God won't understand. The language of prayer might be of profound religious significance in other ways: think about the use of a local language in a context in which it is banned, or the tribe in question oppressed, or the use of Latin to express the extension of the Church across time and space.

<sup>18</sup>Matthew 6:8.

<sup>19</sup>Matthew 7:32

womb I knew you.’<sup>20</sup> Here and elsewhere God’s knowledge is presented as more like the knowledge a craftsperson has of their work than of a knowledge of facts about the world.<sup>21</sup> ‘God’, writes Herbert McCabe, ‘is not well-informed’ [ , ]. Aquinas takes God’s knowledge to not involve ‘composition and division’ in the way that the knowledge of creatures such as our selves, possessing discursive rationality does of necessity. God instead knows all things through knowing himself, and thereby things other than himself as their creator. For God to know  $\phi$  for any  $\phi$  concerning creatures just is for God to create the world such that  $\phi$ ; the knowing just is the creating.<sup>22</sup> So God knows our needs and desires, not by entertaining propositions about them but by creating them. Make of this what you will, it is a classical account of divine knowledge, rooted in Christian practice, and does not deliver what the personhood theist needs at this point. The role of God’s knowledge in the practice and understanding of prayer doesn’t require that God have propositional attitudes.

There are, in any case, clear problems with talk of God *understanding* us. To be in a position to understand a speaker is, at least,<sup>23</sup> to possess an aptitude, and in particular one which involves initiation into a social practice. It is far from clear what it could be for God to be skilled at something, God can presumably not *learn* a skill, and the suggestion that God has an ability commits one to there being potentiality in God, something that Christian theology has classically rejected. Even more peculiar is the thought that God is a member of a linguistic community, indeed of *our* linguistic community, for it is *us* whom God is supposed to understand. Membership of this community is rooted in our animal life: it involves making sounds, hearing them, attention to gestures in particular circumstances, recognition of those circumstances themselves. It is a category mistake to speak of God as engaging in these activities. Moreover it is a category mistake of religious significance to speak of God as a member of a community with creatures such as ourselves, one amongst others, in the way that would be required for membership of a linguistic community.<sup>24</sup>

The purpose of this section has been to unsettle Leftow’s suggestion that Christian prayer is a matter of addressing God, and that this in turn only makes sense if God is believed to be a person. This line of thought is tempting to the extent that we don’t attend to the details of Christian practice, and in particular how different talking – collectively or individually – to God is to talking to another human being.

### 3. BELIEF IN A PERSON?

If the ordinary run of Christian practices don’t provide obvious support for the claim that Christianity is, at least implicitly, committed to divine personhood what about Christian *belief*? At the beginning of his *Warranted Christian Belief*

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<sup>20</sup>Jeremiah 1:5

<sup>21</sup>Isn’t a craftsperson a person? Well, yes, but there is no claim here that we don’t use personal images about God – that is obviously deeply rooted in religious practice. My target is the specific claim that we talk of God in ways that are only intelligible if we believe God to stand in propositional attitude states.

<sup>22</sup>STh 1a, q14,

<sup>23</sup>Whether or not linguistic competence is *simply* a matter of aptitude possession is contentious. For a case to the contrary see [8, Ch. 3].

<sup>24</sup>Of course, Christian doctrine does allow that human beings may belong to a community with God in a sense, but that is precisely because they are elevated to shared in the life of the Trinity by grace, belonging to a community by adoption to which we could not belong by nature. This is of no help in explaining how God might be a language user.

Plantinga makes a broadside against apophatic theology [19]. His target will strike those of us with more historical or ecumenical perspectives than Plantinga's as severely limited, consisting as it does of the work of Kant, Kaufman and Hick.<sup>25</sup> Still, the apophaticisms of pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, Aquinas or Teresa of Avila, for example, would fall squarely within the remit of Plantinga's condemnation, as would any view that denies divine personhood. Sam Lebens has done a good job of laying out Plantinga's reasons for objecting to apophaticism [11]. Of interest to us here will be Plantinga's insistence that apophaticism, and *inter alia*, rejecting divine personhood involves us in, what Lebens terms, *reductive revisionism*, reinterpreting the religious language of ordinary believers in a way that robs it of religious interest. According to Plantinga,

This is not a matter of pouring new wine into old wineskins: what we have here is nothing like the rich, powerful, fragrant wine of the great Christian truths; what we have is something wholly drab, trivial and insipid. It is not even a matter of throwing out the baby with the bathwater; it is instead, throwing out the baby and keeping the tepid bathwater; at best a bland, unappetizing potion that is neither hot nor cold and at worst a nauseating brew, fit for neither man nor beast. [19, 42]

In spite of a great deal of sympathy for Kaufman, the immediate target here, being the subject of this kind of invective from a prominent philosopher,<sup>26</sup> I hold no brief for his philosophical theology. However Plantinga holds apophaticisms beyond Kaufman's guilty of reinterpreting Christian doctrine in a reductionist fashion, so if his opposition to this (if not his invective) is justified then a Christian who does not assent to personhood theism ought to be worried.

What is the problem supposed to be? Take characteristic Christian claims: that God creates, that God the Son became incarnate as Jesus, that God saves God's creatures and brings us to share in the divine life, that God called his ancient people, and attends to the prayers of us today. Let's take it to be common ground amongst philosophers and theologians that we ought not to seek to revise these claims in the following sense: they have a proper place in liturgy and devotion and in the ordinary everyday way in which believers talk about their faith. This rules a good number of revisionist theologians out of consideration.<sup>27</sup> For us, however, the Christian is saying what she ought to when she says, for instance, 'God has called me to new life in Christ'. But, according to Plantinga, the apophatic theologian is being duplicitous in her acceptance of this language, since she *re-interprets* the believer's utterance, assigning to it a meaning very different from its natural one. After all it is *persons* whom we usually speak of as calling one another.

Seductive though this line of argument is, it is entirely question-begging. Plantinga is simply taking the non-apophatic interpretation of religious language to be correct as an account of everyday religious usage. Were this not the case, he would be unjustified in taking apophatic interpretations as *revisionary*. But then it is incumbent upon the person running Plantinga's line of argument to *show* that a non-apophatic (for our purposes a non-personhood theist) account of everyday religious language

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<sup>25</sup>Restriction of attention to debates of interest within north American Protestant Christianity is a besetting problem within analytic philosophy of religion, although there are signs of diversification.

<sup>26</sup>I assume that Plantinga intended to make reference to Revelation 3:15-6 in the passage quoted.

<sup>27</sup>See, for instance, John Shelby Spong's *Call for a New Reformation*, readily available on-line.

is the correct one. This can only be done by attending to actual usage, not on armchair appeals to the simple folk faithful, who say what they mean and mean what they say, unperturbed by revisionist philosophers.

What is correct is that we religious folk do not on a day by day basis make *any* metaphysical claims about God. It is a rare homily which tells us that God is (or isn't) a person, or that religious expressions latch on to divine reality in such-and-such a way. How then are we to tell whether or not ordinary religious talk, 'God has called me to life in Christ', for instance, has a meaning consonant with apophaticism (which would presumably involve 'to call' functioning non-literally)? We can attend to the way the expression is used, how it functions within religious life, the inferential transitions it is taken to license. Are there significant differences between this and ordinary calling talk? Obviously, yes. So we should not take the religious use and the ordinary use to agree in meaning. A number of further questions remain, crucially whether the religious use of 'call' ought to be interpreted as analogical, in the thomist sense, so that the believer's utterance is a candidate for truth, or whether the correct interpretation is as metaphorical, in which case the religious value of the utterance must consist in something other than its truth. Exactly the same considerations play out in the case of credal affirmations - when we say, for example, that God made the world, we mean something quite unlike what we mean when we talking about ordinary makings; the former are agential transformations of matter, the latter is a bringing to be *ex nihilo*. And again the same considerations play out when considering biblical narrative, including stories in which God is presented as a being undergoing emotional states, with the additional consideration that critical understanding of the text is needed (Plantinga himself has been at the forefront of undermining biblical criticism within philosophy of religion, but it seems to me that if we are concerned with the *meaning* of biblical texts, historical criticism is indispensable, and I know of no better way to go about this than the mainstream methods of academic biblical studies). It is clear from all of this than Plantinga's presupposition that ordinary religious language ought to be interpreted in a manner favourable to the personhood theist at best stands in need of more support.

A yet stronger case may be made against ordinary Christian language entailing personhood theism. On the supposition that God is a person, common Christian assertions look problematic. 'Jesus is both truly God and truly a human being': aren't we then forced either into admitting two personal realities in Christ (since every human being is a person), which is Nestorianism?, or else saying that the divine person displaced (how is unclear)<sup>28</sup> the human person that would otherwise have been there, which is Appolinarianism? Abandon personhood theism and these problems dissolve, as, given a sufficient general apophaticism, do worries about the coherence of claiming that one and the same person is both human and God [15]. Similarly, 'God is three persons (*personae*, *hypostases*) in one substance' encounters no small amount of difficulties in the context of personhood theism: is there one divine person who is somehow manifest in three persons, what could this even mean?<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, is God simply three persons; and why is that not tritheism? Then again, think about 'God is good'. If God is a person then the kind of goodness God possesses is the kind of goodness appropriate to persons, moral goodness [23, Ch. 11], and the problem of evil gets off the ground [5]. Not only then do

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<sup>28</sup>I think that in order to make this kind of christology even superficially attractive, some form of substance dualism is needed.

<sup>29</sup>I see Leftow's Latin Trinitarianism as approximating this position [12].

*contra* Plantinga, ordinary Christian professions of belief not require interpretation in terms of personhood theism, but the attempt to so interpret them gives rises to philosophical difficulties not obviously latent in the ordinary professions.

## 4

We would do well to attend more to lived religious practice when philosophising about religion. In particular, when philosophising about *Christianity*, we need to pay attention to Christian practice in its diversity and depth. This is both a desirable end in itself and a necessary prerequisite to the proper investigation of issues around the meaning of religious language, such as those we have encountered in engaging with Leftow and Plantinga. Absent such engagement, proponents of personhood theism still have work to do in making even a *prima facie* case for their position. An alternative, under-explored at the moment, is to investigate the possibilities for a non-personhood theism.

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