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Classical and Revisionary Theism on the Divine as Personal: A Rapprochement?

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Abstract

To claim that the divine is a person or personal is, according to Richard Swinburne, 'the most elementary claim of theism' (1993, 101). I argue that, whether the classical theist's concept of the divine as a person or personal is construed as an analogy or a metaphor, or a combination of the two, analysis necessitates qualification of that concept such that any differences between the classical theist's concept of the divine as a person or personal and revisionary interpretations of that concept are merely superficial. Thus, either the classical theist has more in common with revisionary theism than he/she might care to admit, or classical theism is a multi-faceted position which encompasses interpretations which some might regard as revisionist.

This article also explores and employs the use of a gender-neutral pronoun in talk about God.

Keywords: divine personhood; divine agency; analogy; metaphor; classical theism; revisionary theism; revisionist theism; gender-neutral pronoun

To claim that the divine is a person or personal is, according to Richard Swinburne, 'the most elementary claim of theism' (1993, 101). I argue that, whether the classical theist's concept of the divine as a person or personal is construed as an analogy or a metaphor, or a combination of the two, analysis necessitates qualification of that concept such that any differences between the classical theist's concept of the divine as a person or personal and revisionary interpretations of that concept are merely superficial. Thus, either the classical theist has more in common with revisionary theism than he/she might care to admit, or classical theism is a multi-faceted position which encompasses interpretations which some might regard as revisionist.[1]

1. Classical theism: God as 'a person', and God as 'personal'

By 'classical theism' I mean belief in a God who, in Swinburne's often-quoted words, 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' (1993, 1). God may be construed either as 'a person without a body (i.e., a spirit)' (Swinburne), or as personal.[2]

[1] I use the terms 'revisionary' and 'revisionist' interchangeably.

[2] Mark Wynn uses the term 'classical' to describe versions of theism which claim that 'God is pure being and therefore "simple"' (1997, 91). Some scholars have argued that a timeless God could not be a person, a claim which is discussed by Garrett J. Deweese (2004, ch. 8) and disputed by Helm (1988, ch. 4).

1.1 Is God a person?

In order to ascertain whether God may be described as 'a person', it is necessary to define 'person' – and this, of course, is notoriously difficult to achieve.[3] Historically, the Latin *persona*, a development from some usages of the Greek *prosopon* and *hypostasis*, was used only to indicate distinctions within the triune God of Christianity, and not to refer to an individual consciousness or will; it was not until the Enlightenment that 'person' came to be applied in the latter sense, first to human beings, and then to God.[4]

If personhood entails embodiment, as Adrian Thatcher (1985, 61) and Brian Davies (2006, 61) think it must,[5] it could be argued that we can claim that God is a person only if we adopt some version of pantheism or panentheism,[6] or regard divine embodiment as a metaphor.[7] But Swinburne suggests that it might be possible to define a person as an animate being who is normally, but not necessarily, described in terms of predicates which depict a material body (Swinburne 1993, 102), and therefore that God is a person in an analogical sense[8] which does not require embodiment.

[3] Deweese notes that '[t]he criteria of personhood are very much in debate in contemporary philosophy, from applied ethics, dealing with beginning- and end-of-life issues, to cognitive science, dealing with artificial intelligence' (216).

[4] Herbert C. Wolf (1964, 28) notes that some of the earliest uses of the phrase 'the personality of God' may be found in William Paley (1850), and the first edition of Schleiermacher (1958) (Wolf, 1964, 28). John Hick notes that 'person' understood in the 'modern' sense – i.e., as an individual centre of consciousness and will – also features in '"social" conceptions of the trinity as three personal centres so intimately united as to form a complex unity of three-in-one' (2004, 270).

[5] Davies follows philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle (1949), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1968), J. J. C. Smart (1959), and David Armstrong (1968).

[6] Grace M. Jantzen offers a recent example of such a view (1984, esp. ch. 5), although Michael P. Levine notes that 'Pantheists usually deny the existence of a "personal" God' (1994, 2).

[7] For example, the teaching that Allah has two hands has been commonly interpreted by Muslim scholars as a symbol for divine power, while Ibn Arabi argued that it is a symbol for the polarities, the opposites, which exist within human beings. See Sells (1994), 86.

[8] There are, of course, other interpretations of analogy (see, e.g., White 2010). I discuss Swinburne here because he adopts an analogical interpretation of God as a person.

Even if an analogical interpretation of divine personhood need not include embodiment, however, it would appear that there are other respects in which the divine person differs from human persons. First, God lacks some attributes which persons normally have. For example, it has been argued that xe[9] is not capable of abstract thought because divine knowledge is 'complete and intuitive' (Ward 1992, 261), and that xe cannot experience emotions, because to experience emotions is to be changed by something which is not oneself, and the creator of everything cannot be changed by something other than xemself (Davies 2006, 209). Secondly, God has some attributes which persons do not normally have. For example, xe is the creator of everything not xemself (Ward 1992, 262). Indeed, Davies argues, if God were a person like us, xe would be just another inhabitant of the universe whose existence would need an explanation; people are parts of creation and, if God is the creator, xe cannot be a person (2006, 62-68). Ward notes that the person model fails to do justice to the idea that God is within us, or that we are one with God (264), while William J. Mander suggests that features of deity such as perfection, omniscience, infinitude and gender-neutrality are incompatible with personhood (1997, 411; see also Gary

[9] Since few would argue that the divine is literally masculine, I adopt the gender-neutral pronoun 'xe' (pronounced 'zi'). According to Mario Pei, Don Rickter notes the use of 'xe, xen, xes' (for 'he/she', 'his/her', 'him/her') in the *United Nations World* of 1 May 1973 (Pei 1978, 145). Others attribute the first use of 'xe' to the *UU World* (the Unitarian Universalist publication) of the same date, with an independent invention of the term by Jim Sinclair in 1992 (http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/xe), but I am unable to access the publications in question in order to check this. A gender-neutral pronoun may be employed to mean 'he, she, or it', but also to indicate a person of unspecified gender. While some languages already employ gender-neutral pronouns, and Sweden has recently (2012) adopted 'hen', there is no generally-accepted English term. From those which have been suggested, I have chosen 'xe' to refer to divinity conceived of as a person, or personal, on the grounds that the 'x' which replaces the first two letters of the gendered pronouns seems particularly appropriate in the context of an apophatic theology. There are some variations in use but, for the purposes of this article, 'xe' is formed as follows: xe (he/she/it), xem (him/her/it), xir (his/her/its – i.e., possessive determiner), xirs (his/hers/its – i.e., possessive pronoun), xemself (himself/herself/itself) (adapted from the table found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender-specific_and_gender-neutral_pronouns).

Legenhausen 1986, 317).

Thus, if God is a person, xe is a person without a body who lacks some of the attributes which persons normally have, and possesses other attributes which persons do not normally have. Swinburne argues that God is a person in an analogical sense if xe resembles persons more than things which are not persons; it is not necessary for God to resemble persons in every respect. He claims that, although he has loosened the meanings of words such as 'person', 'thinks', 'acts', and 'brings about', he has not emptied them of meaning since '[t]here are still statable and precise rules for their use', which means that 'information is still conveyed by the use of the words, although not as much as would have been conveyed if the words had been used in their normal senses' (1993, 287). For scholars such as Mander and Legenhausen, however, too many features of the divine are incompatible with personhood for the analogy to be meaningful.

1.2 Is God personal?

Theists who are unwilling to think of God as a person sometimes suggest that xe should, instead, be described as 'personal'[10] or 'suprapersonal'.[11] In other words, although God is not, in any sense, a person, we may still 'truly speak of God while using terms ... that we employ when talking of creatures' (Davies 2006, 54) – i.e., we may say that God possesses 'person-properties' (Ward 1992, 262). Mander acknowledges that 'God has many properties typically associated with persons' (411),

[10] Thatcher claims that belief that God is a person is an impediment to Christian faith, but that belief in a personal God is essential to it (1985, 61), while Davies argues that God is personal on the grounds that God has knowledge and will and is active (2000, 561-563).
[11] David Pailin uses this word to describe the position of Karl Jaspers (Jaspers 1967, 141ff; Pailin 1976, 149). See also Hans Küng (1980, 633), quoted in Thatcher (2006, 72) and Ward (1992, 265).

while Legenhausen, noting that the claim 'God is personal' is sometimes understood in a weak sense to mean that personal pronouns and predicates applicable to persons (e.g., 'all-knowing', 'all-wise', 'aware', 'merciful') may be attributed to God, observes that '[n]o one in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition … would deny … [that God is personal] in this weak sense' (308).

Swinburne thinks that the distinction between 'person' and 'personal' is unnecessary, however, provided that the difference between divine and human persons is sufficiently emphasised (1993, 101), while John Hick claims that the distinction is meaningless, asking 'what could a personal non-person be?' (2006, 162) Nevertheless, there does seem to be a distinction between those who think that God may be described as a person in an analogical sense, and those who think that God has some of the attributes we would normally expect a person to have – i.e., that God satisfies some of the necessary conditions for calling something a person – but not enough to warrant describing xem as a person.

2. Classical theism: Divine personhood – analogy or metaphor?

If the God of classical theism is at least personal insofar as xe satisfies some of the necessary conditions for calling something a person, then perhaps the idea of God as a person may be plausibly characterized as a metaphor. Whereas analogical religious language might be broadly characterized as the use of human language 'to speak about God, in such a way that we may make claims that are *literally* true of God, while yet respecting the fundamental difference between God and His creation'

(White 2010, 183), metaphorical religious language might be defined as speaking about God in terms which are normally applied to the world in such a way that we make claims which are not literally true but which are, nonetheless, in some sense 'reality depicting' (Soskice 1985, 145).[12] Thus, 'God is good' may be understood as an analogy because, although human beings cannot hope to comprehend the nature and extent of God's goodness, there is some sense in which God's goodness is related to human goodness, while 'God is my rock' may be understood as a metaphor because, although the concept of 'rock' may convey, for example, the notion of divine immutability, there is no sense in which the statement is literally true.

The distinction is less clear, however, when we try to categorize divine personhood. As we saw above, Swinburne thinks that 'God is a person' may be understood in an analogical sense because, although he has loosened the meanings of terms such as 'thinks' and 'brings about', they are not meaningless, and we can still specify rules for their use. Vincent Brümmer, on the other hand, asserts that '[a]ll our thinking about God … [is] metaphorical in the sense that we think and speak about (our relations with) God in terms derived from our thinking and speaking about (our relations with) each other' (2005, 4), and that a central task of theological reflection is that of 'sorting out critically what part of the penumbra of meaning can and what part cannot be transferred to our thinking and speaking about God' (4). Thus, while the notion of divine personhood 'is so rich that it has been developed as the most fundamental and characteristic conceptual model in theistic god-talk' (5), like all theological metaphors,

[12] There are, of course, alternative interpretations of metaphor. For example, Victoria Harrison (2007) argues that, following the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), metaphor should be seen as reality-constituting, and therefore as reality-transforming – i.e., as changing the way in which we experience the world. Soskice rejects this example of what she terms 'the metaphor-as-myth thesis' (1985, 81-82), while Dan R. Stiver draws out the similarities between Lakoff and Johnson' position on the one hand, and that of Soskice on the other (1996, 120, 126).

what it asserts 'is always accompanied by the whisper "and it is not."[13] The fruitfulness of personal models for talking about God should therefore never make us deaf to the whisper that God is not like other people!' (5). Failure to hear this can lead to 'an unacceptable form of anthropomorphism in our understanding of God and his ways' (7). Brümmer cites Wittgenstein's explanation of the use of the picture: 'God's eye sees everything'. This means that 'God is aware of all that happens, not only in the world but also in the hearts and minds of all people'; talk of eyebrows would be inappropriate because this would go beyond the logical limits of the picture (Brümmer 2005, 9, referring to Wittgenstein 1966, 71-72).

In support of the view that divine personhood is, indeed, a metaphor rather than an analogy, one might argue as follows: 'God is good' may be understood as an analogy when it is agreed that there is a relationship of some kind between divine and human goodness; if, as Brian Davies argues (2006, ch. 4), there is no such relationship, then 'God is good' is a metaphor – although it may be difficult to explain which aspects of goodness apply to God if God is not in some literal, albeit extended, sense good. Thus, 'God is a person' is not an analogy because God is not a person in any extended sense; personhood is not magnified in the same way as goodness is magnified when predicated of the divine because God lacks some attributes of personhood and possesses other attributes which are incompatible with personhood. Whereas it might be difficult to determine the nature of the truth conveyed by 'God is good' understood as a metaphor, on the grounds that only one facet of divinity is described and, if this is not understood to be true in any literal sense, little, if anything, remains but an appeal to apophatic theology, the metaphor of divine personhood is a much richer metaphor

[13] Brümmer draws on Sallie McFague (1983, 13) here.

consisting of a range of attributes, each of which might be explained in terms of analogy, as Brümmer seems to suggest (2006, 163). For example, if the metaphor of divine personhood incorporates the notion that God thinks, unless this is regarded as, in some sense, an analogy, it is difficult for human beings to understand, even in part, the nature of the truth which is allegedly conveyed. As White notes, 'if there were an entity *X* for which we could construct no literal propositions, and concerning which every sentence containing the name "*X*" was to be interpreted metaphorically, we would lack the means for fixing the reference of the name "*X*", and so would not have any way of knowing what we were talking about' (2010, 184).

But perhaps it does not matter whether divine personhood is understood as analogy or metaphor – whether the meaning of personhood is stretched when applied to the divine, or whether it is not literally true, even in a stretched sense, but serves to communicate important truths about the nature of the divine. In either case, however, it can be argued that there is at least one attribute of personhood, possession of which is a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for the God of classical theism – that of divine agency.

3. Classical theism: Divine personhood and divine agency

Roger Trigg claims that a personal God is an active God, and that a God who has no intentions or purposes cannot be distinguished from a non-existent God (1998, 210). For Trigg, loss of belief in an active God leads to loss of religious belief since, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition at least, religion is concerned with human relationships with a God who is able to have relationships with human beings (206). As David

Pailin (1976) has noted, religious believers claim that God loves, calls, judges, punishes, and rewards, and all of these describe an action of some kind. If the idea of God acting is incoherent, then it would seem difficult to claim that God is, in any sense, personal.

As a minimum, then, it could be argued that a God who possesses person-properties or is a person in a metaphorical sense is a bodiless agent. But what account can we give of the actions of a bodiless agent? J. L. Gaskin (2000) considers the possibility that such an agent acts in a manner comparable to that in which an embodied agent performs psychokinetic acts – those which cause things to happen without any bodily act connecting the person and the event.[14] Gaskin suggests that, if there are genuine psychokinetic acts which require no physical connection between the agent and the event, the connection must be between pure mind and the world. But there are two reasons why this does not help us to explain the actions of a bodiless divine agent. First, if we do have pure minds, we also have bodies which locate our pure minds in this space-time arena. If a psychokinetic act can be performed by a bodiless agent, the agent must be located in another world in which the agency of pure minds operates, but, Gaskin claims, the concept of agency has no application in relation to such a world. We cannot suppose that agents from that world operate in this one by a form of agency we know nothing of; this would be to pretend that, despite abandoning all the criteria for the application of the concept of "agent", we can think of God's agency as if the criteria were still observed (78-79); 'an entity that does not come under the concept of an agent cannot be used as if it were an agent in virtue of some unspecifiable, unknowable and other-worldly feature which no actual agent has' (79).

[14] This possibility had been previously mentioned but dismissed by Thatcher (1985, 67).

Secondly, Gaskin asks, how can the acts of a pure mind or spirit reach into this world to operate any of the natural connections by means of which this world changes? He therefore concludes that 'there is no point of similarity between the way in which a normal human person can be an agent and the supposed agency of God that would permit us to understand divine "agency" in terms of human agency' (79).

One possible response to the kind of objections raised by Gaskin is offered by Hugh Rice. Rice argues that God may be described as 'personal', first because the knowledge and will of persons bring about goodness in the world (2000, 88), and secondly because, although we cannot know the nature of God or the means by which God's knowledge and will bring about goodness, we can know that there is a link between God and God's effects (89). It could, however, be objected that Rice's arguments are of little help to the theist because Rice claims that God is an agent while largely – if not entirely – in Gaskin's words, 'abandoning all the criteria for the application of the concept of "agent".' But the theist could, perhaps, claim that he or she has not, in fact, abandoned all the criteria for the application of the concept of "agent" since, for example, the actions of an agent may be postulated as the cause of an effect even when we do not understand the mechanism used to perform the actions, and the actions of a specified agent may be postulated as the cause of an effect when the nature of the effect is consistent with our – perhaps tentative – knowledge of the nature of that agent. Thus, whether God's agency is thought to consist in a single, timeless creative act which encompasses the temporal acts of all sub-agents, or, at the other extreme, in an infinite number of temporal responses to situations and the prayers of individuals, the theist might legitimately claim that it is not unreasonable to

postulate a divine explanation for perceived effects.[15]

Such an inference may be supported by divine revelation, which might include religious experience. Indeed, Clement C. J. Webb claims that 'a satisfactory defence of Divine Personality can only be founded upon the facts of religious experience' (1919, 272). While it may not be unreasonable to argue that the actions of a specified agent are the cause of a given effect when the nature of the effect is consistent with our knowledge of the nature of the agent, however, if our knowledge of the nature of the agent is derived from knowledge of the actions of that agent, the argument is circular. Brümmer suggests that talk about the all-seeing eye of God implies 'that God can see into our hearts and know all our thoughts and desires so that we cannot keep these secret from him' because this, unlike implications about eyebrows, 'is relevant for our life and spirituality' (2005, 12). But does this mean that living as if there is an omniscient consciousness promotes moral behaviour? And that since, as Brümmer observes, the reality of God apart from the relationship between God and humanity remains mysterious, we cannot know whether such an omniscient consciousness exists independently of human thought and experience? Such an interpretation might be characterised as non-realist,[16] but Brümmer explicitly claims that '[i]t would be incoherent to live my life as a life in the presence of God if I were to deny that there is really is a God in whose presence I live!" (2005, 6). Following Ronald W. Hepburn, he argues that feelings of exultation and an attitude of quiet confidence in response to the claim 'The Lord is my Strength and Shield' are appropriate only if they are

[15] There are, of course, other possible explanations which, for non-believers, represent a better fit with the observed phenomena.

[16] I use 'non-realism' to refer to agnosticism about a God who exists independently of human thought – as opposed to 'anti-realism' which claims that there is no God existing independently of human thought.

regarded as responses to the Being referred to in the sentence, and if that Being exists (Brümmer 2005, 6-7; Hepburn 1970). If, however, the existence of such a Being is confirmed only by means of experience which is commonly described in terms of metaphors and/or analogies the nature of which we are seeking to explain, we are appealing once more to a circular argument.

4. Revisionary theism: Personhood without agency

One possible response to the difficulties associated with the notion of divine agency is to dispense with the concept altogether and to argue that divine personhood is one manifestation of a non-personal transcendent reality (e.g., Hick 2006, 169), or, more specifically, that divine personhood is a symbol for important spiritual values (e.g., Robinson 1967, 36). For example, John Robinson, following Paul Tillich, claims that 'God is personal' means that God is the ground of everything personal, that personality is of ultimate significance (Robinson 1963, 48-49; 1967, 36, Tillich 1978, 245). Robinson suggests that the gods of the Greeks and Romans were personifications of religious convictions (1967, 36), although this seems somewhat surprising, given the morally dubious behavior which often features in the ancient myths. As an interpretation of the God described in the scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths it may be more promising – although parts of these texts, too, describe a deity who behaves in a manner which some would regard as morally reprehensible. It could, however, be argued that the personifications of God which we find in religious texts have been created by human beings in an attempt to understand the nature of what Hick calls 'Ultimate Reality' (2006, 162) and what it requires of us and that, in some cases, and perhaps especially with regard to some of humanity's earlier

attempts, some facets of the character of the deity described represent either a mistake, or a stage in the development of a personification of Ultimate Reality.

Pailin objects to such interpretations, however, because, in his view, to say that verbs which appear to describe divine actions simply 'reify and personify what are really impersonal forces in the ultimate structure of reality is not to clarify their meaning but to hold that the religious faith expressed by them is basically wrong and must be replaced by a fundamentally different kind of understanding' (1976, 145). In a similar vein, Trigg argues that it is 'not possible to undermine the basis of religion and simultaneously to retain its characteristic ethical claims about humanity' (1998, 212). For Trigg, God must make a difference; otherwise we will not be aware of xir existence. If God is the creator, xe sustains and holds in being that which xe has created. But if God is merely the ultimate ground of everything, it is hard to see what more is claimed than 'mere acknowledgement of and wonder at the existence of everything' (213).

5. Classical theism and the metaphor of divine agency

We have seen that some scholars argue that God cannot be described as a person in an analogical sense because some aspects of persons do not apply to xem. They therefore argue either that God must be described, instead, as 'personal', or that God is a person in a metaphorical sense. In either case, God has some, but not all, of the characteristics of a person. Chief amongst these is the attribute of agency, but divine agency differs from human agency to such an extent that it is difficult to specify how it is to be understood. Others have therefore suggested that divine personhood must be

understood as a manifestation of a non-personal transcendent reality or as a symbol for important spiritual values, but these interpretations are regarded by some as revisionist and thereby as undermining the basis of religious belief.

One possible solution might be to argue that it is not only divine personhood but also divine agency which should be understood in a metaphorical sense. We have seen that theists claim to know that God acts, but not how God acts; to borrow Brümmer's words, divine agency is not only quantitatively different from human agency, it is also qualitatively different (2005, 10). Gaskin's objections suggest that we cannot spell out the sense in which God is an agent clearly enough for us to speak of divine agency. But this assumes that we are looking for some literal, if stretched, connection between our understanding of 'agent' as applied to human beings and our definition of 'agent' as applied to a divine person, metaphorically understood. If divine agency is also a metaphor, perhaps we can say that there are some respects in which the divine resembles a human agent, even if we struggle to articulate them. They might be insufficient to enable us to describe God as an agent in a literal or analogical sense, but sufficient for us to describe divine agency as a metaphor which enables us 'to say that which can be said in no other way' (Soskice 1985, 153).

In which respects, then, can we say that the divine resembles a human agent? In outline, an answer might go as follows: Human agents change the world by means of verbal communication – e.g., advice for someone experiencing a moral dilemma – and physical action – e.g., a medical intervention when someone is ill. Although the divine is rarely said to speak audibly, religious believers do say such things as 'I feel that God is telling me to do *x*' – perhaps after reflection upon relevant passages from

the scriptures of their religion and the teachings of their tradition, comparison with secular morality, consideration of the thoughts of other believers, and analysis of the application of these to their own circumstances. Similarly, although the divine is rarely said to perform physical actions in the manner of a human agent, believers do say that they see the hand of God in the way in which events unfold. In the case of a person suffering from an illness, for example, God might be said to work through the actions of the medical staff.

But how does this differ from God not acting at all? The problem becomes more acute, of course, if the advice turns out to have been mistaken, or the medical treatment is unsuccessful. Attempts to respond to such a difficulty led Antony Flew to conclude that religious belief has suffered death by a thousand qualifications (1990, 368),[17] but one might, instead, suggest that the qualifications point not to the death of belief but to something important about the nature of belief. They might, for example, enable us to gain a clearer idea of the forms in which divine action can be manifested. Thus, just as one might say that it is, at least in many religious cultures, no longer appropriate to pray for great wealth, so one might say that it is no longer appropriate to pray for a cure from illness – i.e., that it is no longer appropriate to expect divine action to manifest itself in this form. Divine action might, however, be manifested in, for example, a solution to a problem, the strength to cope with a difficult situation, or the help and support of others.

[17] Flew seems to have changed his mind about this at the end of his life (Flew 2007).

6. Classical and revisionary interpretations of the metaphor of God as personal

I have argued that the classical theist can retain the metaphor of God as personal if she or he also understands divine agency as a metaphor. But, if divine agency is manifested in such things as a solution to a problem, the strength to cope with a difficult situation, or the help and support of others, how does this differ from a revisionist interpretation of personhood and divine agency? Are we not left with feelings and attitudes which are unrelated to any state of affairs (Brümmer/Hepburn), a personification of impersonal forces (Pailin), and/or an ultimate ground of our being which makes no identifiable difference to our existence (Trigg)?

Brümmer argues that religious faith entails 'some form of critical realism', and that religious metaphors are, as Janet Soskice has claimed, 'reality depicting' (2005, 7; Soskice 1985, 145). Since, for Brümmer, a religious metaphor can be explained, at least to some extent, in terms of analogy (7), at least some of that metaphor (the part whose meaning we can explain) expresses a literal truth, albeit in a stretched sense – but how far can it be stretched before the interpretation becomes revisionary? If divine personhood includes the metaphor of divine parenthood, explained at least partly in terms of God's care for me, if I suffer an untimely death through disaster or disease, in what sense is God's care meaningfully expressed? The classical theist could reiterate the view that divine omnipotence is not to be construed in such a way that human suffering is always prevented, and that divine care is expressed by means of the human beings who help me. But the revisionist theist could say this, too.

Similarly, even if 'The Lord is my strength and shield' refers to an objectively-

existing state of affairs, it clearly does not mean that I will never suffer. Brümmer suggests that 'God is my rock', which may be taken to have a similar meaning, refers to our dependence on God (2005, 6), but this does not entail the belief that God intervenes to prevent my suffering. Does he, perhaps, mean that God is whatever it is which brought about the existence of the universe, or even that God is to be identified with the material world on which we depend? The former might be construed as a version of the cosmological argument which a revisionist could accept, while the latter is a form of pantheism or panentheism. Brümmer notes that religious doctrines must not be seen as explanations of the same kind as scientific explanations; rather, we must note their importance for life (8). On the other hand, while we must be agnostic and apophatic about what God is like independently of our relationship with xem, if we were entirely unable to describe the nature of God and our relationship with xem in human terms, 'our spirituality and fellowship with God would collapse into an incomprehensible something we know not what' (12). Brümmer argues that God has many faces and 'reveals himself in manifold ways in his dealings with us'; believers therefore 'claim that God is ever present to us in ways that are relevant to the demands we have to face in the specific circumstances or times in which we live' (11). But is 'God reveals himself in ways which are relevant to believers' circumstances' equivalent to 'believers interpret the divine in ways which are relevant to their circumstances?' In other words, is Brümmer really appealing to a form of Hick's concept of 'experiencing-as', developed from Wittgenstein's idea of 'seeing-as'? Wittgenstein noted that we may see an ambiguous figure as either a duck or a rabbit (1968, II:xi), but Hick argues that all our seeing is 'seeing-as', and all our experiencing is 'experiencing-as' (2004, 140). For Hick, faith is the interpretation through which we are conscious of the Real (160) or the 'supra-natural' (2006, 145).

This enables us to say that some believers experience God as a Being with whom they can interact, while others experience God as personal in a more limited sense, or as an impersonal standard which enlightens our human endeavours. This characterisation of belief may be employed to explain not only the existence of different religions, which are said to be different phenomenal manifestations of the same noumenal Real, but also different interpretations within the same religion.[18] Thus, within the same community of believers, 'God is my friend' might have meaning for one member but not another, while the same noumenal Reality underlies the experience of both.

It could be argued that this interpretation of a classical understanding of the divine as personal is compatible with revisionist views of the nature of the divine. Thus, if God is whatever it is which brought about the existence of the universe, or may be identified with the material world upon which we depend, then Robinson's claim that the attribute of divine personality conveys the belief that 'personality is of ultimate importance' entails that 'God is whatever it is which makes the personal so important'. The notion of divine personhood thereby includes the idea that the personal can, at its best, manifest the divine.

The characterisation of divine personhood for which I have argued is compatible even with the views of scholars such as D. Z. Phillips and Don Cupitt, the former of whom has often been described as a 'non-realist',[19] while the latter has claimed that 'all religions, philosophies of life and visions of the world are human imaginative constructions … The truth in a religious or philosophical text is no longer seen as

[18] Cf. Victoria Harrison's recommendation that we should adopt a 'family resemblance' approach to differing interpretations of the same religion (2006, 147-152).
[19] Phillips himself denies this, although he is almost as reluctant to describe himself as a realist – he sees the terms 'non-realism' and 'realism' as 'battle-cries in a confused philosophical debate' (1993, 35).

corresponding to … a great Objective Truth out there' (1998, 4). Phillips suggests, however, that someone looking for realism in the philosophy of religion might begin by considering the way in which words which are not literally true and pictures which are neither portraits nor diagrams nonetheless manage to convey 'something real' about the world (2002, 7). And even Cupitt talks about 'Being' as 'the extra-linguistic stuff out there that our descriptive uses of language are trying to refer to, or be about' (1998, 73), and suggests that we need Being for ethical and religious reasons; it is our 'complementary Other' (74). Indeed, Being is 'the religious object' (74); we 'attend to it, have an attitude to it, and respond to it' (73). In *Reforming Christianity*, he claims that 'the only basis for ethics' is 'our newly realised full co-humanity' (2001, 103), which seems to imply that it is the 'given' physical nature of human beings which determines what makes life worth living – i.e., that only a form of moral realism can explain genuine altruism. Thus, even when the divine is construed in the manner of Phillips and Cupitt, religious feelings and attitudes do refer to a state of affairs, and this state of affairs may be conceived of as personal and active in a metaphorical sense which is not dissimilar from that of the interpretation of the classical theist.

This means that Trigg's objection to religious beliefs which make no identifiable difference to human life need not apply to either classical or revisionist interpretations of theism. For either version of theism, 'God' is the name for whatever it was which brought the universe into existence, and perhaps also for the totality of that which exists. Xe requires a certain form of life, and provides a standard against which we measure our behaviour. The task of human life is to try to understand and to communicate, both to our contemporaries and to future generations, the nature of the divine and what it requires of us, in order that we might 'have life, and have it

abundantly' (John 10:10). This is achieved by contemplating the stories about God, xem actions, and the behaviour which xe expects of humankind which are found in the scriptures and traditions of the world's religions. The task is difficult, and human beings are sometimes mistaken, but the divine can nonetheless guide us towards solutions to moral problems, offer a source of strength to cope with difficult situations, and manifest xemself in the help and support of others. Thus, the divine makes a difference to human beings because goodness makes a difference to human beings, both in the way in which it affects our lives and in the conduct it requires of us.

It is, perhaps, more difficult to avoid Pailin's charge that such a view personifies impersonal forces. Whether or not we think that, ultimately, this classical/revisionist interpretation of the divine as personal agent succumbs to this objection depends upon the extent to which we think that the concepts of personhood and agency can be stretched before the links with those concepts as applied to human persons and agents are entirely broken. Nevertheless, if the divine can be understood as a guide, a source of strength, and an inspiration for human altruism, this supports an argument that, for both the classical and the revisionist theist, the links are sufficiently strong to enable the continued use of these metaphors in our conceptions of the divine.

7. Conclusion

On any interpretation of the divine, there are clearly many respects in which God is not like a human person, and, where there do appear to be similarities, the resemblance is always heavily qualified, either by means of analogy, or through the

use of metaphor, the meaning of which may be at least partially explained in terms of analogy. I have argued that the metaphor of God as personal entails a metaphorical interpretation of divine agency, the latter of which may be explained by means of analogy. On such a view, 'I feel that God is telling me to do *x*' might mean 'In the light of my reading of scripture, study of my religious tradition, participation in religious ceremonies, and/or conversations with other believers, and my reflection on the application of these to my own circumstances, I feel that I am required to do *x*'. Similarly, 'God is my strength and shield' might mean 'The divine, being the totality of the universe, including its optimal moral values, along with the scriptures and traditions by means of which human beings have attempted to capture its requirements and the support of fellow travellers on the religious path, gives me the strength to attempt to live a moral and meaningful life, even – and perhaps especially – in difficult circumstances'.

I have also suggested that even the most 'non-realist' of revisionist theists ultimately make a commitment to some form of realism, and thus that both classical and revisionist theists can explain the nature of divine personality and agency in a similar manner. I have argued that, for theists of both kinds, their commitment to a form of realism enables them to avoid the objection that they are simply attempting to generate feelings and attitudes which are unrelated to any state of affairs, and, secondly, that the functionality of their beliefs ensures that in neither case can they be reduced to belief in an ultimate ground of our being which makes no identifiable difference to our existence. Finally, I have argued that since, for both versions of theism, the links between the meanings of 'personal' and 'agent' when applied to the divine and the meanings of these terms when applied to human beings are stretched

but not broken, neither the classical theist nor the revisionist simply personalises impersonal forces.

Thus, analysis of the nature of divine personhood and divine agency, understood as metaphors which may be at least partially explained by means of analogy, leads to an interpretation of these attributes which is compatible with both classical and revisionist versions of theism. This could imply that classical interpretations of theism are closer to revisionist views than it might, at first, be thought, or that classical theism is a multi-faceted position which encompasses interpretations which some might regard as revisionist. It could also imply that the views of scholars such as Phillips and Cupitt, insofar as they may be construed as realist, are closer to the classical end of the religious spectrum than perhaps they would care to acknowledge. This enables them to avoid the reductionist charge which is often levelled against them – i.e., the claim that they offer a watered-down, inferior version of theism for those incapable of genuine belief. It also offers support for Phillips' claim that he, like Wittgenstein, 'leaves everything as it is' (Wittgenstein 1968, 124; Phillips 1993, 242). Thus, classical and revisionist theism meet in the middle, and the differences between them are largely – at least with respect to divine personhood and agency – superficial.[20]

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[20] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the observation that my argument depends upon the idea that it is 'proper' to treat 'divine personhood' and 'divine agency' as metaphors at least partially [properly] explained in terms of analogy, and the suggestion that some classical theists hold that God is a person and an agent in a straightforward literal sense, while some revisionist theists deny that God is a person and an agent in even a metaphorical sense. My argument, however, is that the reflective classical theist cannot hold that God is a person and an agent in a straightforward literal sense. And, while it is true that some revisionist theists deny that God is a person and an agent in even a metaphorical sense, I would argue that, at least for those whose beliefs are derived from the Abrahamic tradition, in which God as a personal agent features prominently, it is not necessary even for the revisionist to jettison this important aspect of religious belief.

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