

Does God Have to Be a Person?

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Mythology tells stories—stories about the intentional actions of supernatural and other non-natural beings that ultimately affect the human world of the believers. Because the stories focus on intentional actions of the beings, the implication is that these beings have personal identities and person-like attributes: they plan, they think, they have motives, desires, even emotions (such as anger, or love). Because their actions affect the human world, it is appropriate to say that these non-natural person-like beings *intervene* in the human world, either now, or at some time in the past—often “long ago” “in the dream time” “at the time of our ancestors”. These interventions bring observable events about, meaning that observable events in the human world have direct origins from outside the natural world, i.e., from the intentional activities of the supernatural or non-natural person-like beings.

The conception of God as found in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions is primarily mythological in the above ways. God intervenes in the human world both long ago, as in the creation stories of *Genesis*, and now, as in miracle-working, or response to prayer. God can be talked to. God loves, or sits in judgement. God has plans, and exercises “His” power. These are all typical mythological ways of talking and thinking about God.¹ There are also angels, the Devil, and the “principalities” and “powers” of the New Testament. Again, non-natural beings and forces, at least the first two of which are capable of intentional action. And again, these are mythological ways of conceiving reality.

To say that these are mythological ways of conceiving reality is not to say that these are *false* ways or ignorant ways. The notion that myths are false stories made up by people who are ignorant of the truth about religious matters comes from the early days of Christianity when Christians were anxious to distinguish their faith commitment from those of the pagan world, for the Christians found their conceptions of God and God’s relationship to humankind to be at odds with the conceptions found in the mythologies of the surrounding cultures. They were convinced that the Christian conception was far closer to the mark. But today we can see that there is such a thing as a mythological way of talking and thinking about the world—a way of thinking that is shared by many religious traditions. This way of thinking conceives of divinity as personal, active, and full of intentions. Typically, divinity is also conceived as having emotions—anger, love, even sorrow. And in this specific regard, Christian conceptions of God are similar to those of other mythological ways of conceiving the divine. The early Christians were right: their conception of God was significantly different from the pagan conceptions, in many ways too numerous to mention here. However, in one very important respect, the Christian conception of God was the same as the conceptions of the surrounding pagan conceptions: God was thought of primarily in person-like terms—God is thought to be something like a person who has no limitations or imperfections.

¹In the fields of religious studies and theology the phrase “personal God” is used to indicate this type of person-like God. This phrase does *not* mean that the God belongs to someone, or is someone’s own personal conception.

To be sure, there are also ways that Christians have talked about God that do not fit this picture of God as simply a person without human limitations. The idea that Jesus was divine pushed the Christian community to develop the notion of the Trinity--the notion that God is somehow God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit all at once, while still remaining just one individual being. This doesn't sound much like anything a person could manage to be. Nevertheless, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are said explicitly to be "persons" in the traditional formulas about the Trinity. So, despite the fact that the Trinity isn't much like a person, each member of the Trinity is said to be a person.²

But not all religious conceptions of the transcendent or of the divine are mythological in the above ways. In particular, there are important "impersonal" or "transpersonal" conceptions of divinity that do *not* make out divinity as a being that does things, as a person-like being with intentions, motives, or emotions. Here is a brief description of several of these conceptions of divinity:

1. One classic Hindu conception of divinity is known as Brahman. Brahman is an absolute unity that underlies the variety and complexity of the world as we experience it. Brahman is often said not to have attributes, since to assume Brahman possesses attributes is to destroy its absolute unity. Probably this means one cannot describe Brahman accurately. Brahman is present in all experienced reality of the everyday world, as a kind of underlying unity or soul, and in particular Brahman is present in all people in the form of soul. Brahman does not act, plan, have emotions, or have person-like qualities—how could it, since it has no attributes at all? One might think of Brahman as a world-soul, or the soul of all that exists.
2. A somewhat similar notion is found in Taoism. The Tao, which means The Way, is sometimes called The Lord. The Tao is not some person-like being issuing commands for how to live. Rather, Tao is the inexpressible, underlying way that everything really is. So, again, as in Hinduism, there is an idea of some sort of underlying reality that supports or explains the mundane world of everyday experience—an underlying reality that cannot be properly described. I am not aware that the Tao is thought to be absolute unity, as was Brahman, but I would say instead that the Tao is a unifying orderliness that hides beneath the surface of everyday complexity. The proper life for the Taoist is to seek to live in harmony with the Tao—that is, not to fight the underlying natural order, but instead to go with the flow, so to speak.
3. The famous ancient Greek philosopher-scientist, Aristotle, about 300 years before the time of Jesus, proposed a concept of divinity that completely rejected the mythology of the Greeks of the day. Aristotle's God is an entity that forever remains totally untouched, uninfluenced, unscathed, uninvolved, unchanging. It is pure thought—thought of itself and of nothing else. So, apparently, one might think of it as something like a mind that has just one constant thought forever, the thought of

²For those who like technicalities, I understand that the actual term used by the Church in the credal formulations regarding the Trinity is "persona", which can be interpreted as in theater to refer to the character represented in a play. This raises all sorts of interesting questions about exactly what the Church fathers meant by referring to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as each being a persona.

pure perfection, that is, itself. Surprisingly, though, this divinity has tremendous influence on our world, not by doing things, but just by being there. It does not create the universe, since the universe always existed, but the universe as a whole naturally strives to be as much like the divinity as possible—the details of how this works are unclear to me, but the general idea is that there is a striving for perfection in the universe. (This is what makes the planets and stars go round the earth in circles, for example.) But the key point for us here is that Aristotle's divinity is not much like a personal being. Sometimes one can note traces of Aristotle's conception of God as completely unchanging in Christian talk of God. Christians may not notice the contradiction between praying to God in the expectation that God can be influenced by prayer and believing that God is completely unchanging, and beyond human influence.

4. Probably the greatest Roman Catholic philosopher/theologian of all time was St. Thomas (from Aquino, Italy, and thus often known as St. Thomas Aquinas), and for centuries his point of view about Christian teaching was seen in the Church as the best. He is famous among theologians and philosophers for his *theory of analogy* about God-talk, although most Roman Catholics have probably never understood what this truly means, even if they have heard of it. Bluntly, what St. Thomas said is that to think of God in person-like terms cannot possibly be the real truth about God, for it makes God far too small. All talk about God's love, God's anger, God's plans—all talk about God as personal is literally false. However, it is not totally false. In fact, it can be true, if understood analogically. What does this mean? God is not really a person-like being, for God is far too great for that, but it is all right to describe God in person-like terms (to say that God loves us, for example) since such descriptions can properly describe how God seems to us to be. So, although God does not really and truly literally love us (because God really isn't a person-like being capable of love), it is nevertheless true that from our limited human perspective it is *as though* God loves us. We can relate to God *as though* God loves us. There is an *analogy* between human love and the way God is. I think this basically means that all attributions of person-like characteristics to God are literally false, but the ones that are part of mainstream Christian thought are metaphorically or symbolically true. So, this conception of God tries to be impersonal (trans-personal?), while still maintaining the truth of person-like characterizations of God. If this approach holds up, Aquinas has presented us with a sophisticated and interesting way of keeping the old Christian mythological ways of thinking about God alive, by treating them as correct ways of relating to God while denying that they literally describe God accurately.
5. Various contemporary theologians in the Jewish and Christian traditions have moved to depersonalize God. I here mention one famous 20th Century Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, who is famous for his analysis of the God concept. Since he is a Christian theologian, he is not trying to debunk the Christian notion that there is a God, but he tries to rework the entire Christian story about the true God, salvation, Jesus, and so on, while at the same time maintaining that the best conception of the true God is impersonal, or transpersonal ("beyond" personal). Tillich holds that everyone believes in some sort of god, for the basic notion of a god is simply whatever one finds "ultimate" in one's life. So, if power is your ultimate concern, then power is your god. If some individual person is your ultimate, then that person is your god. It appears

these gods can be personal or impersonal (like power, or sex, or money). But there is only one true divinity, one that is genuinely ultimate whether anyone recognizes it or not, and that is the ultimate ground or basis of everything. So, Tillich's conception of the true God is "the ground of being". Don't misunderstand this to mean that the true God made the universe a long time ago. That's not the point. Rather, Tillich is claiming there is some current basis ("ground") for everything that now exists, for all of reality. That basis is the real God. So, if there were no God now, there would be nothing now. (Tillich is here relying very heavily on a traditional Jewish and Christian idea of God as the "sustainer" of the universe.) The notion of the "ground of all being" is hardly the notion of a person-like being, but it can presumably manifest itself in persons (as well as in non-persons).