

# CONCEPTS OF GOD

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Much philosophy of religion focuses on the topic of God. All through the centuries philosophers have asked whether there is reason to believe that God exists. They have also considered what, if anything, can be known of God's nature. But what should we take the word 'God' to mean? You might find this question puzzling. You might say: 'We all know what "God" means. What we need to ask is "Does God exist?" and "What can we know about him?".' Yet are matters as simple as that?

Unfortunately, they are not. And anyone starting work on philosophy of religion should be aware of this fact at the outset. For those who say that they believe in God often disagree in their respective accounts of God. The word 'God' has been understood in different ways even by those who subscribe to belief in what the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls its 'specific Christian and monotheistic sense'.

'Monotheistic' is the adjectival form of the noun 'monotheism', which means 'belief that there is only one God'. And the *Oxford English Dictionary* is clearly thinking of belief in God as professed by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, all of whom declare that there is but one, true God. Yet there is substantial disagreement about what God is even among Jewish, Islamic, and Christian monotheists. So, when you hear Jews, Muslims, and Christians using the word 'God', you should not assume that they all understand it in the same sense. You should not even assume this when confining your attention to one of these groups.

Among philosophers of religion, God is typically taken to be the God of monotheism (or theism, for short). And I shall now fall in with this line of thinking. From this point on I take 'God' to mean 'the God of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity'. As I have said, however, this still leaves us with a problem of understanding. So now I shall try to explain why. It is not easy to do so, but to simplify matters, I shall begin by

saying that monotheism or theism can be divided into at least two approaches to God. For reasons which should soon be obvious, I shall call them 'classical theism' and 'theistic personalism'.

## Classical Theism

Classical theism is what you can find endorsed in the writings of people like the Jewish author Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), the Islamic author Avicenna (980–1037), and the Christian author Thomas Aquinas (1224/6–74).<sup>1</sup> Classical theism is what all Jews, Christians, and Muslims believed in for many centuries (officially, at least). And numerous philosophers have taken it for granted that God is as defenders of classical theism take him to be. From the time of St Augustine of Hippo (354–430)<sup>2</sup> to that of G. W. Leibniz (1646–1716),<sup>3</sup> philosophers almost always worked on the assumption that belief in God is belief in classical theism. And their understanding has been shared by many theologians. The major tenets of classical theism are part of the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. They were also taught by most of the major sixteenth-century Protestant reformers and by heirs of theirs, such as Jonathan Edwards, the famous eighteenth-century American Puritan divine.

But what does classical theism amount to? Central to it is a particular approach to the doctrine of creation, according to which everything other than God somehow depends on God causally. All theists accept this doctrine in some form. For classical theism, however, it has a particular meaning.

### (a) Classical theism and the doctrine of Creation

According to classical theism, God is primarily the Creator. God is what accounts for there being any world at all. He is causally responsible for the existence of everything other than himself. More specifically, God, for classical theism, is the one (and the only one) who creates 'from nothing' (*ex nihilo* in the traditional Latin phrase). The idea here is not that God works on something called 'Nothing' in order to create. Classical theism's claim is that God makes things to be without there being

anything prior to his creative act save himself. He makes to be, but not *out of* anything.

According to classical theism, for God to create is for God to make it to be that something simply exists. Artists make it to be that there is a work of art. Surgeons make it to be that someone's insides get modified. Nuclear explosions make it to be that landscapes are rearranged. According to classical theism, however, God makes it to be that things are just *there* regardless of what they are *like* (although he is also responsible for that). He accounts for there being something rather than *nothing*. Many people think that to say that God has created is just to say that God brought it about that the universe *began* to exist. Although classical theists typically agree that the universe began to exist, and although they hold that it was God who brought this about, they also typically say that belief in God as Creator is not just belief in God's past activity. For classical theists, God's creative work is just as much present in the continued existence of you and me as it was in the origin of the universe.

In the thirteenth century there was a great debate about 'the eternity of the world'. Some philosophers and theologians said that it can be proved that the world had a beginning. Others denied this. Thomas Aquinas, although he believed that the world had a beginning, conceded that this belief of his could not be shown to be true by philosophical reasoning. But he also argued that whether or not the world had a beginning is irrelevant to the doctrine of creation. He said that to believe that the world is created is chiefly to believe that its being there at all and at any time is God's doing. And this conclusion is very characteristic of classical theism. According to this, all creatures depend on God for their sheer existence. And God is as much the creator of things which *continue* to exist as he is of those which *begin* to exist, regardless of when they happen to do so. In terms of classical theism, God is both the initiating and the constantly sustaining cause of the universe and all it contains.

If this account is true, then everything other than God is totally dependent on God for its existing and for its being as it is. Not surprisingly, therefore, classical theists commonly stress God's intimate presence to creatures. For them, God is everywhere since he is making everything that exists to be what it is for as long as it exists.<sup>4</sup> For classical

theists, God is not everywhere by being physically located in all places. But he is everywhere as causing the existence of all places. According to classical theism, God is always everywhere, always present to creatures. And this, among other things, means that God cannot, strictly speaking, intervene in his created order. For to intervene is to step into a place or situation where one was not present to start with. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is to 'come in as something extraneous'. Yet classical theists hold that God is always present and never comes in as something extraneous. Some people would say that God can intervene so as to bring it about that changes occur in the world. On the classical theist's account, however, such changes cannot be literally thought of as divine interventions since they and what preceded them are equally the creative work of God.<sup>5</sup> As one classical theist puts it:

It is clear that God cannot *interfere* in the universe, not because he has not the power but because, so to speak, he has too much. To interfere you have to be an alternative to, or alongside, what you are interfering with. If God is the cause of everything, there is nothing that he is alongside. Obviously, God makes no difference to the universe. I mean by this that we do not appeal specifically to God to explain why the universe is this way rather than that. For this we need only appeal to explanations within the universe . . . What God accounts for is that the universe is there instead of nothing.<sup>6</sup>

You cannot intervene in what you are doing yourself. And, say classical theists, God cannot literally intervene in his own created order. Sometimes they make this point by claiming that for God to create is not for him to effect any change. Something can be changed only if it pre-exists the activity of a changer. But, asks the classical theist, what can pre-exist the activity of God the Creator?

### (b) Classical theism and the nature of God

The classical theist's answer to that last question is, as you might now suspect, 'Nothing'. Or, as Aquinas writes:

We must consider not only the emanation of a particular being from a particular agent, but also the emanation of all being from the universal cause, which is God; and this emanation we designate by the name of creation. Now what proceeds by particular emanation is not presupposed to that emanation; as when a man is generated, he was not before, but man is made

from *not-man*, and white from *not-white*. Hence, if the emanation of the whole universal being from the first principle be considered, it is impossible that any being should be presupposed before this emanation. For nothing is the same as no being. Therefore, as the generation of a man is from the *not-being* which is *not-man*, so creation, which is the emanation of all being, is from the *not-being* which is *nothing*.<sup>7</sup>

And this answer has further implications for those who subscribe to classical theism. One is that nothing created can cause God to change or be modified in any way. In terms of classical theism, there is no causality from creatures to God since creatures are wholly God's effects. Parents can act causally on their children. And children can act causally on their parents. But that is so because they belong to the same world as each other and because neither parents nor children owe all that they are to each other. According to classical theism, however, creatures constantly owe all that they are to God, and any causal activity of theirs is, first and foremost, God's causal activity in them. Many classical theists make this point by insisting that God is impassible.

In this context 'impassible' does not mean 'callous', 'heartless', or 'indifferent'. It means 'not able to be causally modified by an external agent'. And for most classical theists the claim that God is impassible goes hand in hand with the teaching that God is immutable. The idea here is twofold: (1) God cannot be altered by anything a creature does, and (2) God is intrinsically unchangeable. Why intrinsically unchangeable? For classical theists, the answer lies in their understanding of what is involved in God creating. On their account, all change is the coming to be of something new. And yet, so they reason, all coming to be of something new is God's doing, which means that God himself cannot change without being a creature, something whose way of being at a given time is derived from another.

For many classical theists, this idea also suggests that God is outside time. Many philosophers have thought that change and time go together, since (a) anything undergoing change is also temporal, and (b) anything wholly changeless and unchangeable is distinct from time. Classical theists frequently share this view and often, therefore, speak of God being timeless (or eternal). According, for instance, to St Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109):

All that is enclosed in any way by place or time is less than that which no law

of place or time constrains. Since, then, nothing is greater than You [sc. God], no place or time confines You but You exist everywhere and always . . . You were not, therefore, yesterday, nor will You be tomorrow, but yesterday and today and tomorrow You *are*. Indeed You exist neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but are absolutely outside all time. For yesterday and today and tomorrow are completely in time; however, You, though nothing can be without You, are nevertheless not in place or time but all things are in You. For nothing contains You, but You contain all things.<sup>8</sup>

The Bible tells us that God delivered (past tense) the Israelites from Egypt. And it says that God will come (future tense) to judge the living and the dead. One might instinctively read such assertions as mapping God's progress through time. For classical theists, however, God exists at no particular time (and therefore neither existed at some instant in the past nor will exist at some instant of time in the future). In their view, tenses applied to God's activity should be understood as helping us to date created events (like the escape of the Israelites from Egypt or the state of those judged by God in the future). They should not be construed as locating God in time. The idea here is that God can act so as to bring about dateable events without himself being part of any temporal process. Or, as Aquinas observes:

Since God is altogether outside the order of creatures, since they are ordered to him but not he to them, it is clear that being related to God is a reality in creatures, but being related to creatures is not a reality in God. We say it about him because of the real relation in creatures. So it is that, when we speak of his relation to creatures, we can apply words implying temporal sequence and change, not because of any change in him but because of a change in the creatures; just as we can say that a pillar has changed from being on my left to being on my right, not through any alteration in the pillar but simply because I have turned round.<sup>9</sup>

If all that is so, however, God must be vastly different from anything with which we are acquainted. Yet classical theists embrace that implication. For them, we must sharply distinguish between God and everything else. Things in the world are subject to the causal activity of other things in the world. But, says the classical theist, God is not so subject. Things in the world are either changing or able to undergo change. According to classical theism, however, God is unchangeable. Everything

in the world exists at some time. According to classical theism, however, God transcends time.

For classical theism, we get things badly wrong if we take God to be something we can picture or get our minds around. 'I would be surprised', says Anselm, 'if we could find anything from among the nouns and verbs which we apply to things created from nothing that could worthily be said of the substance that created all.'<sup>10</sup> Classical theists happily agree that God may be compared to things that we know. They also agree that he can be truly described using words which we employ when speaking of what is not divine. They hold, for example, that God truly acts, causes, moves, knows, wills, and loves. Yet classical theists also typically insist that none of this means that we therefore have a grasp of God or a concept which allows us to say that we understand what God is.

This fact partly emerges from the way in which classical theists often characterize God in negative terms (as *not* created, *not* passive, *not* changeable, or *not* temporal). But it also comes out in the fact that classical theists tend to deny that words used to characterize God mean what they do when applied to what is not divine. Hence, for example, although they agree that God acts, causes, and moves, classical theists do not think that he does so as part of a world in which other things act, cause, and move. For them, God's action, causation, and movement of things are in a class of their own. And, they hold, the same is true of God's knowing, willing, and loving.

When we think of knowledge, will, and love, we are normally thinking of people. It is people we look to in the first place when trying to explain what 'knowledge', 'will', and 'love' mean. According to classical theism, however, knowledge, will, and love are different in God from what they are in people. People, for instance, know because they have learned. But, says the classical theist, to learn is to change and God cannot learn since he is changeless. People come to know because of being taught or because of what they have observed by means of their senses or discovered by means of empirical investigation. But, says the classical theist, God has no body and, therefore, no senses.

Classical theists would also normally add that God's willing and loving must further differ from ours, since, unlike ours, it cannot involve him in reacting to anything. I sometimes choose (will) to catch a train for

some reason or other. But, according to the classical theist, God does not choose (will) in the light of a scenario which he confronts and which disposes him to act thus and so for reasons he has as part of that scenario. A wife may love her husband. Yet, notes the classical theist, love, in people, is an emotion. So it is rooted in bodily contact and bodily reactions. And the classical theist holds that God has no body, since, making the difference between there being something and nothing, he creates all bodies. In people, love can show itself in their attempts to do good to the objects of their love. Yet God, says the classical theist, cannot *try* to do good to things. In terms of classical theism, the unchangeable (and, therefore, the untrying) God is effortlessly responsible for anything that we find to be good in the world. Or, as St Augustine writes:

The truest beginning of piety is to think as highly of God as possible; and doing so means that one must believe that he is omnipotent, and not changeable in the smallest respect; that he is the creator of all good things, but is himself more excellent than all of them; that he is the supremely just ruler of everything that he created; and that he was not aided in creating by any other being, as if he were not sufficiently powerful by himself. It follows that he created all things from nothing.<sup>11</sup>

### (c) God as an individual

We can put all this by saying that, according to classical theism, God is not a person. When we speak of persons, we are normally referring to human beings. For classical theists, however, God should be sharply distinguished from these. Human beings have bodies and are parts of a changing and changeable universe. According to classical theism, however, God is incorporeal, unchanging, and not part of the universe. As we shall see later in this chapter, and also in Chapter 13, some philosophers have thought that human persons are really non-material. But even these philosophers take persons to be distinct individuals belonging to a kind so that one person added to another makes two things of the same sort. For classical theism, however, God is not an individual belonging to any kind. You and I are both human beings. Neptune and Mars are both planets. According to classical theism, however, there is nothing of the same kind that God is.

Classical theists have sometimes expressed this point by saying that God is entirely simple. They do not, of course, mean that he is stupid or

unintelligent (one sense of 'simple'). What, then, do they mean? We shall be turning in some detail to the notion of divine simplicity in Chapter 8. For the present, though, the point to grasp is that classical theists who say that God is simple mean in part that God is not a member of any genus or species. They are claiming that God is not what we would ordinarily call an individual.

To call something an individual is usually to imply that there could be another such thing distinct from it though just like it. In this sense, different people are individuals. But in this sense, says the classical theist, God is not an individual. He belongs to no kind or sort. According to the teaching that God is simple, God also lacks attributes or properties distinguishable from himself. You can differentiate between me and, say, my weight, height, or colouring at some particular time. Today I might weigh one hundred and forty pounds. And I might be six feet tall and pale. But in ten years time my weight and height could be different. So my weight, height, and colouring are not simply identical with me. To have weight, height, and colouring is not to *be* weight, height, and colouring. According to the teaching that God is simple, however, attributes or properties of God are, in fact, the same as God himself. On this account, God does not, strictly speaking, *have* attributes or properties. He is identical with them. As St Anselm puts it: 'The supreme nature is simple: thus all the things which can be said of its essence are simply one and the same thing in it.'<sup>12</sup>

### Theistic Personalism

Turning, however, to what I am calling theistic personalism, we get a very different picture. Take, for instance, the contemporary Christian author Alvin Plantinga.<sup>13</sup> According to him, the teaching that God is simple is false since God possesses different properties and is a person, not 'a mere abstract object'.<sup>14</sup> Then again, according to Richard Swinburne (also a Christian),<sup>15</sup> a theist is 'a man who believes that there is a God', and by 'God' the theist 'understands something like a "person without a body"'.<sup>16</sup> 'That God is a person, yet one without a body, seems', says Swinburne, 'the most elementary claim of theism.'<sup>17</sup> Both Plantinga and Swinburne count as theistic personalists on my understanding of the

expression. And one reason for saying so is that, unlike classical theists, they think it important to stress that God is a person.

### (a) Persons and bodies

What do Plantinga and Swinburne mean by 'person'? Their writings, and the writings of those who share their view of God, proceed from the assumption that, if we want to understand what persons are, we must begin with human beings. Yet Plantinga and Swinburne, and those who broadly agree with them about God, do not want to suggest that God is just like a human being. So they also think that there can somehow be a person who, while being like human beings, is also decidedly different from what people are. In particular, and as Swinburne's phrase 'person without a body' indicates, they think that there can be a disembodied person. Yet, what are we to understand by expressions like 'person without a body' and 'disembodied person'?

Many philosophers hold that such expressions make little sense.<sup>18</sup> They argue that persons are essentially embodied because human beings are such. On their account, the word 'person' has 'embodied' built into its meaning so that phrases like 'person without a body' and 'disembodied person' have an air of self-contradiction about them. Hence, for example, Aristotle (384–322 BC)<sup>19</sup> holds that the persons we call people are essentially corporeal. For him, persons are as necessarily bodily as cats are necessarily mammalian. This line of thinking can also be found in writers such as Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)<sup>20</sup> and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951).<sup>21</sup> But other philosophers take a different view. Consider, for instance, John Locke (1632–1704).<sup>22</sup> According to him, persons might swap bodies with each other. A person, says Locke, is 'a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places'.<sup>23</sup> And, so Locke goes on to say, the person of a prince could come to occupy the body of a cobbler. The prince's person, now in the cobbler's body, would not, Locke suggests, be the same *man* as the prince. But it would, he argues, be the same *person*.<sup>24</sup> Locke is asserting that persons can be distinguished from particular bodies and are not, therefore, identical with them. And if he is right to do so, then persons are not essentially corporeal.

The view that persons are not essentially corporeal is most often associated with René Descartes (1596–1650).<sup>25</sup> In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes looks for a truth which cannot be doubted. He hits on 'I exist' as what he is searching for. One cannot doubt that one exists, he argues, since one cannot even doubt if one does not exist. It is, says Descartes, absurd to doubt one's existence as long as one is thinking. And he goes on to suggest that being a person (being able to refer to oneself as 'I') is inseparable from thinking. 'What am I?', Descartes asks. His answer is 'I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, is willing, is unwilling, and which also imagines and has sensory perceptions.'<sup>26</sup> And this thinking thing, Descartes adds, is not anything bodily.<sup>27</sup>

So the history of philosophy contains examples of authors who take persons to be distinguishable from what is essentially corporeal. And it is their approach, or something very like it, which seems to surface in theistic personalism. Generally, theistic personalists take God to be strikingly similar to what Descartes describes himself as being when explaining what he thinks he is.

### (b) Theistic personalism and the rejection of classical theism

Not surprisingly, therefore, theistic personalists frequently reject almost all the tenets of classical theism as introduced above. Take, for example, their approach to the topic of creation. All theistic personalists agree that God is the Creator. They believe that God causes things to exist. But they also tend to regard God as standing to the created order as an onlooker who is able to step in and modify how things are. While classical theists typically hold that all history is God's doing, theistic personalists more commonly see it only as partly this. Some events, they often say, are not so much caused by God as *permitted* by him. Hence, for example, when explaining what he means by the assertion that God is the Creator, Swinburne writes: 'The main claim is that God either himself brings about or makes or permits some other being to bring about (or permits to exist uncaused) the existence of all things that exist . . . that those things exist only because of God's action or permission.'<sup>28</sup> It would, Swinburne adds, 'hardly seem to matter for theism if God on occasion

permitted some other being to create matter'. Speaking in a similar vein, John Lucas declares:

Not everything that happens can be attributed directly to the detailed decision of God. Although He knows how many hairs I have on my head, He has not decided how many there shall be. He distances Himself from the detailed control of the course of events in order, among other things, to give us the freedom of manoeuvre we need both to be moral agents and to go beyond morality into the realm of personal relations.<sup>29</sup>

According to Lucas: 'Even if God did not know the secrets of men's hearts, but only what they explicitly told Him or implied in their importunate petitions, He would still be better informed than most of us.'<sup>30</sup>

Swinburne and Lucas are here causally distancing God from the world in ways that most classical theists would not. And the difference between theistic personalism and classical theism often shows itself in a tendency among theistic personalists to echo Swinburne and Lucas in this respect. Hence, for example, while classical theists typically say that God knows all history by being its maker, theistic personalists are more likely to assert that God's knowledge of history may partly be acquired by him as history unfolds. On their picture, God's knowledge of the world, especially the world of human affairs, is capable of increase. It is also much derived from a process comparable with taking a look at an object or event which confronts one from outside. In the Middle Ages some classical theists summarized their teaching on God's knowledge by saying that the knowledge of God is the cause of things (*scientia dei causa rerum*). Theistic personalists, by contrast, often conceive of God's knowledge as caused by things other than himself. Hence, for example, Richard Creel writes: 'God must be affirmed as a privileged observer.' Why? Because, says Creel, if God cannot observe things as we do, he must be in error.<sup>31</sup>

Thinking along Creel's lines, theistic personalists often deny that God is impassible and unchangeable. Indeed, many of them make a point of doing so. Why? Largely because they think that, if God is impassible and unchangeable, then he cannot be taken seriously as a person. The persons we call people are changed by what they encounter and discover. They are modified by other things. And, says the theistic personalist, this

is how it must be with God. An impassible and unchanging God would, they argue, be lifeless. Such a God, they often add, would also not be admirable. We admire people who can be moved by tragic events. We admire people who can become elated when good things happen. And, theistic personalists sometimes say, we can admire God only if he, like admirable people, is suitably affected by the good and the bad which occurs in the world. A notable defender of this view is Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), according to whom God undergoes joy as we flourish and grieves as we suffer. For Hartshorne, this means that God undergoes development. God improves as time goes on.<sup>32</sup> Hartshorne's understanding of God is, of course, utterly at odds with the suggestion that God is outside time. And God's timelessness is rejected, whether explicitly or implicitly, by all theistic personalists. The same goes for the teaching that God is simple. As we shall later see, some theistic personalists reject this teaching on purely philosophical grounds. Some, for example, argue that it is logically indefensible or in some way incoherent. But, as we shall also later see, others reject it on theological grounds. Why? The reasons they give are usually based on the way they read the Bible. In their view, the biblical picture of God is just flatly at odds with what those who believe in divine simplicity take God to be. The Old and New Testaments speak of God as though he were a distinct individual with distinct attributes or properties. And this, say many theistic personalists, is reason enough for dismissing the notion of divine simplicity.

Many of them would add that it is also reason for rejecting classical theism's emphasis on the difficulty of understanding what God is. St Augustine of Hippo, like classical theists in general, expresses himself baffled when it comes to the divine nature. 'Who then are you, my God?', he asks. He answers his own question by stressing that God is supremely mysterious. God, says Augustine, is 'most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old . . . always active, always in repose.'<sup>33</sup> According to theistic personalists, however, God is nothing like as extraordinary as Augustine's account suggests.

Augustine's account is inseparable from his commitment to the

teaching that God is simple. But what if we reject that teaching? And what if we think of God as being how Descartes thought he was, albeit much less limited? Then we might think that God is not so hard to fathom after all. Descartes says: 'I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else.'<sup>34</sup> If Descartes is right here, and if he is also correct in his view of what it is to be a human person, might we not claim a fair comprehension of God by reflecting on what we are as thinking things?

Theistic personalists often suggest that we can do just this. They always concede that God is something of a mystery. But they frequently imply that we can have some sense of what it is to be God since we know from our own case what it is to be a person. They also sometimes suggest that words (especially adjectives) used by believers when speaking of God are most naturally to be construed in the same way as when they are applied to people. Theists say that God is, for example, knowing, loving, and good. But we know what it means to say that people are knowing, loving, and good. So, reasons many a theistic personalist, we know something of what it means to say that God is knowing, loving, and good. Some theistic personalists (Swinburne is a notable example) add that our knowledge of people and God allows us (with no reference to divine revelation) to form conjectures and expectations concerning how God is likely to act. Others suggest that God, like us, could be subject to lapses of memory. Hence, for example, Steven T. Davis asks: 'Suppose God knows the answer to any question that can be asked except this: What colour shoes did Martha Washington wear on the day of her wedding to George? Suppose God has somehow forgotten this fact and has forgotten how to deduce it from other facts he knows. Is it so clear he would then no longer be God?' Davis answers: 'I believe that God is in fact omniscient—he does know the answer to this question. But I am not prepared to grant that if he didn't he would no longer be divine.'<sup>35</sup>

### Why These Differences?

What accounts for the different approaches to theism noted above? Classical theists take theirs to be a natural way of expressing what the Bible teaches concerning God's nature. But classical theism also derives

from reading the Bible in the light of various philosophical positions. In this sense, it is also the product of philosophical reasoning and argument. You can clearly see how this is so by turning, for instance, to the first part of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. Here we find Aquinas defending all the tenets of classical theism as I have sketched them. And we find him seeking to ground them in texts from the Old and New Testaments (he spent many years lecturing on the Bible). But Aquinas also tries to argue for them philosophically and without appeal to Scripture. The same is true when it comes to some other notable classical theists. For example, Augustine (who wrote commentaries on biblical texts) and Anselm (who did not) each seek to defend their approach to God on both biblical and philosophical grounds.

Yet grounds such as these are also appealed to by theistic personalists. They commonly insist that their approach to God is what best reflects biblical talk about God.<sup>36</sup> And they frequently maintain that their position makes the best philosophical sense of belief in God. Why the best philosophical sense? Because, say some theistic personalists, philosophical reasoning shows that we should believe in the existence of God as construed along the lines of theistic personalism. Many theistic personalists also hold that there are flaws in the philosophical arguments offered by classical theists in favour of their understanding of God.

So the divisions between classical and theistic personalists derive both from their reading of theological texts and from ways in which they differ philosophically. And this, of course, means that the divisions are both complex and far-reaching. So, if you want to take sides, you are going to have to do a lot of work. You are going to have to adjudicate between classical and theistic personalists with an eye on biblical texts and how they should best be understood. You will also have to study the various philosophical arguments which both classical and theistic personalists give as they attempt to tell us what God should be taken to be.

### Moving On

In distinguishing between classical theism and theistic personalism, I have been trying to paint a picture using rather broad strokes. My aim has been to give you an impression of some substantial differences to be

found among theists. But you should not assume that those who side with some of the tenets of classical theism as I have outlined them also agree with all of them. Nor should you suppose that there is an easily identifiable body of classical theists who all believe the same when it comes to the question 'What is God?' You should also not suppose that there is a solid body of thinkers calling themselves 'theistic personalists' and all saying exactly the same thing when it comes to God's nature. 'Classical theism' and 'theistic personalism' are just labels I have used in order to draw your attention to some significant diversity which often goes unnoticed. But the diversity is notable. And those approaching the philosophy of religion for the first time should be aware of it. As I have said, much philosophy of religion centres on questions about God. So it is important at the start to realize that 'God' is a word which has been understood differently.

But it is also important to realize that philosophers have turned to philosophy of religion not just with different understandings of God but also with different approaches to the general relationship between philosophy and religion. Should philosophy necessarily be viewed as religion's foe? Should it be thought of as a necessary ally? Do religious beliefs need philosophical support? Is it the job of philosophy to pronounce on their truth or falsity? Answers to these questions can be found in the writings of many philosophers, and in the next chapter we shall see something of what the questions amount to and how they have been dealt with.

## NOTES

1. Moses Maimonides was born at Cordova and finally settled in Cairo. The author of numerous works on Jewish theology, he is best known today for his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1190), which is devoted to the relation between reason and religious faith. Avicenna, sometimes called Ibn Sina, was an Islamic philosopher who also had a strong influence on medieval Christian thinkers. Thomas Aquinas lived and worked in France and Italy and became one of the most respected Roman Catholic philosophers and theologians. He wrote voluminously, but is best known for his *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa contra Gentiles*.

2. Augustine of Hippo lived most of his life in North Africa. His impact on Christian thinking is second to none. His many writings include the *Confessions*

(a kind of theological autobiography) and a variety of works on both philosophical and theological topics.

3. Leibniz was born in Leipzig, where he later studied. Generally regarded as one of the greatest seventeenth-century 'rationalist' philosophers, he wrote on physics, mathematics, metaphysics, and theology.

4. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 8.

5. Cf. Chapter 11 below.

6. Herbert McCabe, 'Creation', *New Blackfriars* 61 (1980). I quote from this article as reprinted in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford, 2000), p. 199.

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 45, 1. I quote from the translation of the English Dominican Fathers (London, 1911).

8. Anselm, *Proslogion*, chs. 13 and 19. I quote from Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford, 1998). Anselm was at one time abbot of Bec, in Normandy. He died as Archbishop of Canterbury. His best-known writings include his *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, and *Cur Deus Homo*.

9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 13, 7. I quote from volume 3 of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (London and New York, 1964).

10. Anselm, *Monologion*, ch. 15. I quote from Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford, 1998), p. 26.

11. St Augustine of Hippo, *De Libero Arbitrio*, I, 2. I quote from Thomas Williams (ed.), *Augustine: On Free Choice of the Will* (Indianapolis, IN, 1993), pp. 3 f.

12. Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, ch. 17. I quote from Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford, 1998), p. 30.

13. Plantinga teaches at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. His publications include *God and Other Minds* (1967), *The Nature of Necessity* (1974), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (1999).

14. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have A Nature* (Milwaukee, WI, 1980), p. 47.

15. Richard Swinburne retired as Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford University in 2002. He has written widely in the areas of probability theory, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religion. His books include *The Existence of God* (2nd edn., 1991), *The Evolution of the Soul* (1986), *Is There A God?* (1996), and *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (1998).

16. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (rev. edn., Oxford, 1993), p. 1.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

18. For more on all this, see Chapter 13.

19. Aristotle, generally thought to be one of the greatest of ancient Greek

thinkers, wrote treatises on science, metaphysics, and ethics. He more or less invented the discipline of logic. He acted as tutor to Alexander the Great. He also studied under Plato.

20. Bertrand Russell taught at Cambridge University. He is best known for his work on logic and mathematics. But he also wrote on other matters, including religion. His major writings include *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903/1937), *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1918), *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), and *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948).

21. Wittgenstein studied under Russell but came to disagree with him philosophically on a number of issues. He taught at Cambridge University, but also worked in non-academic contexts. Widely regarded as one of the greatest twentieth-century philosophers, his works (almost all published posthumously) include *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), *The Blue and Brown Books* (1958), and *On Certainty* (1969).

22. John Locke is best known for his work in epistemology (theory of knowledge) and political philosophy. His *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was published in 1690.

23. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited with an introduction by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), Book II, ch. XXVII, p. 335.

24. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 340.

25. Often called ‘the father of modern philosophy’, Descartes is especially famous for his philosophy of mind. His major works include the *Discourse on Method* (1637) and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

26. I quote from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, 1984), p. 24.

27. See Chapter 13.

28. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 131.

29. John Lucas, *The Future* (Oxford, 1989), p. 229.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

31. Richard Creel, *Divine Impassibility* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 96.

32. Cf. Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (New York, 1983).

33. I quote from *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), pp. 4f.

34. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, p. 23.

35. Steven T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (London, 1983), pp. 4f.

36. Cf. John Lucas as quoted in Chapter 8 below.

## FURTHER READING

For helpful accounts of some different understandings of the word ‘God’, see H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London, 1971) and Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983). For a concise survey of different accounts of God given by Jews, Christians, and others, see the article on ‘God’ in E. A. Livingstone and F. L. Cross (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1997). See also the entry on ‘God’ in volume VI of *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967). For statements of Roman Catholic approaches to God, see Karl Rahner *et al.* (eds.), *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 2 (New York, 1968), pp. 381–401, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd edn., Vatican City, 2000), pp. 13–18, and 54–61.

For brief introductions to biblical teachings concerning God, see Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Ronald E. Murphy (eds.), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968), pp. 737–46. See also J. B. Baur (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology* (New York, 1981), pp. 298–316; Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London, 1950), pp. 89–99; and *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville and New York, 1962), pp. 417–36.

For an account of Christian teaching about God in the period immediately following that of New Testament authors, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd edn., Harlow and New York, 1972). See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5th edn., London, 1977) and G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (2nd edn., London, 1952).

Aquinas is often regarded as a paradigm classical theist. For introductions to him, see Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford, 1992) and *id.*, *Aquinas* (London, 2002). For a clear statement of what I am calling ‘theistic personalism’, see Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (rev. ed., Oxford, 1993). For a wholly different approach, written with authors like Swinburne in mind, see Gareth Moore, *Believing in God* (Edinburgh, 1988). For a discussion of the formula ‘God is a person’, see Keith Ward, ‘Is God a Person?’, in Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco van den Brom, and Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology* (Kampen, Netherlands, 1992). For a critical exposition of what I am calling theistic personalism (he calls it ‘neotheism’), see Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN, 1997).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Jane asks Paul 'Do you believe in God?' Paul says 'No'. Jane asks John 'Do you believe in God?' John says 'Yes'. Should we automatically suppose that Paul and John are contradicting each other? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 2 What should we take the word 'God' to mean?
- 3 Can we draw a serious distinction between 'classical theism' and 'theistic personalism'? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 4 Philosophers sometimes refer to 'the concept of God'. What might they have in mind when doing so? Is there any such thing as 'the concept of God'?
- 5 How do biblical authors conceive of God? To what extent can their teachings be invoked in favour of classical theism? To what extent can they be appealed to in support of theistic personalism?
- 6 How might one decide whether or not different people share an understanding as to what 'God' means?
- 7 People sometimes say 'We all worship the same God'. Is that true? If so, why? If not, why not? How might one decide that two people worship the same God?
- 8 If I am a person and if God is a person, does anything make God different from me?
- 9 Artists are sometimes said to create their works of art. How do they do this? Are they doing what theists seem to mean when they speak of God as Creator?
- 10 'God is a mystery.' What might be meant by this statement? Are there any reasons for endorsing it?