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Comment: Is God a Person?

It is often said that God is a person. The idea seems to be that God is a conscious agent with a life history who has various thoughts, aspirations, intentions, and beliefs. On this account, God is a person in the sense of 'person' famously employed by John Locke (1632-1704) when he states that a person 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'. René Descartes (1596-1650) famously claimed that we are essentially immaterial and individual thinking things. And some would say that Descartes was right while adding that what he said of us can also be said of God. On this understanding, God is the Top Person or the best person of all. But should we be supposing that God *is* a person?

You might think that the obvious answer to this question is 'Yes', since God is depicted as a person in biblical texts and since the notion of God being a person is central to the mainstream Christian tradition. Yet the sentence 'God is a person' does not occur anywhere in the Bible. The Bible compares God to people such as shepherds, kings, fathers, builders, and a husband whose wife has cheated on him. But it also compares God to a lamb and an eagle and a case of dry rot while also asserting that God is like nothing else. As for the 'Christian tradition', it can at least be said that no Council of the Church has decreed that God is a person. According to the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation, some person is God since Jesus is God and since anything correctly said of Jesus can be affirmed of God (*anything*, including 'was born', 'died on a cross', and 'was raised from the dead'). On this teaching, it follows that if, for instance, Jesus is a human person, then God is a human person. But this teaching is respecting a difference between the human *nature* of Jesus and his divine *nature*. It is not saying that it belongs to the divine nature to be a (human) person. On the orthodox account of the Incarnation, while it is true that one human person is God, it is not true that God is one human person. Again, in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity we find it said that God is 'three persons'. But the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is not asserting that God is *three* persons in *one* person or that God is three centers of consciousness. This Trinitarian account of God (like the orthodox account of the Incarnation) is, of course, not presuming 'God' to be the proper name of a person, as 'Socrates' was the proper name of the teacher of Plato. Many people find it natural to suppose that 'God' is the proper name of a person called 'God'. But that is a highly

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untraditional way of understanding the word 'God'. Much more traditional is the assumption that 'God' is a word which signifies a nature or way of being. The gods of Mount Olympus had proper names. But none of them were called 'God'. It has been said that 'God', for Christians, has to be thought of as a proper name since we can say things like 'God, come to my aid'. But we can say things like 'Theologian, you are talking nonsense' without being committed to the view that 'Theologian' is a proper name.

It is often claimed by both philosophers and theologians that the big issue between Christians and atheists lies in the fact that one group asserts that there is 'such a person as God' while the other denies this. But why should we think that this claim is true if 'God is a person' is not explicitly asserted in biblical books or in the texts of Councils of the Church? One might say that the formula or mantra 'God is a person' is *implied* by what we find in such writings since they assume that God can be described in ways in which we typically describe human persons. And it is true that the Bible and the Christian tradition consistently speak of God as knowing and willing and loving. It might also be noted that the Bible and the Christian tradition tell us to *pray* to God and to seek *forgiveness* from God. But the intelligible use of verbs such as 'knows', 'wills' and 'loves' is not confined to talk about what is meant by 'persons' as Locke understood that word and as Descartes might be thought of as doing when saying that all of us are essentially immaterial things. Cats can sensibly be said to know and will and love (albeit in ways that fall short of what we mean when ascribing knowledge, will, and love to people). But friends of the claim 'God is a person' would typically not take cats to be persons. It is true that the notion of praying to God and asking for forgiveness from God is bound up with the idea that God knows and is able to act on the basis of knowledge. But it does not therefore follow that God is a conscious individual with a history of some sort. Not unless you assume that anything with knowledge and the ability to act has to be a conscious individual with a biography. But this assumption is open to question. Hence, for example, Thomas Aquinas can happily ascribe knowledge and activity to God without racing to the conclusion that God is therefore a non- material person. He sometimes approvingly quotes a definition of 'person' coming from Boethius (c.477-524). According to this definition, a person is an 'individual substance of a rational nature'. But Aquinas also argues that God is not an individual, not a substance, and not something having a nature. Not an individual, since God cannot be thought of as an instance of a kind of which there might be many members (like a cat or a dog or a human being). Not a substance, since, if we believe what Aristotle says, a substance is something composed of form and matter which undergoes change. Not 'having a nature', since God *is* the divine nature and not something sharing a nature with things of the same kind. These are positions that Aquinas defends while arguing for

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divine simplicity — the conclusion that God is 'entirely simple' (meaning, not something changeable, not one of a kind, and not something owing its existence to something other than itself). And Aquinas was defending these positions while taking them to be thoroughly in-line with the Bible and the decrees of Church Councils up to his time.

Aquinas's account of divine simplicity has often been challenged. And it is probably fair to say that most contemporary theologians and Christian philosophers take it to be unintelligible or alien to biblical ways of talking about God. Yet it is arguably much more orthodox than the idea that God is a person in Locke's sense, or a magnified Cartesian 'thinking thing'.

It has been said that as God has made human beings in the image of God, we have made God in our image if we suppose that God is one person among many. Given the emphasis Aquinas lays on divine simplicity, one might assume him to have been anxious to correct this alleged anthropomorphism. And maybe he would have been right so to be anxious. This is not to say that knowledge, will, and love cannot be attributed to God. Nor is it to deny the inference 'Jesus was a person; Jesus was God; so God is a person'. It is to suggest that, when it is the *divine nature* that is at stake, talk about God being another person (in addition to us) seems to be drawing on an idolatrous notion of God.

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