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Does 'God' exist?

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Abstract

The essay considers the possible meanings of 'God' in Christian discourse, given its assertorial usage and in light of the doctrine of the Trinity. Examination of the grammar of analogous sentences highlights the problems of using 'God' as the subject of verbs of agency. In light of the enhypostasization of divine nature within the three persons of the Trinity, and in no other context, 'God' cannot designate any one person of the Trinity, nor the Three together, nor divine nature conceived anhypostatically and, given its propensity to mislead, use of 'God' in Christian discourse is called into question.

It is a curious feature of arguments for the existence of God that they presume an identity for that which they seek to prove. Suppose someone were to ask, 'Do you believe in God?' and I answered 'Yes', but as the conversation continued, I discovered that what the questioner meant by 'God' was 'a large basset hound which flaps its ears and so is able to fly about the world performing corporal acts of mercy'. If *that* is what is meant by 'God', then I would have to change my answer to 'No', not so much because of any agnosticism about the existence of such a creature, but because even if it did exist, I would not call it 'God'. Just so, the question 'Does God exist?' turns out to be an elliptical form of the question 'Does a being like xyz exist?' Arguments for the existence of God assume or specify (usually assume) an identity for the one whose existence they seek to prove, and this identity is at least as important to the argument as any question of existence or non-existence *per se*, a fact that philosophical disputants have not always been careful to acknowledge: we are debating the existence of something, but is it the *same* thing?

If the eliding of the identity issue has the potential to confuse philosophical discussion, it is even less helpful in the context of Christian theology. It is easy enough to specify particular attributes that might attach to an entity designable as 'God' for Christian purposes (eternity, omniscience, immateriality, so as to rule out the basset hound, for instance), but the identity of God as understood by Christians includes the reality of the Trinity, and it is in this light that the term 'God' becomes highly problematic. Given Christian affirmation of the divine Trinity, what does 'God' designate, exactly?

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If we take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously, take it, in other words, as precisely not separable from the doctrine of God but as integral to it, then we need to be clear about what that doctrine stipulates and what usages are regular or irregular, given its stipulations. We might formulate the 'rule' of Christian discourse about the Trinity this way:[i]

> **the T Rule**: There is one divine nature which subsists wholly and without remainder in each of the three hypostases or persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and in no context other than in these Three. Whatever is predicated of this divine nature must be predicable equally of all three Persons.[ii]

Keeping this benchmark in mind, we can take up the question of what 'God' might mean in Christian discourse. One possibility – let's label it (A) – is that 'God' designates one of the Three. A second – call it (B) – is that 'God' means all three Persons together. A third, (C), is that 'God' means 'any one of the Three', without specifying which one, an expression which might be useful in virtue of its very lack of specificity. Alternatively, we might take 'God' to mean (D), 'one of the Three, but we can't be sure which'. A final possibility, (E), is that 'God' designates divine nature, abstracted from any of the hypostases.

If we plump for (A), we should find ourselves in the company of some of the fathers of the early church, at least if 'God' is equated with the First Person of the Trinity.[iii] The rationale for understanding 'God' in this way devolves on the Father's identity as source or fount of divinity: the Father is the one

[i] Although I am making use of the language of rules, I do so with hesitation. The notion that Christian doctrine resembles a set of grammatical rules was first proposed by George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), although he cited the *regulae fidei* as precedent. The difficulty with the terminology of grammar rules is that the rules in question could be taken as either normative or descriptive. Contemporary linguists tend to eschew the notion that language conforms to normative rules, preferring models whereby 'rules' are viewed as functioning descriptively. It is not entirely clear in which sense Lindbeck is appealing to the notion of rule, but in adopting that language here, I do so claiming both a descriptive and a normative function: the T Rule both purports to describe how Christians came to speak of the Trinity and to stipulate a norm of right usage.

[ii] This formulation is not a quotation from any particular author, but is merely intended to summarize the consensus of the Christian tradition by the end of the patristic era (however one wants to date that exactly; we could use 1000 as a *terminus ad quem*).

[iii] There is patristic warrant for this interpretation, though it is by no means the uniform conclusion of the tradition. For references, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th edn rev. (London: Continuum, 1977), 83, 85, 100 and 112. I am not aware of any precedent for identifying either of the other two Persons with 'God'.

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of the Three who is neither begotten nor proceeding, but from whom the other two proceed and from whom the other Two 'receive' divinity. The immediate problem with this interpretation of the meaning of 'God' is that in specifying relations of particular Persons to one another (the Father is the source of divinity because he begets the Son), it stipulates the distinction of one hypostasis from the other. As such, this gloss cannot account for many of the statements we would wish to make of God. Consider, for example:

(1) God loves us.

If in (1), 'God' means 'the Father', then it would seem that we are saying that loving human persons pertains specifically to the hypostasis of the Father; if so, it would follow that the Son and the Spirit are not included in the action of God's loving and if they are thought of as loving us, this love must be specified separately. We can get around this problem by saying that the will with which God loves pertains to the divine nature rather than any one hypostasis and what one Person therefore wills, so do the others, but then 'God' in (1) does not designate one person of the Trinity.

Perhaps (B) is a better option: 'God' functions in effect as a collective noun, shorthand for 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. On this account, 'God' functions in relation to 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' in the way 'the Smiths' functions in relation to 'John, Jane and Jenny', where John, Jane and Jenny all belong to a family surnamed Smith. Consider the following sentence:

(2) The Smiths live next door.

The verb in (2) is plural, reflecting the fact that the proper name which is its subject has taken a plural form. Both plural markers (on the noun and the implicit one on the verb) indicate that we understand more than one entity to be living next door, even if these are being thought of as a unit in terms of their residence. If so, (2) is not an apt analogy for (1), for 'God' clearly does not function in this way: the noun admits of a plural, but in Christian theology is never expressed as one when denoting the deity whom Christians worship, and the verbs used with it are always singular. Nothing about the grammar of (1), therefore, suggests (B) as a plausible glossing of 'God'.

Perhaps, though, we could get around this difficulty if we instead chose as an analogy:

(3a) The Smith family live next door

or

(3b) The Smith family lives next door.

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((3a) would be the more usual formulation in some parts of the Anglophone world, (3b) in others.) (3a) has much the same problem as (2): while the head noun is singular (for it is a true collective noun), the verb is plural. The plural verb once again signals that we are not thinking of those living next door as a single entity. A different kind of problem arises if we take (3b) to be the correct analogy for (1). The head noun and the verb are both singular and in that respect mirror the grammar of (1), and 'the Smith family' clearly designates a conglomerate comprised of more than one entity. The difficulty is that the Smith family is said to live next door because John, Jane and Jenny Smith live there. The Smith family as such does not live there: 'live', in this context, denotes an habitual occupation of a particular space, yet there is no entity designable as 'the Smith family' that occupies space. What occupies space are individual Smiths and when a number of these inhabit the same space for a length of time, we say the family lives there.

The problems mount if we alter the verb. (3b) makes sense because of a marriage of convenience between its noun and verb: although a family cannot properly speaking live anywhere (because as a single entity it does not occupy space), custom licenses the noun in (3b) as a kind of abbreviation: by 'the Smith family' we understand 'some members of the Smith family'. If we transpose the verb from (1) into (3b), however, we see that the problems of ascribing action to a collective worsen. If we say:

(4) The Smith family loves sailing

then what we mean is:

(5) Each member of the Smith family loves sailing

(or perhaps that the majority of the family members love sailing, but this latter possibility is not significant for our purposes). Whether we take 'the Smith family' as an abstraction, something that has no real existence but which is merely a name for members of a group, or we take it as having that existence which pertains to a web of real relations (and which in that respect resembles the Trinity), the problem remains: neither an abstraction nor a web of relations has the relevant faculty with which to love, namely a will. Only the individual persons who constitute the family have wills and so are able to love. Thus, if we were to replace the noun phrase in (4) with a pronoun, we would get:

(6) It loves sailing.

As soon as we replace the noun with a pronoun, the problem of agency becomes inescapable: no 'it' can be said to love anything. Here the disanalogy

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with (1) becomes clear, for if we replace the noun in (1) with a pronoun, we get:

(7) He loves us

or

(8) She loves us.

The issue of the gender of the pronouns used to replace 'God' need not detain us here, vexatious though it is in itself. Indeed, that difficulty arises precisely because no one is willing to replace the noun in (1) with 'it'. Once we renounce 'it' and opt for either 'he' or 'she' we are clearly in the realm of a singular personal agent rather than a collective, sufficient indication that 'God' is being thought of not as shorthand for 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit', but rather as a single agent representable by a singular personal pronoun, a pronoun which must moreover be fully personal in the sense that it cannot be 'it'.

Perhaps a better way to understand 'God' would be to consider it as a generic noun, one using a singular form to designate 'any member of a given class'; this option we identified as (C). Such nouns, when singular, are usually preceded by an indefinite article: 'see a doctor' means 'see any member of the class of doctors'. 'God' cannot qualify as a generic noun in this sense, as far as Christian discourse is concerned, because the Three are not members of the class of gods (indeed there is no such class, on the Christian account). However there may be quasi-generic usages that would allow us to make sense of (1). Consider the following:

(9) Fred loves Mary.

If 'Fred' is understood as a kind of Everyman, then the sentence would mean that some stock representative of humanity loves Mary. Clearly, though, such a parsing of 'Fred' will not work in a context like that of (9), first, because of the nature of the action, and second, because of the nature of the object. We may ascribe to an Everyman actions which are common to all human beings (eating, for instance), some feelings (pain), and perhaps, though it is inherently riskier, some emotions (grief). We would probably be safe in claiming all human beings know what it is to love something or someone. The difficulty is that the indefinitude of the subject of the verb would have to be matched by an indefinite object, such as 'something' or 'someone'. In other words: Everyman (or anyone) could be said to love someone, but it makes little sense to say 'Everyman loves Mary'. As soon as the object of 'love' is specified as 'Mary', the notion that 'Fred' stands for some sort of Everyman becomes absurd: humankind in general does not love Mary.

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If we sought to avoid this problem by deleting the object altogether ('Fred loves'), we would encounter a difficulty with the verb, which notionally, if not syntactically, requires an object. Granted, biblical dicta such as 'God is love' can function grammatically without specifying an object for God's love, but they can do so because no claim of action is explicitly being made: 'God' works as the subject of a verb of being because such verbs effectively stipulate attributes of the divine nature. Once a transitive verb is used, an object is required, bringing with it all the problems of the relation of a generic subject to a specific object. In the lack of specificity of (C), therefore, lies both its potential attractiveness and the root of its infeasibility. By contrast, if, on the analogy of (9), we take 'God' to mean 'any one of the Three', we run into exactly the same problems we encountered with (A) and (B): either by 'any one' we mean one Person loves without the others doing so (A) or that all Three love (B).

Before abandoning (B) and (C) altogether, though, we might test a sort of hybrid of the two. Suppose that in (9), 'Fred' designates not Everyman, but a specific group of persons: Tom, Dick and Harry, say. 'Fred' now stands as a kind of symbol for the members of this other group and the verb in (9) is accordingly singular. We use a single entity to denote three members of a group in order to underline their joint operation. This gloss seems capable of incorporating some of the key features of the T Rule, as well as accounting for the grammar of (1). The difficulty with it is the sheer dispensability of the symbol: why posit the hypothetical Fred in the first place? If what (9) really means is

(10) Tom, Dick and Harry love Mary

why drag in someone called Fred? The problem with using (9) or (10) as analogies for parsing (1), 'God loves us', is that if (1) really means 'The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit love us', then the term 'God' is redundant – redundant, as well as highly misleading.

Option (D), that 'God' stands for a divine person of whose exact identity we cannot be sure, is effectively a stronger version of (C). The agnosticism – or theological muddle-headedness – of this option might prove useful in some circumstances. For instance, when Christian interpreters have wrestled with the theophanies of the OT, they have differed over which Person of the Trinity is appearing on particular occasions: who speaks from the burning bush?[iv] Likewise, if we take references to wisdom in the later OT and intertestamental literature to have hypostatic value, which of the Persons is this

[iv] Augustine, to take one example, expresses uncertainty as to whether all three Persons were manifested, or only one of them, and if one, which one (*De Trinitate* II.v.26).

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wisdom? Some Christian commentators have identified it with the Word and some with the Spirit.[v] Whatever difficulties are solved by using 'God' in such contexts deliberately to avoid specifying a particular person of the Trinity are however cancelled by the trinitarian impropriety of this agnosticism: we cannot specify one person of the Trinity as the agent of such manifestations because to do so would be to violate a fundamental principle of trinitarian theology, anciently formulated as 'opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt' – the works of the Trinity in the Economy are undivided. There is no possibility that one person of the Trinity speaks from the bush while the other two are somehow silent, even if Augustine seemed willing to entertain such a possibility. True, the equally ancient strategy of appropriation licenses us to think of one Person as particularly associated with certain actions – to be to the fore in the action, so to speak – but since this gambit reflects only the mind's association of certain acts with a particular person rather than identifying one Person as the agent, we are still left with the fact that we can never be uncertain as to which of the Persons is the subject of economic activity: it is always the Three who act together. In virtue of this consideration, 'God' in (1) cannot mean 'Some one of the Three loves us' or 'Any one of the Three loves us'.

We are left with (E), the notion that 'God' stands, not for one or more hypostases, but for the divine nature itself, conceived of as abstracted from the hypostases. 'God is good' is relatively unproblematic if in accord with (E) we take 'God' to denote divine nature. If so, perhaps we could investigate whether at least some such assertions of divine attributes might be interchangeable with assertions of agency. 'God is love', for example, might be taken as the equivalent of 'God loves' and if so, the legitimacy of the first statement could be viewed as authorizing the second. Such translational moves leave in their wake problems of their own, however. The first of these is that it is the assertion of agency that is in fact logically prior. If we acknowledge that (1) is susceptible of conversion into 'God is love', or 'It is in the nature of divinity to love', we must equally admit that 'God is love' can only be understood as an imprecise formulation of 'God loves something or someone': one cannot be loving, let alone be love itself, without engaging in the act of loving. The 'logic' of loving moreover requires not only a lover but a beloved; we can decline to identify this beloved precisely, but we cannot properly construe 'love' as an intransitive verb. Indeed, this consideration

[v] Justin Martyr identified the wisdom referred to in Proverbs 8 with the Son (Dial. 61); Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses* 4.7.4 and 4.20.3 identified it with the Spirit. Gregory Nazianzen sometimes identifies it with the Son and sometimes with the Spirit (cp. Or. 30.20 and Or. 31.29).

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virtually forces Christian theology either towards a doctrine of intra-divine distinction or towards a creator contingent upon creation: to be love, God must do love, and that means either positing distinctions within divine being at the immanent level[vi] or acknowledging that a monistic God needs the other that is creation in order to be what he is said to be essentially.

The most fundamental problem with (E), however, is the provision of the T Rule that divine nature never exists outside the context of the hypostases: if divine nature loves, then each one of the Persons must love. The question that might arise at this point, of whether the will with which 'God' loves pertains at the level of nature or of hypostasis, is from one perspective redundant, given the T Rule, because divine nature never subsists outside the context of an hypostasis. From another perspective, however, we must locate will at the hypostatic level, for the consequence of not doing so would be that we could not affirm that the Persons love each other; the divine nature could only be said to love itself, rather than the Father loving that other who is the Son, for example. Moreover, if 'God' means 'divine nature' or 'divinity', then an analogy for the subject in (1) would be 'humanity', and as the analysis of (9) has already indicated, severe problems attach to ascribing agency to an abstract or collective noun. The strength of (E) lies in its capacity to account for the predication of divine attributes, where 'God' functions as the subject of a verb of being. However even (E) falters when used as a model to account for the use of 'God' as the subject of verbs of doing.

The problem that has arisen most persistently in the preceding analysis is that none of the models proposed can adequately account for the assertion of personal agency of God. Many of the activities which Christians ascribe to God can only be understood as actions of a particular agent, an agent who wills the action, and in willing it, has envisaged an object or outcome for the action, an agent, in other words, capable of both cognition and volition; natures, as such, are capable of neither. The root issue here might be expressed in terms which came into use in the early church in the context of Christology: an- and en-hypostasia.[vii] That which is said to be anhypostatic has no hypostasis of its own. Any hypostatic existence ascribed to it is the result of its enhypostasization, its existence in an hypostasis. If we map these categories onto trinitarian theology, we might put the issue this

[vi] One version of this line of reasoning is proposed by Richard of St Victor in his *De Trinitate*.

[vii] The notion of anhypostasia has its root in the theology of Leontius of Jerusalem, who did not use the term itself, but asserted Christ's human nature had no hypostasis of its own (*Adv. Nest.* 2.10). *Enhypostatos* was used by John Damascene to describe Christ's humanity as it subsists in the Son (*Dialectica* 44).

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way: divine nature is anhypostatic in the sense that is not its own hypostasis (such is the force of the assertion that divine nature exists in each of the Three wholly and without remainder – that is, no'where' else), but not anhypostatic in the sense that it is ever found outside the context of an hypostasis. Consequently, all that is ascribed to divine nature exists only in the context of an hypostasis, and what is predicated of the nature is equally predicable of the hypostasis in whom this nature subsists. The converse is not true, however. Most obviously, relational acts (such as begetting) may pertain to a particular hypostasis and, as such, these acts serve not only to distinguish one hypostasis from another, but also prevent our ascribing the act to divine nature. Indeed, the enhypostasia of the divine nature indicates that nothing may be predicated of it agent-wise; all claims of agency must pertain to the hypostasis in whom divine nature subsists.

Why this should be the case becomes clear if we ask which divine qualities or faculties may be taken as not pertaining to a particular hypostasis. If we regarded anything predicable of God as anhypostatic, it would mean that this quality or faculty could subsist independently of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and the question then arises: how or 'where'? If it is a fundamental principle of trinitarian theology that the whole of the divine nature subsists, without division or remainder, in each of the three Persons, then it follows that nothing predicable of God can be anhypostatic. Rather, the Christian tradition came *de facto* to treat all divine attributes and faculties as enhypostatic: they have no hypostasis of their own, and are not themselves hypostases, but can only exist, or be thought of as pertaining to, an hypostasis. Or, to put the matter using Latinate terminology: nothing whatsoever in or of God is impersonal.

Here is the nub of the problem we have been exploring: 'God' itself is impersonal. Despite its conventional representation by 'he' rather than 'it', 'God' does not stand for any one of the Persons, nor for the Persons together. 'God', like its archaic counterpart 'the Godhead', is most coherently glossed as 'divine nature', but this nature is not a self-subsistent entity in the manner of an hypostasis. The fact that divine nature does not subsist outside the context of the three hypostases sufficiently explains why agency cannot be predicated of the nature itself, even before we press the issue of where faculties such as will must be said to reside. The logic of glossing 'God' as 'divine nature' indicates that it is valid to say 'God is good', because qualities or attributes may be predicated of a nature. However inasmuch as predicating *action* of some entity called 'God' suggests that 'God' is a subject, and indeed a subject capable of agency, use of the word 'God' violates a fundamental principle of Christian theology. At one level, there is nothing new in this assertion, no novelty in stipulating that 'God' designates divine nature

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subsisting in the Father, the Son and the Spirit and nothing else. Yet despite the clarity of the tradition on this point, Christians have continued to use the word 'God', most problematically as the subject of verbs denoting personal agency which have a definite direct object, and this usage creates and fosters the impression, either that anhypostatic divine nature itself is somehow capable of agency, or that divine actions pertain neither to the Father, nor to the Son, nor to the Spirit, but to a fourth divine hypostasis named 'God'.

Now one might object that all the analogies we examined for (1) 'God loves us' were proper names of one variety or another, and one might maintain that these analogies are inapt for that very reason: if 'God' designates a nature, and is a common noun designating a certain kind of entity, then it is not interchangeable with any kind of proper name. The boundary between names and other nouns is a difficult one, and one of the current debates over trinitarian language concerns whether 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit' are names. Whatever might be said in favour of the view that they are, though, it would be hard to make the case that 'God' is a name, in the first instance, because names attach to particulars, in this case persons. Inasmuch as 'God' is a generic form of address equally appropriate to any person of the Trinity, it is better regarded as a title than a name. (A second consideration is its susceptibility to admitting of lower-case and plural forms, albeit not when designating the deity whom Christians worship.) Nevertheless, there is good reason for using personal names as analogies for the subject in (1), for it is entities designable by such names that are capable of undertaking activities such as loving.

The propriety of using personal names as analogies for 'God' rests on the exigencies of collocation, but this in turn poses problems of a different sort from those indicated above by the grammatical analysis, though we saw a mild form of the difficulty in the examination of (2) and (3). The issue here is that verbs must denote activities fitting to their subject, or to put the matter in reverse terms, a grammatical subject must be the sort of agent that can perform the action indicated by its corresponding verb. The stock example of a sentence which conforms to syntactic 'rules', yet is meaningless because of the semantic incompatibility of its constituents is Noam Chomsky's 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously'.[viii] The failure of collocation in this sentence announces itself unmistakably, but the whimsy of Chomsky's example must prompt us to query the logic of more familiar sentences, those we accept as coherent for no better reason, perhaps, than that they are familiar. As ideas do not sleep, boats do not cycle, human beings do not drop their leaves in the autumn – and natures do not forgive

[viii] *Syntactic Structures*, Janua Linguarum IV ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1957), 15.

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or love. Activities such as forgiving and loving not only require the faculties of cognition and volition that are only questionably asserted of anhypostatic natures, but also assume and assert the relations of persons to one another, and the subject of such verbs must therefore be personal. That is the force of the claim that divine nature does not act, except as enhypostasized.

If we for a moment admit that the preceding argument poses a challenge to the way in which Christians have conventionally used the word 'God', we might pause to consider other sorts of objections to the mounting sense that we might just abandon the unhelpful word altogether. Foremost among these must be that the word 'God' has a lengthy biblical pedigree. The immediate rejoinder to this objection is that biblical usages do not in themselves necessarily stipulate theological ones: the fact that Gen 3:8 portrays God's walking about audibly in the garden of Eden is no licence, let alone any kind of mandate, for Christian discourse to make claims implying the denial of divine immateriality. Just so, the fact that 'God' is used in the Bible as the subject of verbs of doing does not in itself dictate that we must do likewise. However we might additionally query the basic assumption of the objection: how widely is the term 'God' in fact used in the Bible? In seeking an answer to this question, we will have to bracket the complex question of the terms used to designate the deity in the OT and whether a Christian theologian should view these as equatable with the names of persons of the Trinity; answering these questions is a study in its own right and is too unwieldy to undertake here.

We can however turn to the NT and investigate its writers' usage of the term 'God', although in doing so some limitations must be acknowledged. First, we are concerned only with instances of the word 'God', not with analogous terms such as 'Lord'. If we address only usages of the former, a striking pattern emerges. Clinton Morrison's *An Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament*[ix] lists some 1224 occurrences of *theos*. This count includes usages classified by Morrison as 'contextual' – that is, where the word *theos* itself does not appear, but where the RSV translates 'God' with good cause (usually to avoid a plethora of ambiguous pronouns in the English) – and instances where the use of a passive has forced *theos* into an oblique case (the deep structure of 'The world was created by God' is 'God created the world' and so it seems sensible to include sentences such as the former in the count). We exclude direct quotations from the OT, although the line between these and close paraphrases can admittedly be fuzzy, as well as 'God' used in: apostrophe ('O God'); in stock phrases such as 'God willing'; multiples of exactly the same phrase (whether in gospel parallels or

[ix] Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979.

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sheer repetition of the same phrase in a short, unified passage for rhetorical effect); and 'God' used in blessings. More tendentiously, we exclude *theos* as the subject of verbs of being and of modal verbs (the most frequent of which is *dynamai*), as the object of a verb, and in contexts where *theos* is used contrastively with 'Jesus', 'Christ' or 'the Spirit'. The rationale for this last set of exclusions is that verbs of being and modals are unproblematic in the context of the issue being explored here, since they can be read as making assertions about divine nature ('God is good' means 'the divine nature is good'; 'God is able to do x' means 'all the Persons for the Trinity have the capability to do x'); where 'God' is the subject of one of these verbs it does not cause the problems outlined above, which specifically attach to the ascription of agency. The same applies when 'God' is the object of a verb: there are problems in claiming 'we love God' that are parallel to those arising from the claim that God loves us, but the problems associated with claims of divine agency do not arise (though more about this issue later). The reason for excluding texts such as John 3:16 ('God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ') is that the status of 'God' in these is unproblematic in light of developed trinitarian theology: the one who begets the Son is the Father, and 'God' can therefore be taken as designating the Father. A NT scholar might not agree that this was what the writer of the Gospel of John had in mind, but that is a separate issue: such texts are not theologically problematic and it is with theology that we are concerned.

With these caveats in place, we can consider the brute statistical evidence, even though the numbers can only be taken as indicative of a broad pattern, given the amount of discretion that inevitably enters into determining what counts and what does not. The pattern, however, is clear enough: of 1224 instances of forms of *theos* listed in Morrison, only 158 occur as subjects of verbs of doing.[x] However much one might query what categories of usage have been included and excluded above, or question the rectitude of individual judgement calls, the raw numbers are an inescapable indication of the reluctance, even in the supposedly theologically undeveloped NT, to claim that 'God' acts: using the criteria outlined here, a mere 13 per cent of the occurrences of *theos* in the NT ascribe agency to God. Even if we set aside the issue of doctrinal considerations governing which biblical usages we ourselves adopt (as in the case of the apparently material deity of Gen 3:8), we encounter here something of a preponderance problem: while one

[x] The verbs themselves tend to clump together in a restricted set of word fields and particular parts of the NT, which suggests that the use of 'God' with verbs of agency is rather limited, in terms both of the sort of agency which is posited and which writers ascribe agency to God at all.

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could use 'God' on the grounds it is used in the NT, the infrequency of its use scarcely argues for it as necessary, and the fact of its rather infrequent appearance as the subject of verbs of agency must be weighed against the problems attaching to its use and interpretation, as indicated by the analysis of its grammar.

Let's consider a different kind of objection, albeit one related to one of the categories of usage we excluded from our survey of NT evidence: 'God' is deeply embedded in the language of Christian piety and worship. Is it, after all, so wrong-headed to say 'May God bless you' – and if not, why exclude such formulae from the NT statistics presented above? In response specifically to the latter question, it would perhaps be easiest simply to note that the handful of such formulae in the NT would not have noticeably affected the overall pattern, although the deeper reason for the exclusion is that blessings express hope or trust that God will bless, rather than asserting he is in fact doing so.[xi]

The sheer prevalence of Christian usage of 'God' is the harder objection to answer. Adequately to address it, one would have to carry out the same sort of survey – tiresome and perhaps trivial though that might seem – of liturgical texts that we did of the NT. How often and in what ways do liturgies use 'God' as the subject of verbs of doing? If one excluded usages which are either explicitly trinitarian ('The blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit . . . ') and usages where one Person is clearly designated ('God from God'), one might find that there are far fewer liturgically-entrenched usages of 'God' than one might suppose, just as we discovered was the case with the NT. This claim is purely speculative, of course, and must remain such for the purposes of this argument, given the enormity of the task of surveying a variety of liturgies, ancient and modern. Examining liturgical texts, moreover, would give one access only to the formal and public piety of those Christian traditions that use set liturgical forms, though admittedly these collectively represent the majority of the world's Christians. Determining what happens when Christians pray aloud in their own words would be the work of a major sociological study, and still would not tell us what happens when people pray in the chambers of their own hearts. The impracticality of gathering the relevant data means that any descriptive study probably has to be renounced.

Renunciation of that task need not entail abandonment of a normative objective, however. Prayer is a prime indicator of the operative, rather than only professed, theology of the one who offers it, and common prayer – whether

[xi] Hence such forms either omit a verb altogether (as in 2 Cor 13:14) or express it in the optative (1 Thess 5:23).

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liturgically stipulated or not – shapes in particular theological viewpoints and understandings those who utter prayers and those who hear them. Indeed, particularly for those without formal theological training, offering and listening to vocal prayer is one of the chief means by which theology is assimilated. Arguing that 'God' is inevitable because people use it in prayer misses this point: if it is the case that offering prayer to 'God' fosters a subtrinitarian faith, and if it is the case that Christians freely use 'God' in prayer, then the pressing conclusion is that better education and a deeper conversion of all the members of the church to the faith of their baptism is needed, not that prayer rooted in faulty assumptions should continue to determine the shape of the church's theology. The widespread abandonment of sixteenth-century pronouns and verb forms, and the growing disinclination to use 'man' to designate human beings generally, indicate that even seemingly entrenched conventions of prayer are susceptible of change.

It is not only within the church that 'God'-talk poses problems, however. If we were to adopt a stricter, more precise code of usage, so that theological discourse about the deity fully reflected the church's profession of faith in the Trinity, would we not create grave difficulties in inter-religious dialogue, and, in particular, imperil the basis on which we engage in dialogue with Christianity's nearest neighbours, Judaism and Islam? The first rejoinder to this objection is simply to note that it is a bad argument which asserts a proposition must be untrue because its consequences are awkward, or even intolerable (this observation responds to the preceding objection, as well). In addition to this formal response, though, there is a material one: namely that it is precisely Christian use of 'God' which muddies the waters of inter-religious dialogue. To the extent that this dialogue concerns itself with the quest for a common basis for discussion or for points of similarity between religious traditions, it is unhelpful to bandy about a term which has markedly different meanings in these various traditions.

The issue is not merely that Christians, Jews and Muslims have somewhat different 'takes' on God – as one sometimes hears, for example, that 'the Jewish' conception of God is somehow earthier, more querulous, less remote than 'the Christian' God, whose wrath, jealousy and apparent arbitrariness are patiently explained away by a tradition which found them embarrassing; or that 'the Christian' God is all love and forgiveness, while 'the God of the Old Testament' (who is apparently not Christian) seems occupied solely in the making of rules which he can then punish people for breaking. Such facile caricatures can be exploded easily enough, but they do not begin to get to the heart of the problem, which is the polyvalence of the term 'God' itself. If the commonality of Christianity, Judaism and Islam is that all are

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monotheistic faiths, and that what this means is that all assert there is but one God, then it is vital to acknowledge the crucial difference in Christianity's way of being monotheistic, and the radically different conception of this one God which it has, compared with either Judaism or Islam. One suspects that the talk of monotheism and the one God who is the object of belief treats the doctrine of the Trinity, if not as an expendable extra, then at least as a postponable one – as if there were a Christian doctrine of God which is, in principle or in practice or even temporarily, separable from the doctrine of the Trinity. There is not, and therein lies the rub.

At this point, we need to introduce a corollary which has been lurking in the shadows of the argument largely unacknowledged until now. In the survey of NT evidence, sentences in which 'God' was a grammatical object (and so was in the accusative in Greek) were excluded, for reasons that were explained. Nevertheless, we might ask whether, if it does not make good Christian sense to say 'God loves us', it can still make sense to say 'We love God'. Or, to state the issue slightly differently, is it possible to love some unhypostasized version of the divine nature? Put in this latter way, the answer is obvious: no, because in accord with the T Rule, no such entity exists. In consequence, a Christian can only claim to stand in any kind of relation – whether of knowledge, or love, or anything else – with divine nature as enhypostasized. Or, to put it more simply, all relations of God, as conceived in the Christian, are necessarily personal. This principle holds true of the relations of the persons of the Trinity to one another and of the relation of human persons to the persons of the Trinity. Those who complain of the supposed baggage of 'person' and 'personal' can eschew it in favour of 'hypostasis' and its variants if they wish, but the fact remains: Christianity is inescapably a religion of persons and their relations – and 'God' is not any kind of person.

So when Jews and Muslims speak of God's doing x or y, or of our doing x or y in relation to God, they thereby designate an entity who is capable of personal agency and an entity which human beings may obey, adore or love as persons may be said to obey, adore or love other persons (whether or not either tradition would wish to use the language of personhood or hypostasization). These usages are precisely those which Christians cannot properly speaking adopt, given the T Rule: 'God' is not a person, as far as Christians are concerned, but a nature which can exist only in the context of one of three particular hypostases. As soon as claims of agency or relationality are made, Christians are on *terra christiana*, doctrine of the Trinity and all, and at just this point the commonality with Jews and Muslims becomes harder to assert, based as it is on the supposed similarities in our conceptions of 'God'.

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In light of the T Rule, and in particular its implication that divine nature is never anhypostatic, there is no divine agent who is not one of the three persons of the Trinity, and this is half the sense in which Christianity may legitimately be considered a monotheistic religion, the other being that there is only one divine nature and this nature subsists wholly, without division or remainder, in each of the three Persons. It is for this reason that early Christians insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity was not to be taken as allowing for three gods – 'God' means divine nature, and on the Christian account there is but one divine nature.

But from the facts that there is but one divine nature, that this nature may in some contexts for convenience's sake be labelled 'God', and that 'God' may coherently function as the subject of verbs of being, it does not follow that there is some entity called 'God' who does this or that or with whom creatures exist in this or that kind of relation. In light of the latter observation, we would have to say that there is an important sense in which Christianity is not a monotheistic religion – not because it asserts more than one divinity, but because it does not profess belief in 'God' at all, but only in the one divinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Yet if Christianity is not monotheistic in the sense that Judaism and Islam are, neither is it polytheistic, or non-theistic (as some varieties of Buddhism are). The standard taxonomy that is used to categorize the world's religions simply does not fit the Christian case at all, and rather than attempting to shoehorn Christianity into it, we might ask whether the fact that a major world religion does not fit the conventional categories does not call into question the propriety of those categories in the first place (a point on which a Buddhist might well agree).

There is another option within the standard range of theisms, of course: atheism. It was atheism of which Pope John Paul II accused Buddhism, and he was greeted with an outcry from Buddhists who objected to their non-theism's being equated with atheistic denial that there is a God.[xii] The complex character of Buddhism's relation to theism provides us with a final caution before we answer the question posed in the title of this essay. If 'God' means 'divine nature' then this nature no more exists than John's or Jane's natures exist. Human nature *per se* does not exist: it is John, Jane and all

[xii] The text of the pope's remarks may be found in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994). His precise description of Buddhism was that it is 'in large measure' atheistic (p. 86). Some Buddhist responses have challenged this claim by appeal to the pantheon of deities of devotional Buddhism; however other Buddhists do not profess belief in these deities and are more accurately described as non-theists.

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their fellow human beings, in their specificity and personhood, who exist. Natures, wills, minds, and so on, exist only in beings capable of having them; they are, so to speak, parasitic upon subjects capable of agency. If 'God' were capable of agency, we should have to say 'God' labels a fourth hypostasis; such would not only constitute express denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, but would arguably push Christianity into the realm of polytheism, inasmuch as we would now count one nature in three hypostases plus another version of this nature which is its own hypostasis. Just as Buddhism, in some varieties, is neither theistic nor atheistic, so Christianity is neither polytheistic nor monotheistic in the sense of asserting 'God' as an agent.

So does 'God', as far as Christians are concerned, exist? The answer must be 'only in the sense that the God's goodness or love exists' – and existence in this sense (which reduces to the predicability of certain attributes of a subject, rather than claiming the status of subject for such attributes) is not what has been at stake in the debates between Christian and atheistic or agnostic philosophers over the existence of God. On this account, the doctrine of the Trinity distinguishes the Christian conception of divinity sharply from other world religions, but also from variants of secular philosophy, even though these are ultimately rooted in precisely the Greek philosophical tradition that furnished Christian theology with the language in which it articulated its doctrine of the Trinity. Taking this doctrine seriously undoubtedly creates problems both for Christian discourse and for Christian dialogue with non-Christians, whether believers or not, but bracketing the doctrine does nothing to help dialogue, inasmuch as it is based on a false premise about the nature of Christianity's theism, nor does it help Christian theology or the church. Taking the essentially trinitarian character of Christianity seriously means one might well question whether we should use 'God' at all, given its propensity to mislead. If, despite our imperfectly digested doctrine of the Trinity, we are to continue to use 'God', it needs to be with much greater sensitivity and circumspection, as well as with constant self-questioning as to why we are not speaking of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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