What do we mean by "God"?

Armin Kreiner

What it means to talk about God is far from indisputable. A *Gedankenexperiment* may help to take a look at the problems I have in mind. Let us imagine that there is an oracle answering beyond all doubt just one question in our lifetime with either "yes" or "no". Now imagine, your time has come to ask your question. What would be a good one? – Maybe to ask if there is a God would be a good choice. For many people it is the most important question of their life. Now, let us suppose the oracle's answer to your question is "Yes"! – What would you really know beyond all doubt? – Would you know what kind of God there is?

> The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or the God of Spinoza and Einstein?
> The God of the Bible or the Qur'an or the Bhagavadgita or maybe one of the ancient Greek or Roman gods or one of the Indian *devas* or Japanese *kami*?
> Would you know whether there is someone out there listening to your prayers and laments, someone who cares about you?
> Would you know whether there is someone to deliver you from evil, sin and death?

I am afraid that you would not know anything like that! Your question was just whether there is a God. But to know that there is a God means nothing as long as you do not know what "God" means. So what do we mean by "God"? What kind of being, what kind of entity or what kind of fact would render the proposition true, that there is a God?

Some years ago Karen Armstrong published a challenging book on the history of God. In the introduction there are some autobiographical notes on her Catholic upbringing. Armstrong recounts that in her childhood she had learned that God is "the supreme Spirit, Who alone exists of Himself and is infinite in all perfections". She admits that this definition had never meant much to her. It had always left her cold and seemed to her "arid, pompous and arrogant". While writing her book she found out that this definition was "also incorrect"[1]. – I wonder how one can know, that a certain concept of God

[1] Karen Armstrong: *A History of God*, William Heinemann: London 1993, p. 1.

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is false. Anyhow, I am sure that some concepts of God are plainly wrong. For example: Jack Miles[2] and Franco Ferrucci[3] have written remarkable books on God. I do not believe that a being described by Miles or Ferrucci actually exists. And I do not think they believe it either. But even if such a being existed this would not make the proposition true that there is a God – at least not for me.

One may ask how I could say this. Why do I accept some definitions and why do I reject others? Are there any reasons for doing so? – Of course, there are some reasons, because there are reasons for everything. What I am interested in is not whether there are any reasons, but whether there are good ones, rational ones. Thomas Morris affirms that this is "the most important, and most neglected, problem for philosophical theology" – "is it possible to select rationally a best method for thinking about God?"[4]

Searching for an adequate understanding of God confronts us with not just one but a net of several demanding problems. I am going to mention some of them. I will ignore others either because they do not seem to be very important, or because I may not have recognized them yet.

The first problem I would like to discuss is this one: Some maintain that none of our concepts applies to God. So we cannot answer the question, what "God" means, because we only can say, what God is not; we cannot say what God is. This is the central claim of what is called "negative" or "apophatic" theology. If negative theology were right, it would not be possible to say what there is, if there is a God because every time we say that God is so and so this, strictly speaking, would be false.

There are several reasons to support this claim. The one I would like to discuss has to do with certain philosophical and theological arguments. The central philosophical argument in favour of negative theology states that there is a radical difference between God and the world, a difference between transcendence and immanence. We gain all of our concepts from our contact with worldly entities. And only to these entities they do apply. So by definition none of our concepts applies to God. That is the reason why God is indescribable or incomprehensible. – Some have found this argument to be fallacious. Affirming that God does not share any properties with worldly entities means to state something about God using human concepts. I do not want to decide whether this really involves a contradiction.

But there is a further and even bigger problem. If negative theology were right and none of our concepts applied to God, it would hardly

[2] Cf. Jack Miles: *God: a biography*, Simon & Schuster: London 1995.

[3] Cf. Franco Ferrucci: *The Life of God: as told by Himself*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago-London 1996.

[4] Thomas V. Morris: *The Concept of God*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1987, p. 8.

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be possible to find out if this were true. And therefore it would hardly be possible to give any reasons that could back up this claim. If there is no way to know God, then there is no way to know this. It even comes worse: It would be impossible to state the difference between a theistic and a naturalistic worldview. To do so presupposes that there does exist someone or something beyond the range of entities admitted by a naturalistic ontology. If the theist lacked the conceptual means to specify what this is it would be impossible for him to state a difference between the theistic and the naturalistic worldview.

There are a few theistic predicates that are meant to do exactly this job. Probably the most important one is the predicate of infinity. That means: The alleged reason for God's incomprehensibility is his or her or its infinity. But this argument will hardly work. "Infinite" could be said to mean the same as "incomprehensible". In this case infinity would not give any reason for God's incomprehensibility, because both concepts would be synonymous. This would be like saying water is liquid because it is H_2O. On the other hand "infinite" might mean something, i.e. "infinitely wise" or "infinitely powerful". In that case, God obviously would not be indescribable. Whatever these predicates may exactly mean they are human predicates that are applied to God. And if God can be called "infinitely wise" or "powerful" he definitely would not be incomprehensible. Otherwise we would not know what it means to call him "wise" or "powerful".

So I am back to my initial problem – the search for an adequate understanding of God. Ultimately this problem arises from the fact that religious believers actually are speaking of God and that they are doing so in many different ways. Obviously there are many things that people have been talking about in different ways. Let us take for example the sun. Once the sun was thought to be a divine being. Others thought it was a hole in the sky through which the heavenly fire shined. Nowadays it is thought to be a kind of thermonuclear reactor. Despite all the differences these notions can be interpreted as different views of one and the same subject or referent – namely the sun. Most of these views are obviously false and at least one of them might come near the truth. It is likely to interpret the religious talk about God in just the same way. We then would have one referent and many different views or theories, some of them plainly false, others possibly true.

But this hardly works in the case of God-talk. If the predicates used to describe something differ too much it does not make much sense to presuppose that there is an identical referent. It might be argued that the notions of the sun – divine, hole in the sky, reactor – differ as much as the notions used in talking about God. But there is a decisive difference: In the case of the sun we at least can identify the referent by pointing at it; in the case of God we cannot. We cannot point at God and say: Look, this is the one "thing" all are talking

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about in all their many different ways. Gordon Kaufman rightly affirmed that we "are unable to check our concepts and images of God for accuracy and adequacy through direct confrontation with the reality *God*"[5].

Neither can we identify the referent of God-talk simply by definition, just because there is no agreement on what predicates have to apply to God or what predicates constitute Godliness: For some, "God" by definition means the creator of the universe, for others it does not. For some God is a bodiless spirit, for others the universe is God's body. For some God's existence is timeless and changeless, for others God changes in many ways. For some, God acts permanently in the world; for others he leaves the world to itself. For some, God literally appeared on earth as a human being in Jesus Christ; for others he appeared many times, in Krishna, Buddha and so on; others find all these stories to be mythological fictions or even blasphemous. For some intentional language is totally appropriate when talking about God, because God literally knows and wants and according to some even feels; others find such notions inadequate or even ridiculous. In the end two people do not necessarily contradict each other when one of them maintains that she believes in God and the other one denies that there is a God. This is a very peculiar and strange situation indeed. Usually this would bring any meaningful debate to an end.

So it seems that talking about God could mean really anything and searching for an adequate understanding of God is therefore futile. When "God" can mean nearly anything, nearly everything might render it true that there is a God – a heavenly father and creator of the universe or the awe-inspiring order and beauty of the universe or an ideal human relationship or practically whatever else you want. In a post-modern age this might seem a rather suitable perspective. But this also would bring the search for an adequate understanding of God to an end. Moreover it would also make the debate with naturalists on the existence of God a pretty useless affair. And finally it would hardly matter if there were a God or not. All these things require a shared concept of God. But obviously there is no such concept. There seems to be literally nothing everybody is talking about when talking about God. So in the end it seems that there is no such thing as God-talk at all. Keith Yandell has described religions as different solutions to different problems[6]. The same seems to count for concepts of the divine.

[5] Gordon D. Kaufman: Constructing the Concept of God, in: A.D.Steuer/J.W.McClendon (ed.), *Is God God* ?, Abingdon: Nashville 1981, p. 111.

[6] Keith E. Yandell: *Philosophy of Religion. A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge: London-New York 1999, p. 56

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However things are not quite as hopeless as it seems. Indeed, there may be no such "thing" that everybody is referring to when talking about God, but nevertheless there might be a certain rule or maxim they are following when doing so. After all, talk about God is primarily a religious practice. That means that there is an underlying religious interest. William Christian has identified religious interest as an interest in something that is more important than anything else in the universe[7]. According to Christian "being religious (just) means having an interest of this kind". Now let us suppose that "God" is taken to denote the object of such a genuinely religious interest. Then "God" denotes whatever is taken to be most important. Still "God" could mean anything, because anything actually might be most important to someone – "God" might mean money, power, fame, love or simply oneself.

I think this is the way God-talk actually works: To denote something as "God" or "divine" means basically to signify it as most important. But there is a difference between "actually working" and "working properly". Not everything that is working is working as it ought to work. Not everything that is assessed as most important really is most important. There is a well-known difference between God and idols. Idolatry means to worship something as most important that really is not most important and so does not deserve being worshipped at all. An idol does not justify a religious interest and so it does not deserve being called "God".

Only the *most* important thing really deserves to be called God. But still "most important" can be understood in two ways: "Most important" could refer to a being, just because contingently there is no more important one, although it would be logically possible that a more important being exists. "Most important" could also refer to a being that is of unsurpassable importance and value, a being "than which nothing greater can be conceived". This is Anselm of Canterbury's well-known *definition* of God. It isn't really a definition, because as such it does not say what greatness actually consists of. Anselm's formula is better considered as a maxim or rule saying: Never apply to God a property that could be surpassed in greatness and value. Always think of God as the most perfect being. This is the central idea of what today is called "perfect being theology"[8].

Although Anselm's maxim does not specify what single properties have to be applied to God, it is nevertheless important for three reasons: First it circumscribes the underlying rule of all God-talk. Thereby it makes it possible to conceptualise all God-talk as a coherent discourse despite the impression that there is no common

[7] Cf.. W.A. Christian: *Meaning and Truth in Religion*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 1964, p. 60.

[8] Cf. Thomas V. Morris: 'Perfect Being Theology', in: *Nous* 21 (1987) 19–30.

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entity all this talk is about. Secondly it not only describes, but also prescribes how this rule has to be applied properly. Anselm's maxim is to prohibit calling something God that is not maximally perfect. It does not deliver a concept of God, but it marks the foundations on which different concepts of God may be discussed in a non-arbitrary way. That is the first step towards a rational philosophical theology. And thirdly Anselm's maxim explains the immense diversity and change in the ways that God has been conceived. This change mainly has to do with changing intuitions and beliefs of what it means to be maximally good, important and valuable. Value intuitions do change. And with them the concepts of God change. There are times when they change rather slowly and imperceptibly, and there are times when they change rapidly and dramatically. In our times they seem to change pretty fast and that is one of the reasons why the concept of God is so disputed nowadays.

The next step is to ask whether there are further criteria that a certain concept of God has to meet. Of course every religious tradition has its own criteria, its own Holy Scriptures and authorities of interpretation, and a Christian concept of God has to comply with these exclusively Christian standards. Roughly the same applies to the Islamic, Jewish and Hindu concepts of God. I will call these kinds of criteria "internal", because their validity is confined to a certain religious tradition. Many Christians, especially those influenced by Karl Barth, are convinced that there are only such "internal" criteria. According to them loyalty to the biblical tradition and the doctrine of the church is not just the ultimate, but also the only criterion for any liable concept of God. The reason for the ultimacy of the biblical concept of God is the conviction that only God can reveal who God really is. Apart from a divine revelation there is no cognition of God, but only human superstition, which has arisen from sinfulness and deception. In the end we are confronted with the true knowledge of God revealed by God himself or herself on the one hand and many false ideas invented by humans on the other. I do not think this is a tenable approach. The Bible contains not just one consistent concept of God, but many varying ideas on what God is supposed to be, to do or to intend. Obviously these ideas were constructed by humans like any other ideas, and like all human ideas, they have to be judged and evaluated by certain standards. Let us call these other criteria "universal" criteria, because if there were such standards, they would apply to all of our beliefs, not only to the Christian or even religious beliefs. I think there really are such "universal" criteria that an adequate understanding of God has to meet.

(i) The first criterion has to do with logic, which means that a viable concept of God must be logically consistent and coherent.

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> Consistency means that not every perfection can be attributed to God without regarding possible contradictions. In brief: The divine properties must not contradict each other. Coherence means that in addition the concept of God must not contradict other beliefs concerning our understanding of the world and of ourselves. It is notoriously difficult to justify the validity of logic, especially in religious matters. It is easier to fathom what would happen if logical criteria did not apply to God-talk. So I will take the easier route.

Logical criteria are meant to guarantee that religious assertions are at least intelligible. There is no way to understand contradictory assertions. Moreover contradictory assertions would not be assertions at all. To affirm that a thing has some property p and to affirm that it does not have that property means to affirm nothing at all. Next, logical criteria guarantee that religious truth-claims are open to critique. Contradictions would make any critical dispute impossible. And finally logical criteria guarantee that religious assertions are capable of being true. Contradictory assertions are plainly false. At least that is what we suppose in our everyday discourse. And I can see no reason why we ought to change this policy when it comes to religious claims.

(ii) The second criterion maintains that religious assertions must have some kind of explanatory function. Religious assertions have to explain some phenomena, and that is why they are here in the first place. Kenneth Miller expressed the explanatory function in the following way:

> "Our Gods did magic. They did the work of nature, and they ruled the lives of man. They warmed us some days, and on others they made us shiver. They healed us when they wished, and other times they struck us down with sickness and death. Most of all, they filled a need that all men have, a need to see the world as sensible and complete. Gods filled the voids in nature we could not explain, and they made the world seem whole."[9]

Miller adds that this was the case until science began to explain most of the phenomena that previously used to be explained by religious beliefs. Little by little God became jobless and finally he "died". This is the story favoured by naturalists. I am afraid this story would be true if God were understood in a way that explained nothing. This surely would not refute belief in God. In the long run it simply would render this belief superfluous.

[9] Kenneth R. Miller: *Finding Darwin's God*, Harper Collins: New York 1999, p. 192.

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(iii) The third criterion has to do with the pragmatic consequences of belief. Concepts of God have to be evaluated by the way they contribute to a good and meaningful life. This is not a specifically religious concern. Nicholas Rescher has developed an approach called "methodological pragmatism". He emphasizes that our search for knowledge and understanding is not only motivated by purely "theoretical" aims, such as seeking for coherence or truth, but is also motivated by our struggle for "survival, welfare, and affective well-being"[10]. This means that knowledge claims must be evaluated insofar as they serve to realize certain values. Of course, it is debatable what values are at stake here, and of course, it is also debatable what a good and meaningful life actually consists of. Nevertheless if there is a certain stock of recognized values, what has to be examined is whether religious beliefs enable actualisation of these values or whether they prevent it. If they prevented it, then these beliefs would not be false or superfluous. In this case they would be shown to be what atheists from Ludwig Feuerbach to Bertrand Russell suspected them to be – harmful and dangerous. To rebut this critique an adequate understanding of God has to "mobilize our energies and intelligence" to combat evil tendencies in our lives – such as egocentric, ethnocentric and anthropocentric tendencies[11].

Let me now summarize what I have said so far. I have tried to show that there is a certain maxim underlying the religious talk of God. This maxim states that "God" basically means what is most important. Consequently only a being of maximal and unsurpassable perfection deserves to be called God. The next step would be to spell out what the notion of a maximal perfect being really means. Usually this is done in the context of a certain religious tradition. In my case it is the Christian or biblical tradition. But it also has to be done in a way that suffices those criteria that I called "universal".

In order to do this it has to be asked what properties are "great-making properties"[12]. This is a troublesome question because value intuitions differ enormously. This is one of the main reasons why there are so many differing concepts of God. Let us approach this problem by asking: What is the most valuable entity in the "great chain of being"? The only serious candidate I can think of is: persons. The Buddhist philosopher Keiji Nishitani has rightly affirmed that to

[10] Cf. Nicholas Rescher: *Methodological Pragmatism*, Basil Blackwell: Oxford 1977, pp. 24–25.

[11] Gordon D. Kaufman: *Constructing the Concept of God*, p. 130.

[12] Cf. Thomas V. Morris: *Our Idea of God*, University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame-London 1991, p. 35.

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think of humans as persons is doubtlessly the highest idea that up to now humans have conceived of themselves. And Nishitani added: The same applies to the idea of God as person[13].

The concept of person has a long and intricate history. By a person I mean a being with certain properties and faculties. Most important are their faculties of perception, self-consciousness and the recognition of the world around them, the power to influence the way things are and the faculty to decide deliberately and responsibly how to do so. What makes a being a person is exactly this combination of self-consciousness/knowledge, power and morality. This combination makes persons the most valuable entities in the universe. Persons are more valuable than inanimate matter, because matter can only be valuable in relation to sentient and conscious beings. Persons are also more valuable than sentient beings that are unable to act consciously and responsibly. If persons are the most valuable entity in the world, then God has to be described somehow as a person[14]. Nothing that is not a person could be more valuable than a person. This does not mean that God is just a person in the way humans are. The term is used analogically. This means: Using one and the same term in describing two distinct entities implies both similarities and dissimilarities. To understand the meaning of an analogy is to recognize the similarities. If there were none it would not be an analogy at all. To call God a person and to deny that there are any similarities between God and ordinary persons would not be an analogy, but just plain nonsense.

Now let us suppose that those properties and faculties that I just mentioned – knowledge, power and intention – are really essential for being a person. Then it follows that a perfect person has these properties and faculties in a perfect way. Therefore a perfect person would be omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect. Obviously these properties are implied by each other[15]. An omnipotent being by definition can know whatever it wants to know. And a being that knows everything will always act in a morally good way. Further it is very likely that such a person cannot be created by someone else. So it has to be conceived as uncreated. If such a being exists it exists necessarily. That means its existence depends on nothing else and has no beginning and no end. Such a being would therefore be the creator of everything else, either in a direct or indirect way. Finally such a being would be the adequate object of a religious interest and worship. In brief, there is a God if there is a maximally perfect person that means an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect,

[13] Cf. Keiji Nishitani: *Was ist Religion*?, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt [2]1986, 130.
[14] Cf. Thomas Aquinas: *Summa theologiae*, I, q.29, a.3.
[15] Cf. Richard Swinburne: *The Coherence of Theism*. Revised Edition, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1993.

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uncreated creator of the universe. Even if this is the outline for an adequate understanding of God there are many questions to be discussed within this outline: Does God act in the world, and if so how? What does creation mean? Is there any change in God?

But there are also many who doubt that this is the right outline at all. They criticize this concept of God as out-dated and false. Gordon Kaufman is a well-known spokesman for these critics. Kaufman has suggested understanding "God" not as a personal being, but rather as "a symbol for vital and humanizing powers". For Kaufman it is even "an error to reify God into an independent being"[16]. Do these critics have different value-intuitions? Do they regard other properties as great-making? Quite frankly I don't know, so I have to speculate on their reasons for objecting to this concept of God.

I guess part of the current conflict between different concepts of God is not only about different value-intuitions. Personal values seem to prevail on both sides. What is at stake is whether there is a divine person apart from human persons or whether God-talk ultimately amounts to talk about human persons and their ideals, values and relationships. There are strong tendencies to continue Feuerbach's programme of reducing theology into anthropology and there is a conviction underlying this tendency. Its proponents obviously do not believe that an independent personal God exists, and I think their reasons have to do with what I called "universal criteria". Some seem to doubt that this concept can be spelled out in a logically consistent and coherent manner. Others doubt that it is able to explain any phenomena that otherwise would be left unexplained. And others doubt that faith in such a God really promotes living a good and meaningful life. I think all these doubts have to be taken very seriously. In my view what those critics are doing is just being content with a second best concept of God, and humanity is the second best candidate if there is no other God. The central issue remains whether or not there is a solution to the problems just mentioned. I think there is, and so I will not be content with anything that is only a second best God.

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[16] Gordon D. Kaufman: *Constructing the Concept of God*, p. 137

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