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Does living Christianity support personhood theism?

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ABSTRACT

Personhood theism is the view that God exists and is a person. It is often claimed that, whatever conclusions might be reached abstractly by philosophers and theologians, Christianity as lived out practically embodies belief in personhood theism. In this article, I critically examine this claim and argue that Christian prayer and liturgical practice does not in fact embody this belief and that the claim that it does begs the questions against the non-personhood theist.

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In what follows, I will concentrate on personhood theism, the view that God exists and is a person. Conceptual elucidation of personhood theism will involve further unravelling of at least one of the concepts *God* and *person*.

There are two main ways of fleshing out a conception of God within the philosophical tradition of concern here: in terms of God in Godself or in terms of God's role with respect to creation. The first approach is exemplified in Perfect Being Theism (PBT). According to PBT, what it is to be God is to be a most perfect being (or a most perfect possible being); the PBTist philosopher on this basis typically proceeds to describe the attributes possession of which follows from divine perfection – the account is usually of an omni-God, prominent amongst whose attributes are omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence (Nagasawa, 2017; Morris, 1987). The second approach works not from God's intrinsic nature but from God's purported effects. Call this the God's effects view (GE). A philosopher taking a GE approach might take what it is to be God to be the reason why there is something rather than nothing (for example). She will typically go on to infer divine attributes from God's role in creation, as does Aquinas in the opening questions of the *Summa Theologiae* (STh, 1a, qq. 3–26) but because she does not take our competence with the concept *God* to involve a grasp on any intrinsic feature of God, she is perhaps more able to adopt a significant doctrine of divine ineffability than the PBTist (McCabe, 2005). We will see below that such a doctrine can cause problems for divine personhood.

It is the concept of *personhood* for which understanding is particularly important if we are to assess the claim that God is a person. At the time of the medieval flourishing of theologies in the Abrahamic traditions, the operative understanding of personhood was that supplied by Boethius: a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. Accordingly, talk of God as *a person* would have been unthinkable (subtleties around

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trinitarian theology notwithstanding) – reason is the form of intelligence proper to material beings (of whom God is not one) nor is God an individual substance, in virtue of the doctrine of divine simplicity, for to be an individual substance is to be one of a kind, whereas God lacks the differentiation between form and matter which this would involve. This ought to be kept in mind when assessing claims about the antiquity of personhood theism.

Of more moment in current debates is a conception of personhood going back to at least Locke and finding application in debates about the metaphysics of personal identity. In this view, one is a person if and only if one is immanently capable of possessing a mental state. The adjective ‘immanently’ here is intended to take account of sleep, if one thinks that those who are sleeping and not dreaming do not possess mental states, and perhaps of patients in reversible comas and so on.

This view might be thought more friendly to divine personhood, since talk of God’s desires, knowledge, anger, love, and so on is present in both scripture and present religious practice. Surely, God’s possession of mental states is required to make sense of this. Moreover, does not the fact that we address God in worship, or that God can be spoken of as responding to prayer imply that God is understood as possessing mental states, and so is a person? Arguments of this sort will detain us below.

If personhood theism is the doctrine that God is a person in the sense of possessing mental states, why would anyone reject it? From within religious traditions, one consideration is the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS). In the Aquinean context, this is taken to flow from reflection on God as the creator, the thought being that any coming together of distinct existences in God would stand in need of explanation, incompatibility with God’s being the only reason for the existence of things over and against nothing (STh 1a, q3, a7). This is not the place to assess DDS, but its apparent implications for personhood should be stressed. According to DDS God lacks any form of constitution. In particular, there is no mereological composition in God, no coming together of form and matter, and no distinction between potentiality and actuality or between existence and essence. God is therefore impassible and cannot be affected by or interact with creatures. Nor, it might further be argued, is it easy to see how God can stand in mental states if DDS is obtained.

Focusing on one important class of mental state provides a motive for dissenting from divine personhood. Amongst the mental states attributed to God within personhood theism are propositional attitude states: belief that, knowledge that, grief that, and so on. However, grasping of propositions is for us inseparable from possession of a language in which those propositions can find expression. Why should we suppose it could be otherwise? What would be the criteria according to which we could make that judgment? Now language is intrinsically social and practical; it is an activity engaged in by creatures relevantly similar to ourselves. God is no such creature, and we cannot take God to be a language user. To suppose otherwise would be to suppose that God *knows how* to do something, that God possesses an aptitude, has been initiated into some skill. But this is to think of God as too much like us (Hewitt, 2018). So we ought not to attribute propositional attitude states to God. So we should not take scriptural and traditional language attributing these states to God literally. But now if we do not take language about those states literally, why ought we to take language attributing *any* mental state to

God literally? Treating the cases uniformly, we conclude that God has no mental state, and therefore that God is not a person.

There is much that could be said to expand, and criticise, these brief arguments against divine personhood, and my purpose in presenting them here is not to win converts. The point is rather that the fortress of personhood theism is not impregnable, quite apart from the relatively recent nature of the language of divine personhood¹ and the presence of clearly non-person-based conceptions of deity outside Western religions and apophatic strands within those religions. Faced with a conglomeration of factors threatening to undermine personhood theism, one option to shore it up is to turn to religious life and thought, to show that the characteristic practices of the monotheistic faiths assume divine personhood, and on that basis that any attempt to explicate belief in God within these traditions, which does not deliver divine personhood must be inadequate. Our attention now turns to two versions of this project.

1. Worship

Brian Leftow writes about worship in the context of opposing naturalistic pantheism, where this is the view that God and the universe, understood naturalistically, are numerically identical (Leftow, 2016). Leftow maintains that anything playing the ‘God-role’ in our lives (and so, anything eligible to satisfy the concept *God*) must deserve worship. Something deserves worship only if:

- (1) It is *conceptually appropriate* to worship that entity. If I worship my coffee cup I have missed something about the nature of worship, since my coffee cup is not a fitting object of worship. Says Leftow: ‘At a minimum, to be conceptually appropriate for worship, an item must be able to be aware of us addressing it and to understand enough of our address for there to be a point to it, and be sufficiently superior to us in some way to deserve a worship-attitude.’ (Leftow, 2016, 71)
- (2) The entity is worthy of worship. The biblical God satisfies these criteria. Satan does not.

There is much to grumble about here. In particular, I would query the suggestion that *superiority* is part of conceptual appropriateness to worship: one is never just superior to something, one is superior in some respect. An espresso machine is superior to a filter as a coffee maker; Celtic is superior to Queen of the South as a football team. Are we to suppose that there are salient respects of comparison between God and creatures? Are we not then vulnerable to the lines of criticism against religion issuing from Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, and well expressed by Monty Python’s parody ‘Oh Lord, oooh you are so big. So absolutely huge. Gosh, we’re all really impressed down here I can tell you’(Python, 1983)?

But I will not develop these thoughts here. Rather, I want to look at the case for divine personhood implicit in Leftow’s attack on naturalistic pantheism. Leftow thinks, plausibly enough, that the impersonal naturalistic universe does not satisfy the criteria in (1) for being a conceptually appropriate object of worship. The universe cannot be ‘aware of my addressing it’ nor ‘understand’ my address. So much the worse for naturalistic

pantheism, thinks Leftow. Anything that fulfills the God-role is going to need to be *something like a person*, conscious and understanding. I say ‘something like a person’ because anticipating a reply to an objection along the lines that pantheists might personify an intrinsically non-personal universe, Leftow writes,

A pantheist might reply that theists, too, personify God, because God is not a person in any ordinary sense. They do so because otherwise it is very difficult to talk about Him. But then (pan- theists might say) are not I hoist with my own petard? I think not. If God is a person of an extraordinary sort, He is still a person. If He is not a person, still He is personal. Even the most anti-anthropomorphic theists, so long as they do not simply subside into negative-theological silence, admit that God knows, God wills, and God is good, in some legitimate sense of these terms: Even Aquinas’ theory of analogy tells us that these are really, literally true of God, though the way these properties are realized in God – the sense in which they are true of Him or what it is in God that satisfies these terms’ senses – is ultimately beyond us.’

This liberality is ill-advised in Leftow’s own terms, for in arguing against the naturalist pantheist initially, he has insisted that conceptually appropriate objects of worship must be ‘aware’. This is an application of mental-state talk, pushing us towards divine personhood, understood in a Lockean fashion. An attempt might be made to resist this conclusion by trying to present an account of how awareness might be attributed analogically to God, but since Leftow is elsewhere committed to divine personhood, I take it that he will be happy with understanding his argument from conceptual inappropriateness as an argument for divine personhood. It is on those terms that I will engage with it.

Why are only persons conceptually appropriate recipients of worship? Because, as we saw above, worship is being understood as *address*:

[W]orship is a form of address: when we worship, we say things to what we worship. We sing hymns to God; we pray to God; we declare to God our belief in Him. We do not intend this as some sort of psychological self-help, or for moral improvement. The point of the practice is for these words to be heard and understood.

Appeal is being made here to a human practice, worship, and in order to assess the strength of the appeal we will need to attend to the details of the practice. It is hazardous to pass judgment on the ‘point’ of some practice without evidence; indeed, why should there be a *point* to the practice of worship beyond the practice itself? In actual fact, in any case, there can be a point to addressing something which is not a person; consider Burns’ *Address to a Haggis*. Puddings are, however, impersonal, whereas the theistic opponent of divine personhood typically holds that God is neither a person nor impersonal (but rather that God is not the kind of thing of which personhood is predicated intelligibly),² so we should perhaps not draw too much on this or similar examples. We might, however, question whether it is always the case that prayer is not intended for ‘self-help’ or ‘moral improvement’. I myself was taught that prayer changes us, rather than God, and have entered into it on that basis.³

There are, in other words, many questions left open by Leftow’s declaration that worship is a form of address, intended to be understood by a person. It is certainly not a conceptual truth. I now want to suggest that it is not even a truth, that there are cases of worship that are not forms of address. Limiting ourselves to western Christianity, we might ask ourselves: is censing an altar a form of address?, what about hands being raised in a charismatic prayer meeting?, dancing during a pentecostal service?, the lighting of

a candle before an image of the Sacred Heart? Do these involve ‘words’ that might be ‘understood’? Obviously not, yet they are absolutely typical acts of worship. The temptation to ignore the wide array of bodily acts of worship (and of supplication, expression, contemplation . . . it is a mistake to think all liturgy and prayer is *worship*) in favour of addresses may have its roots in the assumption that liturgical actions are always a way of saying something that *could* be said in words: so the priest censuring an altar, for instance, is saying (perhaps on behalf of the community), ‘we value what happens here’, or ‘we worship Christ, of whom this is a symbol’. A good deal of popular apologetic material around ritual has taken this line. But this reduction of the meaning of prayer to that which could be communicated sententially is at best highly questionable, as is the suggestion that a given act of prayer must have some sententially expressible content. Think about other forms of human expression. Does a piece of music have to *say* something? Some philosophers think so, others do not. What about a kiss? It is haywire to think that what is going on when somebody kisses her wife is that she is saying ‘I love you’, albeit in a less verbal way. That is how we might interpret it to a child who observes two people kissing, but that is because the child does not yet inhabit the set of practices within which a romantic kiss makes sense. That the two people love each other might be a precondition for the kiss being honest (just as religious beliefs, or hopes, or fears might be preconditions for an honest prayer); it simply does not follow that the kiss is a way of saying ‘I love you’. More than that, it seems like the person who offers a sentential analysis of a kiss is missing something, that they have an impoverished grasp of humankind’s symbolic possibilities. We ought not to assume that a kiss admits any analysis, but yet it makes perfect sense to us in the proper context, just as it is. Just as kisses, so with censings.

It could be objected at this point that the recipients of romantic kisses are persons. This is, of course, true, but only helps the personhood theist to a very limited extent. Firstly, the example draws attention to an important feature of the uncontroversial satisfiers of our concept of personhood, namely that they are bodily. Similarly, the body is the principal means of human communication, not just in kissing, but in uttering, writing, and typing words. The suggestion that interactions of the same sorts we ordinarily call *addressings* can be present in the case in which one party is not corporeal needs to be shown. Secondly, we can shift the example, following Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, to somebody kissing a photo of her beloved (Wittgenstein, 1993). This, no more than the live kiss, requires a sentential interpretation, and the depicted person may not even be alive (and the kisser may not even know whether the person is alive) – yet it is a perfectly meaningful action. Ritual actions which are in no way addressings are part of everyday human life, need not have persons as their objects (or any object whatsoever), and this is apparent even before consideration of the particular case of religion.

‘But’, the personhood theist might contend, ‘I can allow that some, perhaps even a lot, of what goes on in Christian liturgy and prayer does not take the form of addressing God. It is just that some of it *does*, and on that basis, I claim that only the attribution of an implicit personhood theism to those engaged in prayer renders this intelligible’. Certainly, much Christian liturgy involves saying and singing things, which are directed towards God. But it ought to be striking how different from ordinary cases of talking to someone, let alone having a conversation, this is.

First, the register of language used in liturgy and in private prayer differs from ordinary speech, this is every bit as true of the spontaneous prayer at a charismatic meeting ('Lord we just exalt your name') as it is of the Roman Missal ('consubstantial with the Father'). Shift in register is often an indicator of a shift in locutionary force ('I confer on you the degree of bachelor of arts') or of the type of addressee ('You're a very cutey doggie, yes you are'). Collective worshippers speak or sing in chorus, in a manner rarely observed otherwise off of sports terraces, and the level of uniformity is greater even than then, with the use of ritual words unparalleled. This is simply not like talking to a person in our ordinary lives.

Nor is private prayer much like a personal conversation, however frequently the comparison may be made. Here, of course, I may use words exactly like those I would use talking to a friend. When talking to a friend, however, I have to say the words aloud, otherwise I may communicate with her by writing, or by sign language.

What I cannot do when talking to my friend is say the words 'to myself' in my internal monologue. By contrast, this is a form commonly taken by prayer to God. Still more marked is the difference between conversing with my friend and, what we might call, conversing with God. It is, in the usual course of things, entirely straightforward, and a matter of publicly accessible fact, whether my friend has replied to me, what she has said and which conversational moves this leaves open to me if I am to be a co-operative participant in the conversation. On the contrary, what we call 'hearing the voice of God' is typically a matter of careful discernment. As I have said elsewhere,

God's speaking to the praying person is not public; watching somebody in the act of prayer is sufficient to understand this. Hearing the 'voice' of God is, for the believer, an often painful introspective process, which involves distinguishing thoughts, desires, and impulses taken to come 'from God' from ones taken to be of no religious significance. To make these observations is in no way to undervalue prayer, but rather to recognise that it cannot be categorised as a series of exchanges within a community such that God could be identified as a discrete agent with a distinct sphere of influence. (Hewitt, 2018, 15)

God's speaking to us is an important image in many religious traditions, and it is not my purpose to undermine it. I am urging something like what Wittgenstein had in mind when he counselled returning words to their ordinary from their metaphysical use (Wittgenstein, 2009, 116). To understand what it *means* for God to speak we have to attend to the actual practice of prayer, and its place within the life and theology of religious communities. We cannot hastily make the inference from God speaking, or from us speaking to God for that matter, to the metaphysical claim that God is a person. And when we calm our haste and look at the lived reality of liturgy and prayer, what ought to strike us is how *different* these are from ordinary human exchanges.

The difference is reinforced when we consider Leftow's saying, of worship, that '[t]he point of the practice is for [these] words to be heard and understood'. We can assume safely that some kind of appeal to metaphor or analogy will be applied to an articulation of the intention that God *hear* our words; God is not an animal and does not have senses. What, however, about God's *understanding* those words? In passing, even in the case of ordinary human conversation, it seems wrong to say that a speaker's primary intention is that her words be *understood*. It is better to say that the hearer's understanding of the language, and therefore of an utterance, is presupposed, rather than intended, by

a conversational participant. Still, in the case of addressing one of our fellow human beings (in the normal run of things, as a co-operative participant in the conversation, speaking in a shared language) we take it that our utterances are understood. In fact, our practices of addressing do not make intelligible sense in the absence of the assumption that we are addressing *persons*. For it is persons who understand language.

Have not we finally arrived at a firm base in the life of prayer for belief in divine personhood? For surely our practices of prayer presuppose that God will understand them. On the contrary, this is far from obvious once we pay attention to the actual practice and doing so lights up another area of profound difference between praying to God and conversing with a human person. The person praying is not concerned that God will not understand her.

It does not matter in which language she speaks,⁴ whether she speaks aloud or ‘in her head’; she need not worry about speaking up to be heard, and she does not need to modify her register to aid comprehension. If God is a being that understands one’s prayer, why do we never do anything to facilitate that understanding? That is what we usually do; indeed, we come to understand what it is to understand through the successes and failures of our attempts at communication. The grammar of understanding has its place within situations in which communication might conceivably fail, in a material world that is both the condition of and a potential barrier to communication with other persons.

‘So what?’, the reply is likely to come back. The need to avoid misunderstanding in communication is a function of our usual conversations being with finite persons. God is an infinite person, omnipotent and omniscient, and cannot fail to understand us. It is surely right to say that it would seem out of place to say that God can *misunderstand* prayer but to infer from this that God understands prayer is to assume that one and one only of the pair (understands, misunderstands) must be applicable to God with respect to each act of prayer. However, this overlooks the possibility that to say either that God understands or that God misunderstands is a category mistake, a failure to recognise that God is not amongst the objects on which understanding might be intelligibly predicated. Internal to the Christian tradition itself is the conviction that ‘your Father knows what you need before you ask him’:⁵ whatever I am doing when I pray I am not informing God of facts about the world and its needs of which he was previously ignorant: ‘your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things’ says Matthew’s Jesus, contrasting what he holds to be the proper attitude towards prayer with that of the Gentiles, who strive, for food, drink, and clothing.⁶ Does not this mean that God, as presupposed in the practice of Christian prayer, is indeed a person, since in order to be a knowing subject one must be a person?

It certainly is important to the practice of petitionary prayer that God is taken to know intimately our needs and desires, but it is not obviously important that what we call knowing in God is *propositional* (and so the kind of state which is definitive of personhood). God’s knowledge of creatures is described in key scriptural passages in terms not easily suited to a propositional reading, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.’⁷ Here and elsewhere God’s knowledge is presented as more like the knowledge a craftsperson has of their work than of a knowledge of facts about the world.⁸ ‘God’, writes Herbert McCabe, ‘is not well-informed’. Aquinas takes God’s knowledge to not involve ‘composition and division’ in the way that the knowledge of creatures such as our selves, possessing discursive

rationality does of necessity. God instead knows all things through knowing himself, and thereby things other than himself as their creator. For God to know φ for any φ concerning creatures just is for God to create the world such that φ ; the knowing just is the

creating.⁹ So God knows our needs and desires, not by entertaining propositions about them but by creating them. Make of this what you will, it is a classical account of divine knowledge, rooted in Christian practice, and does not deliver what the personhood theist needs at this point. The role of God's knowledge in the practice and understanding of prayer does not require that God have propositional attitudes.

There are, in any case, clear problems with talk of God *understanding* us. To be in a position to understand a speaker is, at least,¹⁰ to possess an aptitude, and in particular one which involves initiation into a social practice. It is far from clear what it could be for God to be skilled at something, God can presumably not *learn* a skill, and the suggestion that God has an ability commits one to there being potentiality in God, something that Christian theology has classically rejected. Even more peculiar is the thought that God is a member of a linguistic community, indeed of *our* linguistic community, for it is *us* whom God is supposed to understand. Membership of this community is rooted in our animal life: it involves making sounds, hearing them, attention to gestures in particular circumstances, recognition of those circumstances themselves. It is a category mistake to speak of God as engaging in these activities. Moreover, it is a category mistake of religious significance to speak of God as a member of a community with creatures such as ourselves, one amongst others, in the way that would be required for membership of a linguistic community. 'You thought I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.'¹¹

2. Belief in a person?

If the ordinary run of Christian practices do not provide obvious support for the claim that Christianity is, at least implicitly, committed to divine personhood, what about Christian *belief*? At the beginning of his *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga makes a broadside against apophatic theology (Plantinga, 2000). His target will strike those of us with more historical or ecumenical perspectives than Plantinga's as severely limited, consisting as it does of the work of Kant, Kaufman, and Hick. Still, the apophaticisms of pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, Aquinas, or Teresa of Avila, for example, would fall squarely within the remit of Plantinga's condemnation, as would any view that denies divine personhood. Sam Lebens has done a good job of laying out Plantinga's reasons for objecting to apophaticism (Lebens, 2014). Of interest to us here will be Plantinga's insistence that apophaticism, and *inter alia*, rejecting divine personhood involves us in, what Lebens terms, *reductive revisionism*, reinterpreting the religious language of ordinary believers in a way that robs it of religious interest. According to Plantinga,

This is not a matter of pouring new wine into old wineskins: what we have here is nothing like the rich, powerful, fragrant wine of the great Christian truths; what we have is something wholly drab, trivial and insipid. It is not even a matter of throwing out the baby with the bathwater; it is instead, throwing out the baby and keeping the tepid bathwater; at best a bland, unappetizing potion that is neither hot nor cold and at worst a nauseating brew, fit for neither man nor beast. (Plantinga, 2000, 42)

What is the problem supposed to be? Take characteristic Christian claims: that God creates, that God the Son became incarnate as Jesus, that God saves God's creatures and brings us to share in the divine life, that God called his ancient people, and attends to the prayers of us today. Let us take it to be common ground amongst philosophers and theologians that we ought not to seek to revise these claims in the following sense: they have a proper place in liturgy and devotion and in the ordinary everyday way in which believers talk about their faith. This rules a good number of revisionist theologies out of consideration. For us, however, the Christian is saying what she ought to when she says, for instance, 'God has called me to new life in Christ'. But, according to Plantinga, the apophatic theologian is being duplicitous in her acceptance of this language, since she *re-interprets* the believer's utterance, assigning to it a meaning very different from its natural one. After all, it is *persons* whom we usually speak of as calling one another.

Seductive though this line of argument is, it is entirely question-begging. Plantinga is simply taking the non-apophatic interpretation of religious language to be correct as an account of everyday religious usage. Were this not the case, he would be unjustified in taking apophatic interpretations as *revisionary*. But then it is incumbent upon the person running Plantinga's line of argument to *show* that a non-apophatic (for our purposes a personhood theistic) account of everyday religious language is the correct one. This can only be done by attending to actual usage, not on armchair appeals to the simple folk faithful, who say what they mean and mean what they say, unperturbed by revisionist philosophers.

What is correct is that we religious folk do not on a day by day basis make *any* metaphysical claims about God. It is a rare homily that tells us that God is (or is not) a person, or that religious expressions latch on to divine reality in such-and-such a way. How then are we to tell whether or not ordinary religious talk, 'God has called me to life in Christ', for instance, has a meaning consonant with apophaticism (which would presumably involve 'to call' functioning non-literally)? We can attend to the way the expression is used, how it functions within religious life, and the inferential transitions it is taken to license. Are there significant differences between this and ordinary calling talk? Obviously, yes. So we should not take the religious use and the ordinary use to agree in meaning. A number of further questions remain, crucially whether the religious use of 'call' ought to be interpreted as analogical, in the thomist sense, so that the believer's utterance is a candidate for truth, or whether the correct interpretation is as metaphorical, in which case the religious value of the utterance must consist in something other than its truth. Exactly the same considerations play out in the case of credal affirmations – when we say, for example, that God made the world, we mean something quite unlike what we mean when we talk about ordinary makings; the former are agential transformations of matter, the latter is a bringing to be *ex nihilo*. And again the same considerations play out when considering biblical narrative, including stories in which God is presented as a being undergoing emotional states, with the additional consideration that a critical understanding of the text is needed. It is clear from all of this than Plantinga's presupposition that ordinary religious language ought to be interpreted in a manner favourable to the personhood theist at best stands in need of more support.

A yet stronger case may be made against ordinary Christian language entailing personhood theism. On the supposition that God is a person, common Christian assertions look problematic. 'Jesus is both truly God and truly a human being': are not we then

forced either into admitting two personal realities in Christ (since every human being is a person), which is Nestorianism, or else saying that the divine person displaced (how is unclear)¹² the human person that would otherwise have been there, which is Apollinarianism? Abandon personhood theism and these problems dissolve, as, given a sufficient general apophaticism, do worries about the coherence of claiming that one and the same person is both human and God (McCabe, 1977). Similarly, ‘God is three persons (*personae*, *hypostases*) in one substance’ encounters no small amount of difficulties in the context of personhood theism: is there one divine person who is somehow manifest in three persons, what could this even mean?¹³ Alternatively, is God simply three persons; and why is that not tritheism? Then again, think about ‘God is good’. If God is a person, then the kind of goodness God possesses is the kind of goodness appropriate to persons, moral goodness (Swinburne, 2016, Ch. 11), and the problem of evil gets off the ground (Davies, 2006). Not only then do *contra* Plantinga, ordinary Christian professions of belief not require interpretation in terms of personhood theism, but the attempt to so interpret them gives rise to philosophical difficulties not obviously latent in the ordinary professions.

We would do well to attend more to lived religious practice when philosophising about religion. In particular, when philosophising about *Christianity*, we need to pay attention to Christian practice in its diversity and depth. This is both a desirable end in itself and a necessary prerequisite to the proper investigation of issues around the meaning of religious language, such as those we have encountered in engaging with Leftow and Plantinga. Absent such engagement, proponents of personhood theism still have work to do in making even a *prima facie* case for their position. An alternative, under-explored at the moment, is to investigate the possibilities for a non-personhood theism.

Notes

1. Brian Davies remarks that the first English occurrence of ‘God is a person’ was in the 1644 report of the heresy trial of John Biddle (Davies, 2016, 65).
2. On this, see McCabe (McCabe, 2005, 8–9).
3. Compare here Aquinas at STh Iii, q83, a2, ad 2.
4. I mean here that we are never worried that we might speak in a language God will not understand. The language of prayer might be of profound religious significance in other ways: think about the use of a local language in a context in which it is banned, or the people in question oppressed, or the use of Latin to express the extension of the Church across time and space.
5. Matthew 6:8.
6. Matthew 7:32
7. Jeremiah 1:5
8. Is not a craftsman a person? Well, yes, but there is no claim here that we do not use personal images about God – that is obviously deeply rooted in religious practice. My target is the specific claim that we talk of God in ways that are only intelligible if we believe God to stand in propositional attitude states.
9. STh 1a, q14,
10. Whether or not linguistic competence is *simply* a matter of aptitude possession is contentious.
11. Psalm 50:21

12. I think that in order to make this kind of christology even superficially attractive, some form of substance dualism is needed.
13. I see Leftow's Latin Trinitarianism as approximating this position [Leftow, 2004].

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