# ?Is God A Person

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The most striking difference between Christian and Muslim theologies is that while, for Christians, God is a person, Muslims worship an impersonal deity. Despite the importance of this difference for a host of theological issues, it is a difference which has gone largely unnoticed by Christians and Muslims alike. Yet Christians everywhere will affirm that God is a person, while the average Muslim will readily deny this. Theism is often defined by philosophers of religion who work in the Christian tradition in such a manner as to require the belief that God is a person. Thus, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy has it that, 'THEISM signifies belief in one God (Theos) who is

(a) personal,

(b) worthy of adoration, and

(c) separate from the world but

(d) continuously active in it '.1

John H. Hick admits that, ' Theism ...is strictly belief in a deity, but is generally used to mean belief in a personal deity '.2 Richard Swinburne states that a theist is one who believes that there is a God who is a ' person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe ',3 and J. L. Mackie, while arguing the case of atheism, endorses Swinburne's definition of theism.4

Both theists and atheists in the Christian tradition agree that theism commits one to the view that God is a person of some sort, but there is no corresponding unanimity among Muslim theologians and philosophers in the claim that God is not a person. There have been Muslim theologians who have held that God quite literally sits upon his throne in heaven. Nevertheless, within the fold of Islam (at least among theologians), belief in a personal God is a minority position. The theological and philosophical groundwork for the Muslim claim that God is not a person is found in both Sunni and Shi'ite sources; however, in this paper I will concentrate on Shi'ite views on this issue.

This paper consists of two parts in which some arguments for and against the view that God is a person are summarized, and the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments are

evaluated. None of these arguments will be defended as conclusive. However, it is my hope that this exposition of both impersonal and personal views of the deity will provide a groundwork for future dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Before the arguments are presented it may be useful to mention an important distinction, that is the distinction between the claim that

(1) God is a person, and the claim that

(2) God is personal.

Some who accept (2) would deny (1) on the grounds that, since there are three persons of God, God is not a person. The indefinite article is taken by such theologians to indicate a singularity incompatible with the trinitarian doctrine. Also, (2) is sometimes understood in a weak sense, to mean merely that personal, rather than impersonal, pronouns are applicable to God, and that other predicates applicable to persons are attributable to God, e.g. he is all-knowing, all-wise, he is aware, he is all merciful.

No one in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition (sometimes called the Abrahamic tradition (1) would deny (2) in this weak sense. What is at issue is whether or not the metaphysical category of person is in some sense attributable to God.

Both (1) and (2) will be understood to assert this stronger claim. The indefinite article in (1) will be taken to mean ' at least one ', and (2) will be understood to be an assertion about the nature .of God, and not merely as a claim about scriptural language

## Arguments For The Claim That God Is A Person .1

Although the claim that God is a person is usually assumed rather than defended by argument, four major arguments may be constructed which seem to reflect Christian thinking on this topic. The first of these is an argument stemming from belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Secondly, one may argue that scriptural language presupposes a personal God. Thirdly, one might claim that an adequate account of revelation requires that God be viewed as a person. The fourth argument that may be advanced asserts that worship and prayer are only appropriately directed toward a personal God. These arguments will be presented in succession and evaluated.

The word 'person' derives from the Latin 'persona' which was the term for the mask worn by actors in dramatic performances. The Greek equivalent was used in somewhat this sense by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) who described Christ as the divine substance which assumed the human mask, , prosopon being the mask worn by Greek actors.

Thus, the concept of a person was associated with Christ from as early as the second century. It is one thing to claim that Christ is the persona of God, and quite another to assert that God himself is a person. This latter doctrine was explicitly formulated only in nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology.5 The doctrine of the personal God was made popular in twentieth-century Christian theological circles due to the influence of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (1878-1965), and the American personalist, Edgar Sheffield Brightman (1884-1953). The most extreme form of the doctrine was that advanced by Brightman who held that God is limited by conditions within his nature which are neither created nor approved by his will, and that God maintains a constant and growing control over these conditions. Brightman's teaching, that person is the ontological ultimate, has had a strong influence on theologians such as Maritain, Gilson, and Mounier. Not all of the theologians who have been influenced by the personalists have accepted the extreme views of Brightman. The view that God is a person has nevertheless become extremely widespread among contemporary Christian theologians. No standard definition of 'person' has been adopted since that of Boethius, according to which a person is an individual substance of rational nature. Among different philosophers and theologians, different aspects of person hood have been emphasized, e.g. mind, self-consciousness, will. The ascription of such attributes to persons is by no means inconsistent with the Boethian definition. Depending upon one's theory of what it means to have a rational nature, such attributes may even be implied by the Boethian definition.

In the Christian setting, the move from the recognition of the person of Christ to the view that God is a person can be established by the following syllogism

(3) Jesus is a person.

(4) Jesus is God.

(5) God is a person.

The validity of the above argument depends upon the assumption that the second premise is an identity claim, and this assumption might be challenged even by Christians. While there is no hesitation among Christians in their acceptance of (4), there is room for doubt regarding the following

(6) God is Jesus.

The equivalence of (4) and (6) is needed for the derivation of (5), and it is not clear that all those who accept the doctrine of the trinity will accept this equivalence. According to one possible reading of trinitarian doctrine, God is one substance which is manifest in three persons.6 Because Jesus is a member of the trinity, (4) is true. However, since the trinity

includes persons other than Jesus, (6) is to be rejected.

On the other hand, the equivalence of (4) and (6) might be maintained by arguing that these statements assert the identity of the substance named by ‘Jesus’ with the substance named by ‘God’. Since there is only one being which is named by the term ' God ' and only one being named by ‘Jesus’, (4) is an identity claim.

Even if (4) is taken as an identity claim, the validity of the argument may be questioned. It is not clear that the following argument form is valid

(7) Jesus is _____

(8) Jesus is God.

(9) God is _____

Does this argument form enable us to infer the mortality of God from the mortality of Jesus If it does, how is this to be reconciled with claims of the immortality of God Perhaps it could be argued that hu man mortality is consistent with divine immortality, and that human weakness is compatible with divine omnipotence, etc. Thus, one might hold that since Jesus is mortal and is God, that God is mortal. God is mortal in one sense and in another sense, God is not mortal. The term ‘mortal’ is equivocal here. In this way, any attempt to use the above argument form to derive a claim based on the limited nature of Jesus as a human being which was inconsistent with the divine attributes could be met with the charge of equivocation. (To be more precise, the charge would not be that the terms were completely equivocal, but that they were analogical. In any case, it is the denial of univocacy which is important here.)

Whether or not this response would prove satisfactory, some such attempt should be made by the Christian to defend the above argument form, for it is important for the Christian to claim that by studying the character of Jesus, we learn about the nature of God. Thus, from the kindness of Jesus, we learn that God is kind. God reveals his kind ness through Jesus. The problem is to find some way to determine which attributes of Jesus reveal to us something about the nature of God, and which attributes of Jesus pertain only to this person of God. If we charge that the mortality of Jesus is compatible with the immortality of God, how can we deny the possibility that the kindness of Jesus is compatible with divine malevolence

The question is merely academic with regard to kindness and malevolence, for we may claim to know, independently of Christ's revelation, that God is good. Consider the proposition under examination, that God is a person. Is being a person the kind of predicate whose true application to Jesus implies an analogical application to God, or should we claim that the fact that God is a person in his hu man manifestation is compatible with his existence as an impersonal deity

Nothing will be won with the claim that only the moral attributes of Jesus may be applied to God, and that these are to be applied only by analogy.

This tactic will not solve our problem, for all it does is to ensure that God has the moral perfections of Jesus in an infinite degree. But the question with which we are faced is not with respect to the good ness of God, but with respect to the metaphysical issue of whether or not God is a person. It is by no means obvious that the property of being a person is a perfection, and not an imperfection. One might argue that to be a person is to have a kind of perfection. To be a person is to be superior to the animals. To be a person is thus to have a kind of perfection, and so God has this kind of perfection in an infinite degree. This argument fails because it is disputable whether entities which are superior to persons should still be termed persons, even if it is granted that to be a person is to be superior to other earthly creatures. To be a mammal is to be superior to earthly creatures which are not mammals, but this does not mean that mammality is a perfection which may be ascribed to God by analogy.

Aquinas argues that personhood is a kind of perfection since being a person connotes dignity.7 But the claim that God is a person cannot be supported merely by reference to the dignity of persons. The problem is that dignity may be separately ascribed to God without claiming that God is a person. The simple connotation of perfection does not entail that the term with such a connotation designates a perfection, for it is consistent that one of the attributes connoted by a term may be a perfection and another a limitation. For example, 'muscular' connotes power, yet we do not say that God is muscular, since this would not only imply that God has power, but that he is corporeal. So, even if it is granted that 'person' connotes dignity, which is a perfection, this by itself does not establish that person is a perfection.

Our conclusion must be that argument (3)-(5) is of questionable worth in the attempt to demonstrate that God is a person. Even those who accept the premises of this argument may have doubts as to its validity. In any case, the argument calls for serious attention. Given the reading of (8) as an identity claim, it is difficult to see how the validity of the argument form (7 )-(9) can be denied, but given the validity of this argument form, an account is needed by which the apparent incompatibility of human and divine attributes may be resolved.

The second argument which will be presented for the claim that God is a person does not depend upon the assumption of the divinity of Christ. The argument is that scriptural statements pertaining to God presuppose that he is a person. This position is succinctly stated by John H. Hick.

The conviction that God is personal, He rather than It, has always been plainly implied both in

the biblical writings and in later Jewish and Christian devotional and theological literature. In the Old Testament God speaks in personal terms (for example, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob') and the prophets and psalmists address him in personal terms (for example, 'Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer.'). In the New Testament the same conviction as to the personal character of God is embodied in the figure of fatherhood that was constantly used by Jesus as the most adequate earthly image with which to think of God.8

This argument is especially appealing to contemporary philosophers who are keenly sensitive to the presuppositions of linguistic usage. The kind of attributes which are ascribed to God in scripture are applicable only to persons, it is claimed, and thus God is viewed as a person by those who accept the truth of scripture.

The trouble with this line of argument is that it could also be used to support an anthropomorphic view of God which is clearly and explicitly rejected by the orthodox. Consider the following two arguments

(10) All fathers are persons.

(11) God is a father.

(12) God is a person.

(13) All fathers have bodies.

(14) God is a father.

(15) God has a body.

Hick would endorse the first argument but not the second, yet the language of scripture is corporeal just as much as it is personal. Those who would argue that God is a person because of the nature of scriptural language must come up with some way of blocking the argument from scriptural language to anthropomorphism. This difficulty is exploited by Kai Nielson, who argues that unless scriptural language is understood rather literally, it is un intelligible, and that since religious people do not take religious claims literally, they do not really understand what they are talking about!

It may well be that when the engine isn't idling, when people are praying or worshipping, their childhood pictorial images of God as a material being unwittingly reassert themselves and, in that way, 'loving' comes to have an application when applied to God. But to reflective religious consciousness, He is 'Pure Spirit', and 'disembodied mind', but then, given their use of 'God' as 'Pure Spirit', we cannot understand what it would be for such a being to act and thus to be loving, merciful or just, for these predicates apply to things that a person does. But we have no understanding of ' a person 'without' a body' and it is only persons that in the last analysis can

act or do things. We have no understanding of ‘disembodied action’ or ‘bodiless doing’ and thus no understanding of ‘a loving but bodiless being’.9

Those who would argue with Hick that God is a person because scriptural language seems to indicate this must block the sort of attack on theism advanced by Nielson. If it is claimed that religious language is not to be interpreted literally, and that argument (I3)-(I5) may thus be countered, then argument (10)-(12) can no longer be used to establish that God is a person. It will be claimed that the scriptural statemen t that God is our Father is symbolic, and so cannot be taken to imply that God has all of the attributes which could be applied to fathers outside the scriptural context. But once this is ad mitted one can no longer argue that our acceptance of scripture commits us to the view that God is a person.

By referring to Jewish as well as to Christian scriptures, Hick attempts to support the claim that the view that God is a person is implicit in Judaism and is thus independent of the doctrine of the incarnation. However, the classical solution in Jewish theology to the problem of anthropomorphic scriptural statements, as enunciated by Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), would require not only a denial that God has a body, but a denial that God is a person as well. According to Maimonides God is absolutely transcendent and unknowable. There is not the faintest resemblance between him and his creatures. Maimonides explains that the anthropomorphic language of scripture is necessary for it is only by the use of such language that the masses of people would be able to believe that God exists. When we say that God is just, this does not mean that God has the same attribute which we ascribe to just persons, but that God is not unjust and that he is the cause of all justice.10

Interpretations of scriptural statements which avoid commitment to anthropomorphism were common among Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians of the Middle Ages. This is not the place to examine the differences in the various positions which have been taken with regard to the interpretation of religious language. The point is simply that any account of religious language sufficiently subtle to provide a response to the charge of anthropomorphism will be sufficient to rebut the argument that the use of religious language commits us to the existence of a personal God.

The third argument which will be considered in support of the claim that God is a person makes reference to the phenomenon of revelation. Revelation, according to many contemporary theologians, is God's communication to man. Communication is the exchange of information from one person to another. So, if God communicates, he must be a person. The same objections which were brought against the second argument could be used to refute this one. Nevertheless, this argument deserves special attention because of the importance of the

notion of revelation as God's communication for many contemporary theologians. We can pose the argument from revelation in the following way

(16) Only persons communicate.

(17) Revelation is a kind of communication between God and man.

(18) God is a person.

The validity of this argument is not in question. Those who accept God's revelation as a kind of communication yet deny that God is a person must reject (16). This is precisely the line taken by Muslim theologians. The problem is to explain how communication can take place when at least one of the parties communicating is not a person.

The entire tradition of Muslim theology begins with controversy concerning the nature of divine revelation, the speech of God. This is why the expression for theology in the Muslim world is 'ilm al kalam, whose literal translation is, ‘the science of the speech’.11 Several key points in the theology of the late Shi'ite philosopher, Allamah Tabataba'i, may shed some light on our problem.

Tabataba'i goes to some trouble to distance himself from those Muslim theologians who have held that because everything leads back to God, the entire universe is the speech of God. Tabataba'i rejects this view because it would mean that any claim that God communicates to his prophets would have to be interpreted as mere allegory. On the contrary, Tabataba'i maintains that God's speech is real communication. Divine revelation is real communication because it is directed to specific individuals, and because through revelation a message is conveyed. However, when it is said that God communicates his message to the prophets, this does not mean that he has thoughts which are conveyed from one person to another. Tabataba'i writes that God is too great to be said to have a ' self ' or ' mind ' with which he might have ideas. When God is said to communicate with a man, this means that he creates something which gives that man an inner knowledge of a message.

. . . [I]t becomes clear that the laws which can guarantee the happiness of human society cannot be perceived by reason. Since according to the thesis of general guidance running throughout creation the existence of an awareness of these laws in the human species is necessary, there must be another power of apprehension within the human species which enables man to understand the real duties of life and which places this knowledge within the reach of everyone. This consciousness and power of perception, which is other than reason and sense, is called the prophetic consciousness, or the consciousness of revelation.12

Tabataba'i claims that although we u the term ' communication ' to signify the exchange of ideas between human beings, the term can be used to describe revelation because the effect

or function is the same, i.e. a message is obtained. I n like manner, we use the term ' lamp ' to describe an electric light, even though it has none of the elements of the lamps to which the term was first applied, simply because the function is the same. Thus, revelation may be considered in a real sense to be God's communication to man, although this communication does not originate from a mind or person.13

Whether or not we accept Tabataba'i's theology, he shows us that one may consistently hold that revelation is divine communication without committing oneself to the view that God is a person.

The final argument which will be considered in favour of the view that God is a person is that the personality of God is a condition for the appropriateness of worship and supplication. Karl Rahner, for example, uses a form of this argument against those who would claim that while God appears as a person to us, he is not intrinsically a person. Rahner argues that if we say that God is a person 'in relation to us ', but not ' in his own self ', he would not be able to ' enter into that personal relationship to us which we presuppose in our religious activity, in prayer, and in our turning to God in faith, hope and love '.14

There is a danger of question-begging in this argument. One might say, ‘In my religious life I assume that God has attribute X, hence to deny that God has attribute X is to undermine completely my religious experience’. This is unwarranted. As my views of God become less naive, the attitudes and assumptions which I bring to my religious practice may be expected to change, but this may be seen as a matter of growth, and not necessarily one of abnegation. While Rahner sees an ' empty nothingness ' as the only alternative to a personal God, it should be clear that there are other possibilities.

The argument that prayer and worship presuppose a personal God is more cautiously articulated by Frederick Copleston.

. . . [W]hen we say that God is personal, we really mean that He is not less than what we experience as personality, in the sense that the perfection of personality must be in Him in the only manner in which it can be in an infinite Being ...That there is a positive content of some sort to our idea of divine personality is shown by the fact that the meaning in the statement ' God is super-personal ' (i.e. more than that which we directly experience as personality) is different from the meaning in the statement 'God is not personal ' (i.e. in any sense, just as a stone is not personal) . If we had reason to believe that God were not personal, we should see the uselessness of worship and prayer; but the statement that God is personal suggests immediately that worship and prayer are in place, even though we have no adequate idea of what the divine personality is in itself.15

Although Copleston's argument is more sophisticated than Rahner's, it also rests on a false dichotomy. It claims that God is either a person or is not a person in the way that a stone is not a person. A similar argument could be made for the claim that God is a fish. Either God is super-fish, i.e. more than that which we experience as fish, or he is not fish, i.e. just as a stone is not a fish. God is not a fish in any sense. He is not even a super-fish. But this is not because he is less than a fish, but because fishiness is a limitation by which God is unconstrained. Likewise, one might argue that God is not a person, not because he is, like a stone, less than a person, but because to be a person in any sense is to be limited. While worship and prayer would not be appropriately directed toward something which was not a person like a stone is not a person, i.e. not a person because less than a person, would it be inappropriate to direct our worship and prayer toward something which is not a person because it belongs to a higher category than that of persons This question is adroitly taken up by John Laird in his Mind and Deity.

As Luther said in his Great Catechism ‘A God is that whereto we are to look for all good and to take refuge in all distress; so that to have a God is to trust and believe him from the whole heart.’ Is it credible, we may ask, that such things should be believed of God if reality were impersonally constituted

I would suggest, although with great diffidence, that it is not incredible. If man's environment did perform and would continue to perform these services, hope and confidence as well as acquiescence might be directed towards it. The environment would be dependable and, in that sense, trustworthy. It might be reverenced, admired, extolled and even worshipped. Affection might be felt for it as well as trust. It might be loved unless, in the English way, we restrict the term 'love ' to the sort of feeling that can only be felt for another person...

…The objector says that reverence, affection and admiration, except of a tepid and watery kind, could not be felt for physical nature, unless by inadvertence or mere illusion. Suppose that this statement is substantially true. We have still to remember that a spiritual community, i.e. a spiritual unity that need not itself be a self or a person, may and does inspire such feelings. Consider the possibility that the Holy Spirit, understood impersonally, is the principle agent in the Christian life. Consider the possibility that human history, despite so much in the past and despite nearly all in the present, is the gradual achievement of a heavenly republic, and is not a passing episode on the surface of a precarious planet. Such theories are impersonal but theistic. What right has anyone to say that they are quite absurd

...There is no reason for assuming that the impersonal must be sub-personal.16

In short, prayer and worship are not incompatible with belief in an impersonal deity, provided

.that the impersonal is not equated with that which is less than a person

## Arguments For The Claim That God Is Not A Person .2

Although the arguments for the negative position, that God is not a person, will be taken from Muslim theology, not all of these arguments will be unfamiliar to the student of Christian theology, since both Christians and Muslims used arguments similar to these du ring the middle ages. It has often been remarked that theology strives for a balance between the belief that God is immanent and the belief that he is transcendent. Muslim and Christian theologians differ on how to strike the balance. For the Christian, although God is transcendent, he became man, and can be understood through this incarnation; and although God is immanent, the primary manifestation of his presence in the world is through the divinity of Jesus.17 Both the transcendence and the immanence of God are understood more radically than this in the Muslim view, according to which, because of God 's transcendence, he cannot be called a person, not even analogically. In brief, the Muslim argument against the personality of God is that personality is a limiting factor and is therefore incompatible with the infinite nature of God.

God transcends such concepts as ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, ‘self ‘, and ‘person’.

The Muslim denial that God is a person is not, however, a denial that God is immanent, and where the immanency of God is emphasized in Muslim though t, it is done so in a way that is appropriate to an impersonal view of God. This point is recognized by Webb, who expresses his own reservations about whether Muslims should be said to worship a personal God on the grounds that

…Personality is not expressly reckoned among [God's] attributes and that, when the Moslem aspires after a more intimate kind of piety than his canonical scriptures suggest, he seems to pass at once to a pantheistic mysticism wherein the personal distinction between the devotee and his God tends to disappear altogether.18

Although the charge of pantheism has been vigorously denied by such an eminent Muslim scholar as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the point that the object of worship and contemplation in Islamic mysticism is not experienced as a personal being stands.

The central doctrine concerning the ultimate nature of reality has usually been called wahdat al-wujud or the (transcendent) unity of Being. This cardinal doctrine, which is not pantheism, not pan-entheism nor natural mysticism as Western orientalists have called it, …asserts that there cannot be two completely independent orders of reality or being which would be sheer polytheism or shirk… Through that mystery that lies in the heart of creation itself, everything is, in essence, identified with God while God infinitely transcends everything. To understand this

doctrine intellectually is to possess contemplative intelligence; to realize it fully is to be a saint who alone sees 'God everywhere'.19

There is reason to describe the God worshipped by the Muslims as an impersonal deity, whether the deity is considered to be immanent or transcendent. From a Muslim perspective, the position that God is a person may be attacked by showing that this is incompatible with the transcendent nature of God, or by showing that this is incompatible with God's all pervasive immanence.

One of the earliest arguments in favour of God's extreme transcendence was made by the son-in-law of Muhammad, Ali.

The first act of worshipping God is to know Him. The basis of knowledge of Him lies in (the acknowledgement of) His Unity. The support for (the acknowledgement of) His Unity is the denial of any comparison of Him, the High, (with man) in terms of stating that human qualities (sifat) subsist in Him. (This is) because of the testimony of reason that everyone in whom human qualities subsist is created (mansu). Whereas the testimony of reason (requires) that He, the High and Exalted, Who is the Creator (sani), is not created.20

The argument may be applied to the question of God's personality by means of the following syllogism

(19) All persons are created.

(20) God is not created.

(21) God is not a person.

The problem with this argument is that anyone who believes that God is a person will simply deny the major premise. God is the exception.

Another argument from God's transcendence can be found in Al-Kafi, one of the earliest Shi'ite theological texts.21 There the question is entertained as to whether or not it is proper to say that God is a thing. It is concluded that it is proper to say that God is a thing, because to say otherwise would be tantamount to the denial of his existence. But God is a thing unlike anything else, with neither matter nor form. Vere it not for the fact that to deny that God is a thing would be to deny his existence, it would be said that God is not a thing. In this tradition, it has often been denied that any metaphysical categories can be applied to God. From this the following argument can be constructed

(22) Substance is a category.

God does not belong to a category.

God is not a substance.

The conclusion to this argument has been defended by the contemporary Muslim philosopher,

Ayatollah ja'fary.[22] Ja'fary argues that every substance belongs to a genus and has some property which differentiates it from other members of that genus. But whatever is composed of genus and difference is limited by these terms. Its existence is circumscribed. Bu t God is completely unlimited; and thus he is not a substance.

The argument from the unlimited ness of God to the claim that God is not something which has a genus and species can also be found in Mulla Sadra (c. 1572–1641), whose influence on contemporary Muslim philosophy in Iran cannot be overestimated. Mulla Sadra describes God as the 'pure reality of being'.

This Reality is not restricted by any definition, limitation, imperfection, contingent potentiality, or quiddity; nor is It mixed with any generality, whether of genus, species, or differentia, nor with any accident, whether specific or general. For Being is prior to all these descriptions that apply to quiddities, and That which has no quiddity other than Being is not bound by any generality or specificity.[23]

…For if His Being had some limit or particularity in any respect, It would have to be limited and particularized by something other than Being; there would have to be something with power over Him limiting, specifying, and circumscribing Him. But that is impossible.[24]

According to this line of thought, God cannot be a substance because substances consist of genus and difference. That which consists of genus and difference is limited by the conditions indicated by the genus and difference, but God is not limited by anything. So, God is not a substance.

The conclusion could also be supported by appeal to the simplicity of God. Whatever is composed of genus and difference is not simple; but God is simple, so he is not a substance.

None of these arguments is conclusive. One who affirms that God is a substance might deny (23) by arguing that mere inclusion in a category does not entail limitation of a sort incompatible with the perfection and infinity of God. Against Mulla Sadra, it could be argued that not every differentiating property is privative. To pursue such arguments would involve exploring some of the fundamental issues of metaphysics, such as the nature of substance and of property. Claims about the simplicity of God are obscure and difficult to reconcile with the multiplicity of God's attributes. This and related issues have occupied an important place in the history of Muslim theology. The defence of the claim that God is not a substance is no easy matter.

If it is agreed that God is not a substance, it is a short step to the denial that God is a person.

(25) All persons are substances.

(26) God is not a substance.

(27) God is not a person.

Interestingly enough, this is an argument which has not escaped the notice of Christian theology. Aquinas admits that God is not an individual substance, or hypostasis, in the sense of being a support for accidents, although God is a substance in the sense of being something which subsists, i.e. which has a nature distinct from any other. Recall that Boethius defines 'person' as 'individual substance of rational nature'. Thus, Aquinas' admission that there is a sense in which God is not a substance threatens the claim that God is a person. Commenting on the Boethian definition, Aquinas also notes that God is not rational in the sense of being the subject of discursive thought. Aquinas concludes

There are some, however, who say that the definition of Boethius, quoted above (A.I), is not a definition of person in the sense we use when speaking of persons in God. Therefore, Richard of St. Victor amends this definition by adding that Person in God is 'the incommunicable existence of the divine nature.'25

To accept Richard of St Victor's definition of 'person ' is to give up the view that God is personal! Even those who believe in an impersonal deity may affirm the claim that the existence of the divine nature is not shared by any other entity.

One might deny that God is a substance and yet maintain that God is a person, by rejecting (25). This seems to be the line taken by certain recent Christian theologians. The Ritschlian school and H. R. Mackintosh have questioned the adequacy of the category of substance in terms of which the Nicene and Chalcedonian affirmations of the full humanity and real deity of Christ have been made. They claim that substance is a Hellenistic concept, not a Biblical one, and that it is static while Biblical concepts such as purpose and action are dynamic.26

Although an attack on (25) might be mounted in this way, it is not clear how successful it would be at refuting the argument that God is not a person. Arguments that God is not a substance are not based on the stasis of substance, but on its complexity and limitedness. These features would not be eliminated by replacing substance by a more dynamic category. Unless i t can be shown that persons need be neither complex nor limited, the claim that God is personal will be inconsistent with the claims that God is simple and absolute.

In summary, the arguments for the view that God is not a person which are based on God's transcendence may be attacked in two ways (a) by claiming that God's substantiality is not incompatible with his transcendence, and (b) by claiming that his personality is not incompatible with his transcendence, and that not all persons are substances. The pursuit of either of these tactics would involve grappling with extremely difficult issues in metaphysics and theology. However, these difficulties await defenders of the above arguments, as well as

their detractors.

The Muslim conception of God may be described as an impersonal one, not only in virtue of Islam's emphasis on the transcendence of God in Islam, but also in virtue of the Islamic conception of divine immanence. God's immanence is such that he is present in all things in a way which seems incompatible with his belonging to the category of substance or of person. One of the essential components of a relation between persons is the distinctness of the persons involved in the relation.

The radical immanence of the God of Islam may be incompatible with the distinctness required of entities which take part in a personal relationship. There is a long tradition of Muslim theologians and philosophers who, like Mulla Sadra, hold that God is pure existence, the ultimate ground of all reality.27 This ultimate ground cannot be individuated, as substances and persons must be, for according to the doctrine of God's immanence, God is undifferentiated. It is because God is undifferentiated and because he is not a distinct individual that he pervades all that exists, just as a universal pervades everything which exemplifies that universal. God's immanence has been portrayed by means of the image of the ocean and its waves

... [T]here is nothing other than God Almighty; whatever is, is He. The manifestation is not only His; it is also He. There is no exact image that can be evoked in this respect; the object that casts a shadow together with the shadow itself is imprecise and defective. A preferable image would be the ocean and its waves. The wave has no separate existence with respect to the ocean; it is the ocean, although one cannot say the converse, that the ocean is its waves. Waves come into existence only through the motion of the ocean. When we consider the matter rationally, it appears to us that both the ocean and the waves exist, the latter being an accident with respect to the former. But the truth of the matter is that there is nothing but ocean; the wave is also the ocean. This world is also like a wave with respect to God.28

The conception of God's immanence presented above is admittedly obscure, and for this reason is not particularly useful to the defender of the claim that God is not a person. The personalist may simply deny that God is immanent in the extreme sense described here. While the Islamic conception of divine immanence may not be an appropriate basis for a defence of the impersonal view of God, one cannot properly understand that view without understanding the Islamic doctrine of immanence. The doctrine of God's immanence is no less important or central to Islamic theology than the experience of God as immanent is central to Islamic mysticism. In a frequently cited verse of the Qur'an (5016) it is stated that God is nearer to man than his jugular vein.

The final argument against the view that God is a person which will be considered here is one which is not explicitly formulated in Islamic theology. Many western philosophers since Descartes have taken mind to be essential to personhood. Any argument that God does not have a mind would thus undermine the claim that God is a person. Here is one such argument.

(28) God does not have a body.

(29) There are no disembodied minds.

(30) God does not have a mind.

The more controversial of the premises in this argument is (29). The belief that there are no disembodied minds is a commonplace of contemporary materialism. There is wide agreement among philosophers that Cartesian dualism founders on its inability to explain psycho-physical interaction. Idealistic monism is not taken seriously. The only plausible solution to the 'mind-body problem' seems to be to treat the mind as in some sense dependent upon the body, specifically on the brain. It is because the brain has the physical structure that it does that, we are able to think. This claim draws support from the fact that those species of animals with more highly developed brains, also have more mental prowess than others. Exactly how minds and brains, or mental states and brain states, are to be correlated is a matter of great controversy among physicalists. What is agreed upon by all, however, is that brain activity is a prerequisite for mental activity.

Persons persuaded by the arguments of the physicalists that mind is dependent upon body might be tempted by atheism. Such persons might reason that since mind is dependent on body, God, who is a mind without a body, cannot exist. But given the impersonalist view of God, it is possible to draw a different conclusion, namely that God exists but does not have a mind. The claim that God does not have a mind, and the premise (29) on which it rests, viz., that there are no disembodied minds, might be thought to be contrary to religious belief. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul seems to require that human minds do not depend upon brains for their continued existence, and the doctrine of God's omniscience seems to require that God has a mind. But religious doctrines do not need to be understood in such a way as to require belief in disembodied minds, as the following considerations show.

First, with regard to God 's knowledge, Mulla Sadra, for example, certainly does not understand this as implying that mind is ascribable to God.

…His Knowledge of all existent things is Simple Knowledge, and . . . their presence i n Him is Simple in its essential Reality. For all things in Him are included in His knowledge in a higher and more perfect way, since 'knowledge' is (only) an expression for Being, on the condition that It be unmixed with matter.29

On this account, at least, there is nothing mental about God's knowledge. Divine awareness and consciousness may each be understood as expressions of pure existence.

The contention that there are no human disembodied minds is more troublesome than the claim that God does not have a mind. Mulla Sadra, in accordance with Muslim theological tradition, is careful to distinguish the soul from the self-conscious psyche. The psyche is not immortal. The soul, on the other hand, is not only immortal, but has existed prior to the existence of the body. This doctrine is difficult, but it clearly implies that the soul is not mental, is not a mind, but is rather an immaterial aspect of the person.

Although (29) is the more controversial of the premises in the argument above, some might dispute (28). A pantheist, for example, might claim that the material world is the body of God, and that this world forms the material substrate for the mind of God. This is implausible. The organization of the material world as a whole does not appear to have a structure analogous to that of an organic brain, or even of a computer, in virtue of which one could be warranted in claiming that the material world could serve as the material support of the mind of God.

Of course, the arguments discussed here do not prove that God does not have a mind, and it has not been proved that there are no disembodied minds. However, these claims are consistent with at least some elements of the Islamic tradition, and if the claims are accepted, they will support the view that God is not a person.

Several arguments have been presented here. Neither those in favour of the claim that God is a person, nor those against this claim, are conclusive. Those who wish to defend either position must address unanswered and difficult questions. But there is a lesson to be learned from this very inconclusiveness. The issue of whether or not God is a person has been presented as a controversy between Christians and Muslims, but it need not be seen as such. I mentioned that Muslims are not united in their belief that God is not personal, and although personalism is now predominant among Christian theologians, it need not be. Belief in the personality of Jesus is compatible with belief in the impersonality of the being of which Christians believe Jesus to be a hypostasis.

God is not a person as man is a person. The all-embracing and all-penetrating is never an object that man can view from a distance in order to make statements about it. The primal ground, primal support, and primal goal of all reality... is not an individual person among other persons... It will be better to call the most real reality not personal or impersonal but transpersonal or suprapersonal.30

.These are not the words of an ayatollah or a sufi, but of the Christian theologian, Hans Küng

## Notes

1. H. P. Owen, 'Theism ', The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1972, vm, p. 97.

2. John Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 5.

3. Richard Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism (Oxford Clarendon Press, r 977), p. 1.

4. J. L. Mackie, The Miracle of Theism (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1982), p. r.

5. This is the thesis of Clement C. J. Webb, God and Personality (London George Allen & Unwin, 1920), pp. 61--89. Webb argues that Christians did not explicitly claim that God is a person, or had a personality until the nineteenth century. They spoke of persons in God, but not of the person of God. The point is debatable. Aquinas, for example, explicitly states that '...in God essence is not really distinct from person ...' ( Summa Theologica I, q. 39, a. r ), although this claim is highly qualified.

6. The claim that God is one being whose persons differ only in relation to human understanding is the heresy of the third-century theologian Sabellius, and is condemned by Aquinas ( Summa Theologica I, q. 31, a. 2).

7. Summa Theologica I, q. 29, a. 3.

8. Hick, pp. 9-10.

9. Kai Nielson, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (New York St. Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 36-7.

10. Cf. Isaac Husik, A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy (New York Meridian Books, and Philadelphia The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), p. xiv.

11. This explanation of the origin of the term kalam is given by al'Allamah as-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i, Al-Afı.can, trans. Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982) Vol. 4, pp. 149. For a conflicting explanation, see the extensive discussion in Harry Austryn Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kalam (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1976).

12. 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, Shi'ite Islam, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Houston Free Islamic Literatures, 1979), p. 143.

13. al'Allamah as-Sayyid Mluhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i, Al-Mizan, trans. Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982) Vol. 4, p.133-42.

14. Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith, trans. William V. Dyck (New York The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 73.

15. Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, vol. n, Mediaeval Philosophy Augustine to Scotus (Westminster, MD The Newman Press, 1962), pp. 396-7.

16. John Laird, Mind and Deity (London George Allen & Unwin, 1941), pp. 166-8.

17. A similar observation is given caustic expression by Alan Watts in his Behold the Spirit A

Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion (New York Pantheon Books, 1947), pp. 133-5 'After the Renaissance, to meet the rise of Humanism, ...spirituality became more and more Christocentric, and at the same time quite alien to the traditions of Christian mysticism! Contemplation , as understood by the mediaeval mystics, was replaced by affective and imaginative devotion to the humanity of Jesus. From the standpoint of mysticism this was a disaster based on a misunderstanding of the Incarnation, for it made the divine humanity transcendent and hum anized the mystery of God...When...theology tries to achieve a compromise between immanen ce and transcendence, both are deprived of their effect. God is not quite im manent and not q uite transcendent...' This passage is anthologized in Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, Philosophers Speak of God (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1969) , p. 325. Note that Watts does not claim that the compromise between immanence and transcendence is inherent in Christianity; rather he claims that this is a misguided response to renaissance humanism.

18. Webb, p. 87.

19. Seyyed Hossein Nasr , Ideals and Realities of Islam (Boston Beacon Press, 1975), p. 137.

20. Shaykh al-Mufid, Kitab al-Irshad, trans. I. K. A. Howard (London The Muhammadi Trust, 1981), p. 165.

21. Ash-shaykh Abu ja'far Muhammad Ibn Ya'qub Ibn Is'haq al-Kulayni Ar-Razi, Al-Kafi, vol. 1, Part One, 3, (II). trans. Sayyid Muhammad Hasan Rizvi (Tehran World Organization for Islamic Services, 1980), pp. 209-16.

22. In conversation, 11 February 1985, Tehran.

23. Sadr al-Din Shirazi, The Wisdom ef the Throne, trans. James Winston Morris (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 96.

24. ' Ibid. p. 100.

25. Summa Theologica I , q. 29, a. 3. Notice that just as in Al-Kafi, it is claimed that God is a thing for to deny this would be to deny that He exists, Aquinas argues that God is a substance for to deny this would be to deny that He subsists. 'Subsistence' is a technical term in Thomistic philosophy. The imperfect subsistence of secondary substance distinguishes one species from another. The perfect subsistence of first substances is that by which one individual is distinct from all others. In the philosophy of Mulla Sadra and contemporary Shi'ite theology the subsistence of God would be rejected. Differences belong to creation, while God is the undifferentiated ground of all being, pure existence. Cf. note 3, p. 0001 I.

26. John Hick, 'Christianity', The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1972, II, p. 106.

27. Cf. Fazlur Rahman, The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra (Albany State University of New York

Press, 1975).

28. Imam Khomeini, Islam and Revolution, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 406– 7.

29. Sadr al-Din Shirazi, p. 99.

.30. Hans Kung, Does God Exist ' (London Collins, 1980), pp. 632–3. Cited in Mackie, p. 244