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The Concept of God: Some Philosophical Considerations

By Reginald S. Luhmann

Mr. Luhmann, Head of the Department of Religious Studies at Westcliff High School, Southend-on-Sea, describes this article as an introduction to the philosophy of religion; it raises several central issues in the Christian understanding of the nature of God.

Christianity, perhaps more than any other religion, has a well developed concept of God. The attributes ascribed to God derive partly from revelation and partly from philosophical reflection on the nature of the greatest imaginable being who alone is worthy of worship. As traditionally understood, God's attributes consist of perfection, infinity, transcendence, immutability, omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence.¹ None of these attributes can be easily described or understood, but it is with the attributes of transcendence, immutability, omnipotence and omniscience that the greatest difficulties are encountered.

For the theist, as Anthony Flew has correctly observed, the problem of the concept of God involves three issues.² First, there is the question of characterisation. How are positive terms about God to have significance? Secondly, there is the question of consistency. Are the particular attributes ascribed to God both self-consistent and consistent with each other? Finally, there is the question of identification. How is God to be described and picked out from other objects?

I. CHARACTERISATION AND CONSISTENCY

Some believers have argued that God is totally transcendent and thus beyond our comprehension. This will not do. If statements about God have meaning then they cannot be totally beyond our understanding. Tertullian once argued that he believed because what was to be believed (in his case the incarnation), was absurd.³ He was attacking Marcion who claimed that the incarnation could not have been real because God's nature would then be subject to change. He would cease to have some attributes and take on others. W. D. Hudson, commenting on this, observes, ' . . . it is surely a very curious conception of the transcendence of God which takes recognition of it to consist in a willingness to talk nonsense about him. That was evidently Tertullian's uncompromising conclusion. But the reasoning by which he arrived at it has more than a smack of inconsistency. Tertullian invoked the meaning rules of our language, with respect of God's being "different", in order

¹ See particularly H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1971), Part 1.

² A. Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), 30f.

³ Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 5.

to establish that these rules do not apply to God! And even if we could allow that, his position would still be self-stultifying. He thinks religious belief possible provided it is self-contradictory. But what does a self-contradictory believer believe? His belief unsays everything it says.⁴

Nonsense does not cease to be nonsense even when God is the subject. If God is beyond knowledge it is not because it is impossible to know him. It is rather that our knowledge of God is necessarily limited by our lack of experience and our inability, given our restricted human faculties, to comprehend his nature.

It will not do either to claim that our knowledge of God's nature is directly mediated by revelation which is to be accepted by faith. This is because we need to know how to apply the attributes ascribed to God. As Professor Bernard Williams notes in his observations on Tertullian's paradox, '... it is a stranger request to ask someone by faith to believe something that he does not properly understand; for what is it that he is being asked to believe? Faith might be a way of believing something, as opposed to believing it on evidences, but how could it be a way of stepping from what is understood to what is not understood?' He continues, '... if you do not know what it is you are believing on faith, how can you be sure you are believing anything? ... My difficulty is that, if the belief is incomprehensible and necessarily so, one cannot see what is being accepted, on faith or otherwise.'⁵

The twin problems of the characterisation and consistency of the divine attributes are well brought out in the paper by David Blumenfeld, 'On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes'.⁶ If God is an absolutely perfect being then it means he is one who has unsurpassable knowledge which in turn entails '... an utter and complete comprehension of the meaning of every significant proposition'. Blumenfeld then goes on to show there are some propositions which God could only have if he were limited in power, for instance feelings of fear and frustration. To fear is to believe oneself to be in danger, but an omnipotent being cannot fear because there is no possible harm or danger that could possibly befall him. An absolutely perfect and omnipotent being cannot experience frustration because, 'He is all-powerful and so there is no conceivable obstacle to his will, whatever he wills, he accomplishes.'

4 W. D. Hudson, 'The Concept of Divine Transcendence', *Religious Studies* 15.2 (June 1969), 202.

5 B. Williams, 'Tertullian's Paradox', in A. Flew and A. Macintyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM, 1955), 208-9.

6 D. Blumenfeld, 'On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes', *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978), 91-103.

There are several ways out of the dilemma, each of which Blumenfeld claims are inadequate. First, it could be denied that it is necessary to have the experience in order to have the concept. This would be the approach of the platonist. As the author acknowledges, 'For the platonist, knowledge is purely intellectual . . . apprehension. Whatever is known, is known by grasping abstract ideas or Forms. Experiences may stimulate us to recollect these Forms, but that is all. It is in no way essential to knowledge.' He concedes that '. . . if platonism were true, this would destroy my position', and then boldly asserts, 'But platonism (or at any rate the extreme version of it required here) is false.' Is Blumenfeld right? Although it is not possible to prove or disprove the platonic world of Forms, does that thereby imply that its application to this problem is invalid. I think not.

It is often assumed by philosophers that we come to understand concepts like omnipotence and omniscience by starting with human concepts and then applying them to God by some process of magnification. The theist, on the contrary, argues that it is God not man who is the norm of being; man was made in the image of God not God in the image of man. Thus Professor H. P. Owen, writing about the concept of personality, comments, '. . . we cannot say that infinity and personality are naturally exclusive on account of their intrinsic natures; for personality may be capable of existing in various modes that are analogically related, and the highest form may be infinite.'⁷

Another way out of Blumenfeld's dilemma is the christological solution, which he also rejects. This claims that God has only to become finite, as he did in Christ, for him to achieve a full grasp of all concepts involving finitude. This solution involves two difficulties. First, there is the problem that was debated at length in the first centuries of the Church's history of how Christ could be both God and man and whether the two natures could be logically compatible. Secondly, it seems to commit the theist to heresy. In Blumenfeld's words, 'If God can only fully comprehend *fear* etc. by becoming finite then the incarnation was not an act of grace. It was logically required to secure divine omniscience.' The Christian, it seems to me, is not committed to this view. He believes that Christ was tempted in every respect (Heb. 4:15) and he is thus able to sympathise with our weakness and to understand the limitations imposed by our humanity, but does not need to maintain it was necessary for God to become man in order to become complete. If there is any solution to the dilemma proposed it must be obtained by

⁷ H. P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God* (London: Athlone Press, 1969), 234, 236.

examining the logical implications of concepts like omnipotence and omniscience when used of God.

Omnipotence

The usual practice of those who claim that God cannot be omnipotent is to present an argument, often in the form of a paradox, which shows that there are some things that God cannot do and hence that God is not all-powerful. One of the oldest of such paradoxes is the paradox of the stone, which can be presented as follows.

1. Either God can create a stone which he cannot lift or he cannot create such a stone.
2. If God can create a stone which he cannot lift, then he is not omnipotent, since he cannot lift it.
3. If God cannot create a stone which he cannot lift, then equally he is not omnipotent since he cannot create it.
4. Therefore God is not omnipotent.

Attempts have been made to show that the paradox involves no limitation on omnipotence because it is self-contradictory. This is difficult to sustain and is unnecessary because, as Wade Savage has demonstrated, the paradox contains a fallacy.⁸ This can be shown by supposing there are two persons, not one person, involved. He asks us to suppose a person (y) cannot lift a stone heavier than seventy pounds, then if another person (x) can create a stone heavier than seventy pounds he can create a stone y cannot lift. 'But if x can create stones of any poundage, and y can lift stones of any poundage, then x cannot create a stone which y cannot lift, and yet x is not thereby limited in power. Now it is easy to see that precisely parallel considerations obtain where x is both stone-creator and stone-lifter.'

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But are there no limits to omnipotence? Is there nothing that an all-powerful God could not do? There certainly seem to be things God cannot do. For instance God cannot lie or break his promise, nor, despite Descartes' belief to the contrary, can God do what is self-contradictory. None of these, however, involve God in a limitation of power because they are not real options. God's inability to break his promise does not impose a limitation on him. If God was free to promise and has perfect foresight of all possible consequences of promising something, then he cannot be limited by anything other than the law of non-contradiction, namely to be able to do something and not to do it at the same time. A similar self-limitation is imposed upon God if he created, as I believe he did, creatures with genuine freewill. If God gave them free will then he

⁸ C. Wade Savage, 'The Paradox of the Stone', *The Philosophical Review* 76.1 (1967).

cannot determine them to do things contrary to their will and yet at the same time allow them to exercise genuine freedom. As Professor J. Harrison summarised the position,⁹ 'The view that God can bring about any logically possible state of affairs is surely the view that God can bring about any state of affairs a full description of which is not contradictory.'

There are stronger grounds for maintaining that God can do no wrong. Even so it still seems reasonable to say that it would be logically possible for God to do evil, but that he never exercises his freedom to do wrong for this would make God less than perfect and entail a limitation in his power. One consequence of this would be that God cannot experience remorse which is necessarily connected to consciousness of wrongdoing. We could not appeal to the incarnation to resolve this difficulty if we want to also claim that Christ did not commit sin. The only other possibility seems to be to argue that it would be possible for God to imaginatively enter into the experience of remorse by the process of empathy.

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Omniscience

More problematic than the attribute of omnipotence, is that of omniscience, the investigation of which has provoked a considerable discussion. For God to know everything he must know the future as well as the past and present. How can the future be known? Does this imply that God is outside of time or that there is no open future and hence no genuine freedom of action for human beings? If we say the future is open and humans are free does this not in turn imply that God's nature is in some sense changeable to accommodate changing states of affair?

Time

The problem of time has puzzled philosophers through the ages. From our own viewpoint several things can be said about time. First we might describe time as a temporal instant or a sum of temporal periods related to one another. Human actions can of logical necessity only affect the present or future and not the past. It is true that an attempt was made by Michael Dummett to show how present activity could alter the past, but this attempt is generally regarded as being unsuccessful.¹⁰ The reason for this is that causes cannot follow effects. Therefore it would be impossible to travel backwards in time, although it is logically possible to travel forwards. It might even one day be physically possible to travel forwards by being frozen and then resuscitated.

⁹ J. Harrison, 'Malt does more than Peter can or On Behalf of the Damned', *Religious Studies* 14.4 (1978), 500.

¹⁰ M. Dummett in R. Swinburne, *Space and Time* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 162-170.

There are two ways of viewing time in relation to ourselves and the universe. The first, as propounded by Isaac Newton, is that time is logically unbounded and therefore infinite; after every moment of time there must be another. Whereas it would be sensible to say that space could only exist relative to physical objects, it would not be the case that time is relative to the existence of physical objects. When it is claimed that the universe began to exist in finite time (if it did) then what is meant is that prior to the existence of finite time there were no objects in existence.

The alternative view is a relational one. As W. L. Craig describes it, time is a ' . . . relation among objects that are apprehended in an order of succession or that objectively exist in such an order; time is a form of perceptual experience and of objective processes in the external world.'¹¹

Can either of these views of time be reconciled to a belief in God as omniscient? Does God exist outside of time or is God, in some sense, limited by time? The classical view is to see God as outside of time in the sense of being timeless. Boethius realized that there must be genuine human freedom otherwise God is responsible for all human evil and cannot justly punish human sin. Therefore he argued that God sees things as eternally present whether what God perceives is the result of necessity as the shining of the sun or is the result of willing as in the case of human action.¹² Boethius believed that God knows future acts because they will happen. We know that events occurred in the past because we have a justified true belief about them. Similarly God knows the future because he has a justified true belief about it. This, in turn, means that in the case of human free actions, God knows, but does not determine, the actions. Similarly Aquinas believed that to God all events are simultaneous but not determined. He uses the analogy of a man on a hill watching travellers approaching. God is like the man on the hill who sees the other approach, a view not given to any of the travellers. There is a time model of the universe that can be reconciled to the view that God is timeless, but one that also denies human beings freedom. This is to see the universe as a single space-time continuum within which a body ' . . . is visualised eternally as a 4-D whole extending up and down, north and south, east and west, hence and ago.'¹³ In this model freedom is doubly illusory. The future is not open and in fact there is no real future.

¹¹ W. L. Craig, 'God, Time and Eternity', *Religious Studies* 14.4 (1978), 500.

¹² For text see W. L. Rowe and W. J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973), 81f.

¹³ B. L. Hebblethwaite, 'Some Reflections on Predestination, Providence and Divine Foreknowledge', *Religious Studies* 15.4 (1979), 434.

Timelessness

The concept of God as a timeless being has been investigated by various philosophers and in particular by Nelson Pike.¹⁴ He examines the various difficulties and comes to the conclusion that the view is false. Some difficulties are only apparent but others appear to be genuine difficulties. An example of the former is that God cannot know all knowable facts as a timeless being because some facts can only be known by beings occupying positions in time. This is not strictly true. As a timeless being God could not participate in the temporal events but could from the outside observe and hence understand. In fact all this establishes, says Pike, is that there '... are certain *forms of words* that a timeless individual could not use when formulating or reporting his knowledge.'¹⁵

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There are nonetheless, so Pike claims, certain things a timeless being would be incapable of doing. A timeless being could not reflect or deliberate because this requires temporal extension. He could not remember because memory involves having learned or experienced something in the past. Nor could he will, desire or purpose anything because all these envisage a future state of affairs different than those that now exist.¹⁶

If God is a timeless being and time exists as we know it, then God misperceives it. Alternatively, if God's perception of time is correct then we misperceive it. The latter possibility is a real one in the light of the fact that we do misperceive the world of space and objects due to the limitation of our sensory equipment. Examples of such misperceptions are the constant optical illusion that objects moving away from us get smaller and the illusion of the bending of rigid objects in water as the result of refraction. Nevertheless, even allowing for such a possibility, there is something exceedingly odd in maintaining that time as we know it does not exist. As Anthony Kenny has demonstrated such a view would imply that at any moment every 'historical' event would be happening simultaneously.¹⁷

The most crucial objection to God's timelessness must be that it makes God's intervention in history impossible. In particular it would make nonsense of the Christian belief in the incarnation, a problem described by Kierkegaard as the Absolute Paradox. There are ways out of the problem. Professor Swinburne has argued that time began at the creation of the universe and that God existed timelessly prior to that

¹⁴ N. Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge, 1970).

¹⁵ Pike, *op. cit.*, 95.

¹⁶ See C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957).

¹⁷ Cf. A. Kenny in Rowe and Wainwright, *op. cit.*, 50f.

point and in time subsequent to it.¹⁸ Another possibility is to distinguish two sorts of time. Richard Sturch maintains¹⁹ that one sort of time is that of the inanimate universe where it is possible to distinguish 'before' and 'after' and is part of God's creation in which God can only participate by entering as a creature, that is by an incarnation. The other sort of time is a private or mental time which can only be experienced by beings with minds and is made up of millions of separate series each related to a particular individual. Personal times can only be related to other personal times by participation in the inanimate time. There is, according to Sturch, no good reason for maintaining that God is temporal in the latter sense.

If timelessness in God is rejected as incoherent how do we represent God's omniscience? The best analogy seems to be in terms of clairvoyance or telepathy. Calvin appears to have held such a view. Pike quotes him as saying that '... when we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things have been and perpetually remain before his eyes.'²⁰ There is a considerable body of experimental evidence which makes human telepathy, clairvoyance and foreknowledge (precognition) highly probable.²¹ If such faculties are found in man and are apparently not dependent on the senses, there seems no reason why it should not be possible for God to exercise a universal telepathy and foreknowledge.

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Omniscience and Immutability

Some philosophers have attempted to find an inconsistency between the possession of omniscience and the inability of a perfect being to change. Thus N. Kretzmann argued²² that because a perfect being is omniscient and not subject to change he will be incapable of knowing something that does change (*i.e.* what time it is). This creates a formal contradiction. There are several possible ways out of this dilemma. It could be maintained that in order to know the changing state of the universe no change in the knower is required or that the change is an inconsequential one. Thus a belief that last year was 1981 and this one is 1982 does not involve a real change of mind but a change of belief generated by taking account of a calendar change. Or we might adopt a view similar to that espoused by Sturch that, 'God must be thought of as, in the

¹⁸ R. Swinburne, 'The Timelessness of God', *Church Quarterly Review* 166 (1965), 331.

¹⁹ R. L. Sturch, 'The Problem of Divine Eternity', *Religious Studies* 10 (1974), 492.

²⁰ J. Calvin, quoted by Pike, *op. cit.*, 55.

²¹ See S. G. Soal and F. Bateman, *Modern Experiments in Telepathy* (London: Faber, 1954); R. H. Thouless, *From Anecdote to Experiment in Psychical Research* (London: Routledge, 1972); R. Heywood, *The Sixth Sense* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

²² N. Kretzmann, in Rowe and Wainwright, *op. cit.*, 60-70.

very act of creation, laying down what his actions (to us, reactions) would be in every possible set of circumstances that his creatures might bring about.²³ It could, therefore, be argued that the change is in the object, be it inanimate or personal, and not in God. This, however, creates problems if we wish also to maintain that human agents are genuinely free. Finally, on the analogy with omnipotence we could argue that an omniscient being has the power to know everything but is limited by the demands of logical consistency. Such an approach will not work because, as Kretzmann points out, 'Omniscience is not the *power to know* everything; it is the *condition of knowing* everything, and that condition cannot be preserved through even a single instance of omitting to exercise the power to know everything.'²⁴

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Is there any reason why we should ascribe immutability to God? The Bible it is true claims that God is unchanging (*cf.* Jas. 1:17-18; Mal. 3:6) but it also speaks of God changing his mind (Gn. 6:6; 1 Sa. 15:35; Ps. 106:45; Jon. 3:10). Traditionally biblical expositors have interpreted the latter passages figuratively, but it is not clear why this should be so. It could be that the former passages only refer to God's changeableness with respect to his moral character and not changeableness in every respect. The belief in the immutability of God is not derived from the Bible but, as Rem Edwards has shown,²⁵ from Greek philosophy. This led Christian philosopher-theologians to odd conclusions. Edwards quotes Anselm as saying, 'How, then, art thou compassionate and not compassionate, O Lord? . . . Truly, thou art so in terms of our experience, but thou art not so in terms of thine own. For, when thou beholdest us in our wretchedness, we experience the effect of compassion, but thou dost not experience the feeling.' The Christian teacher and pastor wants to say that God is compassionate, merciful and loves us, yet at the same time add the qualification that this cannot really be so. Edwards concludes his essay with a revealing quotation from Berdyaev, 'It is extraordinary how limited is the human conception of God. Men are afraid to ascribe to him inner conflict and tragedy characteristic of all life . . . but have no hesitation in ascribing to him anger, jealousy, vengeance and other affective states which, in man are regarded as reprehensible. There is a profound gulf between the idea of perfection in man and in God. Self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, stony immobility, pride, the demand for continual submission are qualities which the Christian religion considers vicious and sinful, though it calmly ascribes

²³ R. L. Sturch, *op. cit.*, 491.

²⁴ N. Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, 69.

²⁵ R. B. Edwards, 'The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God', *Religious Studies* 14.3 (1978), 305-313.

them to God.²⁶ Perhaps Berdyaev overstates his case, but the point remains true; a totally impassive God is more akin to the God of deism than to the God of Christianity.

If we deny the immutability of God what consequences follow? One consequence would seem to be that we must deny that God is infinite and perfect. The belief in a finite God has been developed into what is called process theology. One of the philosophers on whose work this theology was built was Charles Hartshorne. He argued that God is a social being and that to ascribe immutability to God is to limit him. We do not admire someone who does his duty and feels serene irrespective of its effects upon others so why should we admire immutability in God? Surely, he maintains, we should not think that the higher the being the less sympathy he will have with lesser beings but rather the opposite.²⁷ But does process theology with its insistence of God as a developing rather than as a static entity help us to understand the nature of God? I do not think so, for a God who is subject to change and develops in response to the environment is not a God in whom one can exercise complete faith, because there is no assurance that such a God will not perish or be overtaken by circumstances. Professor Owen has answered Hartshorne's questions by showing first that God does not adapt to the world because it is totally created by him and there is nothing in it that does not already exist ideally in his mind. Secondly he argues that it is not true that God is unaffected by human joys and sorrows. God responds to them but does not change. He cannot be made more loving because he is self-existent love and certainly cannot become submissive because there is no one to whom he must submit and, moreover, would cease to be supreme if he did submit. Even if we maintain, as I shall argue that we must, that God cannot know future free choices, we can still say that God knows them perfectly as possibilities and ' . . . is necessarily and timelessly adapted to them and to all their consequences.'²⁸

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Divine Omniscience and Human Freedom

The most perplexing of the problems associated with divine omniscience is without doubt its relationship to human freedom of action. Nelson Pike put up a paradigm example to illustrate the problem.²⁹ His example is that of Jones mowing his lawn on a certain Saturday and that eighty years previously an omniscient God believed that on Saturday Jones would mow his lawn. In order for Jones to be truly free he must be

²⁶ N. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Bles, 1954), 28.

²⁷ C. Hartshorne, in Rowe and Wainwright, *op. cit.*, 86f.

²⁸ H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, 82-87.

²⁹ N. Pike, *op. cit.*, 55-56.

free to refrain from mowing his lawn and for this, one of the following must be true:

- (1) Were he to refrain, God's belief would have been false.
- (2) Were he to refrain, God would have believed eighty years ago that he would refrain from mowing.
- (3) Were he to refrain, God would not have existed eighty years ago.

(1) must be rejected if God is infallible, because an infallible being cannot hold a false belief and (3) must be rejected on the grounds that God would then be finite and mutable. Pike also thinks that (2) is impossible because it is inconsistent. It implies that if Jones is free then a belief held at an earlier time must cease to have been held.

There have been many attempts to overcome the difficulty, some of which I propose to discuss. First we could solve the problem simply by denying human freedom, but, as we have seen, Boethius was quick to realize that this would make God the author of all sin and make the concept of the accountability of mankind to God nonsensical. The 'soft' determinist view usually associated with Calvinism fares no better, because although it stresses the sovereignty of God in respect of election it stresses that man is totally responsible for his sin. Man may not be free to do good but he was, at least originally, free to do evil.

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The problem is paradoxical because it envisages past beliefs and present free actions as infallibly correlated. In this respect it is similar to other paradoxes. Dennis Ahern attempts a solution to it by comparing it to Newcomb's Paradox.³⁰ This paradox involves an individual (Joan) who is offered a choice of all the money in box B or all in A and B. We are told that there is (a) £1,000 in box A; (b) either nothing or £1,000,000 in box B; (c) a year ago Yvette either put £1,000,000 in B or left it empty depending on her prediction of Joan's choice. If she predicted Joan would choose B she put £1,000,000 in the box, but if she predicted Joan would choose the two she placed nothing in B. (d) Yvette is considered infallible inasmuch as all her previous predictions have come true. If Joan wished to maximise her gain what would she choose and why? The solution seems straightforward. Joan will choose A and B because this will give her either £1,001,000 or £1,000 whereas B alone may yield nothing. But this ignores the element of the infallible predictions in the past. If Joan knew that everyone in the past who chose only B obtained £1,000,000 she would choose it, even though she did not understand how Yvette made the prediction.

The situation is parallel to that envisaged by Pike. Ahern admits that,

³⁰ D. M. Ahern, 'Foreknowledge: Nelson Pike and Newcombe's Problem', *Religious Studies* 15.4 (1979), 475-490.

'... if on the one hand you assume as a premise that the choice was freely made, then you cannot also believe that if you had exercised a different choice the world up until the time of your choice would have been the same... If on the other hand you assume a premise that there is no way in which a present choice could fix the past prediction unless one's choice could somehow causally or materially influence that prediction, which we have assumed is not possible, then you cannot believe the choice was freely made.' He concludes, 'It is odd to suppose that a choice which meets all the tests for being free, and which would have been free if it had not been predicted by an infallible being, somehow is made not free just by the fact that it was predicted and that the predictor cannot be wrong.'³¹

A more common solution is to solve the problem by modifying one of the premises but this time it is not the premise concerning human freedom but that concerning divine omniscience. As Hebblethwaite puts it, '... if the eternal God creates a temporally structured open world, then he must — logically must — relate himself to it, in knowledge as in action, in a manner appropriate to its given nature. This is not to place arbitrary restrictions on divine omniscience. We may well suppose that God knows everything there is to know... But if he creates a world whose future is open, then what will be is not yet there to be known, nor is it decided yet what it will be. The future cannot be known by omniscience any more than by finite minds.'³²

How far can we maintain that God's knowledge is limited without making the concept of omniscience devoid of meaning? How far can God's freedom be limited by the creatures he has made? An omnipotent, omniscient God cannot be at the mercy of the creatures he has made. We must therefore see omniscience and human freedom against the background of the concept of God as creator and sustainer of the universe. Hebblethwaite says that '... for any serious theism, the constant dependence of created things, whatever their given nature, on God the creator has to be borne in mind. Every sub-atomic particle, every field of force, every organised body (microscopic and macroscopic) has to be thought of not only as given by God, but preserved and sustained in potency as well as being by the Creator.' Elsewhere he writes, '... God knows the ultimate outcome; and he knows every possible permutation on the way and he knows what to do whatever his creatures do. But by the very gift of freedom and an open future to the created world, he makes things such that it is logically impossible for

³¹ Ahern, *ibid.*, 488.

³² B. L. Hebblethwaite, *op. cit.*, 439.

himself to know in advance which particular path a free creature will take within the overall scope of God's creative action.³³

The activity of God in the world has been likened to that of a master chess player who knows all the possible moves his opponents can make and who can never be beaten because his knowledge of the game embraces all possible variations.³⁴ The analogy is a fair one and makes sense of the Christian belief in heaven and hell, the latter being seen as the destiny of those who persistently refuse God's gracious offer of salvation. The belief is only possible if man's freedom is real and God does not totally determine human destiny. Of course, God could determine that some or all of the human race should be punished in hell for their sins, but this would only be logically possible if man were fully responsible in the sense of being free to sin. If God were at the same time to destine some to heaven who were equally guilty this would truly be an act of grace on God's part, but scarcely a wholly just act. This analogy also answers the problem often raised as to why God created the world as we know it if he foreknew all the suffering and evil that would result. The chess analogy argument would maintain that God could only anticipate the future state of affairs as probable in the light of his foreknowledge of the results arising from the abuse of freedom and not know absolutely what would come to pass.

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It would be wrong to believe that God could achieve his desired goals without human freedom being in some way modified. Indeed human freedom is never absolute but is limited by heredity and environment and is continually being modified throughout life. If God is creator and sustainer of the universe he must be actively involved in this ongoing process. David Basinger has indicated several areas in which human freedom must be modified for the chess analogy to work.³⁵ He uses the illustration of a bank robber who decides to kill the clerk who recognises him and asks how God could ensure that the man is not killed while still allowing the robber to exercise freedom. There are several possibilities open. God could allow the robber to carry out the action, that is fire the gun and for the gun mechanism to jam. Continual resort to this would make significant choices illusory, for one could not rely on expected results following deliberate actions. God could instil other thoughts in the robber's mind so that the expected result does not occur, which if

³³ Hebblethwaite, *ibid.*, 442, 443; cf. P. Helm, 'God and Whatever Comes to Pass', *Religious Studies* 14.3 (1978), 315f.; S. T. Davis, 'Divine Omniscience and Human Freedom', *Religious Studies* 15.3 (1979), 303f.

³⁴ Cf. P. T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), 58f.

³⁵ D. Basinger, 'Human Freedom and Divine Providence: some new thoughts on an old problem', *Religious Studies* 15.4 (1979), 497f.

resorted to frequently would involve God in deception. More positively God could temporarily intervene by means of miracle and, say, blind the robber or he can exert pressure on him to do what God desires, but resorted to overmuch this would severely restrict, if not take away, human freedom. The Christian would maintain that God can and does intervene in human affairs in all of these ways, but that the Christian cannot presume that God will intervene at any time. He must be prepared to face the possibility that if he were in the role of the victim in our hypothetical drama that he could well be killed, but he believes that God's will must ultimately triumph if not in this world then in the next.

II. THE IDENTITY OF GOD

The final problem is the problem of identification. How can God be described and picked out, as it were, from other objects? Richard Sturch poses the problem this way, 'We have as it were an equation. Divine love is to divinity as human love is to humanity; but we do not know the value of *either* term on the "divine" side. All we know is the relationship between them; it is like a map where the scale has been lost, so that we can tell it is twice as far from A to B as from C to D but we do not know how far either distance actually is.'³⁶

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An understanding of God's nature can only be by means of analogy or symbolisation. C. A. Campbell claimed that the symbols used in talking about God, for instance power, love, justice, wisdom, mercy and personality are analogical symbols not amenable to complete conceptual apprehension.³⁷ The analogy implies likeness and difference and for normal purposes it would be necessary to know in what way there is likeness and difference. In the case of God, however, Campbell maintains, this does not apply. The reason is that, although for a quality (*e.g.* stinginess) and another (*e.g.* saving) to be analogous there must be something existing in common (*e.g.* saving) this does not apply to the value (saving) itself. God's nature resembles the value not the quality.

Professor H. P. Owen has argued against the view that an intelligible assertion is one that adequately describes an object. It is possible, he maintains, to understand that an attribute applies to God without understanding how it applies. He says, 'The religious philosopher does not ask the unbeliever to change the finite facts or to look at new ones. Rather he asks him to see the finitude of personality, not as a self-sufficient datum, but as the reflection of the absolute Personality which

³⁶ R. L. Sturch, 'The Old Problem of Talking about God', *Faith and Thought* 103.2 (1976), 103.

³⁷ C. A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, 351f.

is God. The Infinite is ontologically implied by every aspect of finite being, and above all by our own infinite form of personal existence; so that at the deepest level of spiritual perception it is true that if we saw ourselves we should see God.³⁸

It is not easy to see how we can truly identify God by means of analogy, but there is a partial parallel to this in the use made of models in science. In science gases have been likened to billiard balls and chromosomes to volumes in a library. These models, like the analogies in religion, are attempts to represent symbolically aspects of the world whose structure is inaccessible. The validity of the model depends on there being some isomorphism between the model and the real structure of the world. As with theological analogies the scientific models are taken seriously but not literally (for instance the gas molecules are neither the tiny elastic spheres of the model nor are they billiard balls but they resemble them in important respects just as God is not a person in every respect like us, but human personality resembles God in certain important respects).³⁹

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It will be obvious from the discussion that no firm conclusions can be reached concerning the nature of God. This is hardly surprising if God is the creator of everything that exists including our finite minds by which we seek to understand him. The question that could be asked is why we should seek to characterise God in such a complex way. The answer, surprisingly perhaps, is that, revelation apart, this concept of God is to be preferred because of its simplicity. The belief in a finite God is more complex because it needs explanation. The belief that God is eternal provides the ultimate explanation for phenomena for which reasons would have otherwise to be given. If God were finite then it would be possible to ask who made God and who made the creator of God and so on *ad infinitum*. Professor Swinburne summarised the position as follows, 'For a person to act, he has to have intentions. His intentions might be determined by factors outside of his control, or at any rate, as those of humans, greatly influenced by them. It would, however, be consonant with his omnipotence for an omnipotent being to be entirely uninfluenced in his choice of intentions on which to act by factors outside of his control *i. e.* to be perfectly free . . . Theism thus postulates a person of an incredibly simple kind — one with such capacities, beliefs and intentions, that there are no limits (apart from those of

³⁸ H. P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God*, 236.

³⁹ See I. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (London: SCM, 1974).

logic) to his capacities, to the extent of his justified true belief and to his choice of intentions . . . One could suppose that these three properties (infinity, omnipotence and omniscience) did not belong essentially together. But that would be to postulate a more mysterious world than one in which they do belong essentially together — for it would make it a cosmic accident that the being who had all power also had all knowledge. To avoid that, it is simpler to suppose that the properties belong necessarily together in a divine essence; as we have seen, they do have a natural affinity.⁴⁰

In respect of the consistency of the divine attributes part of the problem, as we have seen, is to clearly explicate the concepts. Some paradoxes are only apparent and others arise by confusing the possession of an attribute with the exercising of it. There is no reason why God, who could presumably take on any form he chose, should take on a finite form if by so doing he denies his omnipotence and omniscience and hence his divinity.

One area has not been discussed, namely the moral attributes of God. It is here, more than anywhere, that difficulties arise. The problem was formulated by Epicurus to the effect that God either wishes to take away evil but cannot or he is able to remove it but is unwilling. If the former is true God lacks omnipotence and if the latter he lacks absolute goodness. The problem is too vast to be considered here and I must be content just to comment. From the philosophical angle it could be argued that if all evil can be justified in terms of ultimate good then neither the goodness nor the power of God is in question, but if God's existence could be shown to be inconsistent logically with any evil then all actual problems of evil would be automatically excluded. Equally it is never possible to justify all evil because we can never know how much all evil is nor whether it can all be justified in terms of an ultimate good unless we know what the ultimate good was.⁴¹

Without doubt the most problematic area of this study is to demonstrate how God can be identified. It was suggested that this must be done by means of analogy. This is inevitable given that God's nature cannot be perceived by human senses. John Morreall clearly shows this by looking at the implications of the beatific vision. First God could not be perceived by humans because, 'Not being physical, and so not reflecting or omitting light, God is not the kind of thing which could be seen . . . Similarly, God is not the kind of thing which could be heard because he is not the kind of thing which emits or reflects sound

⁴⁰ R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 94-5.

⁴¹ See M. B. Ahern, *The Problem of Evil* (London: RKP, 1971).

waves.⁴² Of course we can have a 'vision' of God but this is not a direct visual perception of God but some form of intellectual awareness and we could hear 'voices' but this will not be literally God's voice. Again we are in the realm of analogy. Perhaps the only way we could ever know God is through Jesus Christ. In his now famous 'eschatological verification' essay, Professor John Hick argued that, 'Christian doctrine postulates an ultimate unambiguous state of existence *in patria* (*i. e.* heaven) as well as our present ambiguous existence *in via*' which consists '. . . not in a direct vision of God, whatever that might be, but in a *situation* which points unambiguously to the existence of a loving God.'⁴³ This he finds in the dual experience of the person of Christ and the fulfilment of God's purpose in ourselves. As the Bible says, 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (Jn. 1:18 RSV).

⁴² J. Morreall, 'Perfect Happiness and the Resurrection of the Body', *Religious Studies* 16.1 (1980), 33.

⁴³ J. Hick, 'Theology and Verification', *Theology Today* 17.1 (1960).