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Most contemporary analytical philosophers of religion would endorse Alvin Plantinga’s description of Christian belief as the belief that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly good person (a person without a body) who has created us and our world, who loves us and was willing to send his son into the world to undergo suffering, humiliation, and death in order to redeem us.

(Plantinga 2000: 3)

There are, however, reasons for doubting whether the conception of God Plantinga here articulates constitutes an adequate understanding of the God of Christian worship. In this chapter, I shall consider some of these reasons, and whether there may be alternatives with better credentials. My aim is not to establish any conception as definitive, but rather to canvass the desiderata for an adequate understanding of the Christian God. A sound grasp of these desiderata, and the limits on meeting them within the compass of any single conception, may be the key to a wise understanding of who or what God is for the Christian religious tradition.

Plantinga himself envisages two kinds of challenge to his account of belief in God. In the first chapter of his Warranted Christian Belief he argues against the view that the God of Christianity is beyond the grasp of positive human concepts, and also sets aside the ‘anti-realist’ understanding of God as a symbolic social construct that focuses vital value-commitments.\(^1\) Accepting positive content and realist reference for Christian belief is not enough to settle the meaning of ‘God’, however. It may be feasible to be a ‘realist’ about Christian belief without taking its core content as the proposition that there exists a ‘personal omniGod’, as I shall label the incorporeal person who is the all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and perfectly morally good (omnibenevolent) Creator *ex nihilo* of all (else) that exists.

The ‘God-role’ and what may fill it

But how can it be a contestable matter who or what the Christian God is? The reason is that the concept of God is a *role-concept* – the concept of something that fills a certain role in the ‘conceptual economy’ of Christian belief. There may thus be dispute about what that ‘something’ is. It is useful to distinguish the *concept* of God – specified by describing the God-role – from
specific conceptions of what it is that fills the God-role. Christians may share the same concept of God, while differing over their specific conceptions of divinity, or, indeed, over whether any such conception is either needed or possible.

**Specifying the Christian God-role: God as uniquely worshipful**

How may the concept of God be specified in terms of the role that God plays? The various aspects of the Christian God-role have a single root: God is that which is uniquely worthy of worship. Christianity has it in common with the other Abrahamic traditions that God is the sole object of worship. These traditions have a deep fear of idolatry – of worshipping something unworthy. Nothing can be God unless it deserves worship. (‘God’ does not function, therefore, primarily as a proper name, but as ‘a compressed title’ with implicit descriptive content.)

To specify the Christian God-role it is therefore necessary to give an account of what Christian worship is.

**Worship as a practical stance**

Worship is an attitude with both factual content and practical implications. The object of worship is to be treated in practice as possessing the highest possible worth (‘worship’ is, at root, ‘worthship’). Worship is not authentic without the actions and style of living that flow from it, however sincere the intellectual acknowledgment of its object’s supreme worth.

What is the practical stance of Christian worship? A caricature has it that to worship is to abase oneself before a superior power one seeks to appease. In fact, worship may be given a broader, and less morally dubious, description in terms of three related elements. First, Christian worship gives absolute practical priority to God and the revealed divine will that we are to love one another as Christ has loved us. Second, Christian worship is Eucharistic: it gives thanks to God for, and on behalf of, all that exists, acknowledging God as the source and goal on which everything ultimately depends. Third, Christian worship trusts in God for help and salvation – for the forgiveness, self-transformation, and liberation that enables our joyful participation in the supreme good for the sake of which we, and all that is, are created. Worship thus entails renouncing attitudes and actions that are inconsistent with living lovingly, thankfully, and trustingly.

God’s reality as uniquely worthy of worship, then, makes fitting a certain overall practical orientation. There is therefore ethical as well as metaphysical content to the idea of the divine. Philosophical discussion of the meaning of ‘God’s existence’ has, however, been preoccupied with God’s ontological status. I will review that ontological discussion, hoping to show the importance of recovering the ethical point of worship for a sound understanding of its object.

**Anselm’s formula and its interpretation**

Anselm’s famous characterisation of the divine as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-conceived (Proslogion, Chapter 2) may be thought of as an attempt to describe the core element of the God-role – namely, of God as uniquely worthy of worship. In this formula, Anselm seeks to grasp the formal status the divine must have to be rightly afforded the absolute priority implied in worship.

Anselm’s formula is widely interpreted as requiring that God have ontological supremacy: God is that than which nothing greater qua being can be conceived. This, in turn, is easily taken to imply that God is a being than which a greater cannot be thought. If rational persons, who act by intellect and will, are then assumed to be the highest possible kind of being, Anselm’s
formula comes to imply that God is the supreme being in the sense of the supreme rational person. In this way, Anselm’s articulation of what it is to be worthy of worship is thought to entail the personal omniGod conception of the divine: the being a greater than which cannot be thought must be a rational person, but with power, knowledge, and goodness so great that no greater can be conceived.

Yet this derivation of a conception of God from Anselm’s formula will be regarded by some philosophers as falling short of authentic divinity. The charge may be made that the personal omniGod conception is anthropomorphic: God made in our image, rather than the reverse. To think of God as an incorporeal supreme mind, it may be complained, compromises the divine absoluteness, with God counted as an item amongst other existents, albeit an item of a unique kind.

 Properly anthropomorphic theism?

Some philosophers, however, defend the properly anthropomorphic character of any human conception of God. How else may we understand God other than by applying – through extrapolation across a vast ontological gulf – attributes whose meaning is familiar from our own case? At the same time, ‘Christians … take it for granted that God is infinite, transcendent, and ultimate (however precisely we gloss those terms)’ (Plantinga 2000: 4). Conceiving of God in familiar personal terms and accepting God’s ‘otherness’ are thus in tension: uncertainty in negotiating this tension is a major contributor to disagreement over the Christian conception of God.

Many theist philosophers hold that this tension achieves equilibrium in the personal omni-God conception, under which divine transcendence amounts to the unlimitedness of God’s power, knowledge and goodness. Plantinga, in effect, answers the divine rhetorical question posed in the epigraph he chooses for his first chapter, ‘With what can you compare me? Where is my like?’ (Isaiah 46:5): ‘Though you are unimaginably great, I can compare you to a human person’. This boldness is motivated by the conviction that the unsatisfactory alternatives are either to accept that God is a mystery beyond understanding or else hold an apophatic conception of the divine, characterised only in terms of what it is not. That conviction will be tested, however, by those who find the personal omniGod conception improperly anthropomorphic.

The Argument from Evil as directed against ‘omniGod’ anthropomorphism

Belief in a personal omniGod notoriously faces the challenge of the Argument from Evil. Hume’s (1779/1993) classic discussion in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion has theological anthropomorphism (championed by Cleanthes) as the Argument’s target, rather than theism as such – although Hume may well have thought that outright atheism would be the eventual outcome because a strictly non-anthropomorphic theism (championed by Demea) proves too religiously austere. This is not the occasion to consider the detailed dialectic of the responses personal omniGod theists make to the Argument from Evil. It will suffice to make two balancing, general observations.

First, and on the one hand, omniGod proponents remain confident that there is no inconsistency in accepting the reality of all the evil that exists while maintaining belief in God as a supreme personal agent who is both all-powerful and wholly good. From the perspective that accepts divine revelation, furthermore, they think it reasonable to hold that some evils do indeed appear pointless yet nevertheless fall within divine providence, whose operations transcend our limited knowledge. Finally, the resources of a Christian soteriology are deployed to
show that God can ‘defeat’ evil, and be good to each participant in ‘horrors’, through the wonderful redemption brought about in Christ.\(^8\)

Second, and on the other hand, the sense that there is something obnoxious about theodicy persists for many.\(^9\) Some endorse the ‘Ivan Karamazov’ claim that any agent who could have, but did not, prevent (for example) the torture of children could not be morally perfect, no matter what ‘higher good’ was at stake.\(^10\) Others observe that it sits uneasily with Christian ethics to allow that perfect goodness might trade off evils for the sake of outweighing goods: could the perfection of the supreme person really require only a straightforwardly utilitarian yardstick, while created persons are held to a higher moral standard? And, if God’s redemptive success compensates for all suffering, there is still room for anxiety about the overall quality of relationship that God would then have with created persons whom he first sustains through horrors and then redeems in the joy of eternal relationship with him.\(^11\)

Doubts such as these, if sustained, would not justify atheism but only the rejection of belief in a personal omniGod. An argument for outright atheism emerges only if whatever fills the God-role has to be the personal omniGod – and that condition is not obviously satisfied. It may be possible, therefore, for Christian believers to accept the Argument from Evil against the existence of a personal omniGod, and yet maintain their religious commitment. The intellectual integrity of that stance, however, requires an alternative conception of God. What could such an alternative amount to?

**A revisionist ‘anti-realist’ option**

One suggestion is the ‘anti-realist’ one already mentioned: Christian worship is an ethical orientation, so perhaps the Christian God, properly understood, amounts to a – potent, even indispensable – symbol for the highest ethical ideals?\(^12\) Talk of God would then be fictional, a ‘noble lie’. But such an anti-realist view must reject the strong tradition that holds it idolatrous to worship what we have ourselves constructed. Furthermore, Christianity understands commitment to its ideals as a fitting response to how things are, so Christians must at least accept meta-ethical realism – the ‘objective’ ‘mind-independence’ of ethical truth. God’s being a human construction may not, perhaps, itself entail that ethical truth has the same status. But the God who is the object of Christian worship is to be thanked and praised as ultimate source and goal of all that exists, and trusted unconditionally for help and transformative salvation: Christian understanding of these roles would need marked revision if God were strictly a fictional symbol. Short of such a radical revision, our conception of God must both fit God’s ethical supremacy and also meet the need for the object of worship to be ontologically supreme.

**Classical theism**

How could God be ontologically supreme and yet not be the supreme being in the form of the personal omniGod? God’s absolute transcendence was captured in classical theism by describing God as atemporal, immutable, impassible, necessary and simple. These attributes may helpfully be understood apophatically – as describing what God is not.\(^13\) ‘Negative theology’ protects divine transcendence, by emphasising that God is quite other than the existents of our experience which change, undergo processes, are contingent (have the potential to not-be), and instantiate general kinds (and are thus ‘composed’, in a certain sense, of ‘essence’ and ‘existence’).

While these classical attributes may be consistent with omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness, they seem impossible to reconcile fully with the metaphysics of God as a supreme personal agent. (Divine simplicity seems decisively excluded: the personal omniGod belongs to

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\(^8\) The text references the context of Christian God’s role in redemption.

\(^9\) Various theodical perspectives are explored.

\(^10\) Discussion on the moral implications of using utilitarian standards.

\(^11\) Further reflections on the tension between theodicy and personal God’s role.

\(^12\) Meta-ethical realism and its implications for the worship of God.

\(^13\) Classical attributes and their philosophical underpinnings are elaborated.
the kind ‘personal agent’ and there must be ‘composition’ in one who acts by intellect and will. What positive alternative to the personal omniGod, then, may classical theism offer? It will not be enough to characterise God purely apophatically. A God who is not this, not that, and not the other may transcend ordinary existents only by failing to be real altogether!

**Tradition-mediated conceptions**

Positive characterisations of the divine of a certain sort are easily come by. Anselm had no doubt that that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought was, in fact, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. There are multiple descriptions of the ‘filler of the God-role’ in terms of how God has been experienced within any given theist tradition. Appealing to these tradition-mediated conceptions is sufficient to rebut the challenge that the conception of a God who is not temporal, not changeable, etc. is, quite simply, the conception of nothing at all.

Will it be satisfying to leave it at that? One may ask of any tradition-mediated description of God just what it is, exactly, of which that description is true. The distinction between concept and conception makes only a relative contrast: any conception will consist in a description, and might therefore be treated as a more specific account of the God-role. But it would be a mistake to infer that knowledge of the divine will be achieved only when we know what it is in itself. Articulate knowledge of who or what God is will have to consist in some definite description. Would it suffice to rest with the descriptions supplied by tradition-mediated conceptions – the One who brought Israel out of Egypt, who raised the crucified Jesus, etc.?

**Faith seeking understanding – and its limitations**

The metaphysically curious will want to understand the metaphysical status of the referent of these tradition-based descriptions. But why should that concern philosophers of religion? One – lame – answer is that it is intrinsic to their philosophical calling to care about metaphysics. A better answer is that the urge to understand beyond tradition-based descriptions is not an external metaphysical imperative but arises from religious consciousness itself. As noted, the theist traditions have a horror of idolatry. Theism therefore generates a religious requirement for open-ended reflective understanding of the nature of the God putatively experienced as self-disclosing. Theist faith must indeed be ‘faith seeking understanding’. There are, however, limits to that understanding. God is incomprehensible – not in the contemporary sense that he is unintelligible, but in the sense that the understanding we should seek and may attain can never be complete. To act as if one were in possession of full comprehension of the divine would be high idolatry.

**Need God be a person?**

That high idolatry is avoided by the negative theological aspects of classical theism. A faith seeking understanding must nevertheless engage with the positive metaphysics of the divine – even if only to avoid attachment to inadequate theories. That requires entering the fray, in a suitably fallibilist spirit. What metaphysics may be proper to Christian faith, then, if not that of the personal omniGod? One important question is whether any alternative would still have to understand God as a person.

Relating to God personally is essential to Christian spirituality. Jesus himself relates to God as Father: that entails – many suppose – that Christians must understand God as a person. Accordingly, many find classical theism spiritually barren and welcome its evolution into personal omniGod
Christian conceptions of God

theism through discarding those attributes – impassibility and simplicity, especially – that do not match the reality of person-to-person interaction between God and humanity.\(^{15}\) (Personal omniGod theism is thus often assumed by analytical philosophers simply to be the ‘classical’ view.)

It is fallacious, however, to infer from the efficacy or even necessity of our relating personally to something that the thing concerned is a person. Well-designed computer or robot interfaces may require us to deal personally with machines, yet they do not become persons thereby. The same goes for institutions, corporations, and other groups, although these may at least be legal persons. These examples may seem not to carry weight for the theological case, however, since machines and institutions seem ‘less than’ persons. Anyone who denies God is a person is typically assumed to ‘de-personalise’, \textit{ego} diminish, the divine. Yet a non-personal divine may be advocated because a personal God is thought ‘too small’: what is urged is not a de-personalising, but a \textit{trans}-personalising that understands God as transcending personhood, yet genuinely ‘imaged’ in personal existence and properly related to by created persons in interpersonal ways.

\section*{Analogical predication and ‘the image of God’}

Since we may not simply ‘read off’ a metaphysical understanding from the mode of relationship with the divine that is essential to Christian spiritual psychology, conceptual space opens up for a conception of God that does not take ‘him’ to be a person. Occupying that space may nevertheless be problematic. Those with a non-personal conception will have to treat as purely metaphorical the vast number of scriptural, liturgical, and prayerful references to God in personal terms. But if the personal God is ‘just’ a metaphor, Christian belief cannot be what generations of believers have supposed. Proponents of a non-personal conception may thus provoke the same reaction as do anti-realists: the accusation that their conception of God renders the mass of believers misguided, and the truth accessible only to a philosophical elite. Christian catholicity must oppose such Gnosticism!

In response, it may be argued that personal attributes apply to God non-metaphorically, yet without God’s literally being a person, because they apply \textit{in some analogical sense}.\(^{16}\) Properties whose meaning we understand from the human case may then, without equivocation, be attributed to a God who belongs to a quite different category. If this doctrine of analogy can be satisfactorily filled out, our entrenched personal attributions to God may be consistent with rejecting the metaphysics of the divine as a supernatural person.

This doctrine of analogy receives support from the doctrine of humanity created in God’s image. Our essential personal characteristics may be thought of – and this is \textit{itself} an analogy, of course – as images in us of the divine nature. That does \textit{not} entail that the divine is a person, since it is typical for an image to be a different kind of thing from that which it ‘images’.\(^{17}\) Personal attributes may thus apply to God by analogy without any implication that God shares an ontological kind with us. Ontologically, our personal attributes have their source in the divine. The trans-personal divinity they ‘image’ we will not fully comprehend. Yet, because those attributes ‘image’ divine reality, we may use them as the source for \textit{analogical} understanding of that reality.

Meaningful analogical understanding depends, however, on \textit{some} positive grasp of the analogy’s trans-personal target: only then may the justice of the analogy be shown. Otherwise attributions which \textit{are} metaphorical will not be distinguishable from those which analogically convey an understanding of God’s properties. Speaking of Jesus as raised to God’s ‘right hand’, for example, is a metaphor for the perfection of his human participation in the divine. But when we speak of God’s anger at injustice, or God’s will that we love one another, we refer analogically to actual divine properties – though God no more has emotions or ‘a’ will than he
has a right hand. No proper ground for this distinction exists, however, without some positive account of the nature of the divine, of our personal existence, and of the relation between them. Appealing to analogous predication, then, secures personal language about the divine even if God is quite other than a person: those analogous attributions do not, however, convey in themselves an adequate understanding of the positive nature of the divine.

**Attenuated personal conceptions**

Philosophers who propose alternatives to the personal omniGod may be divided into two groups. The first group is unpersuaded that the metaphysics of the divine could differ markedly from the experienced object of Christian spirituality, and remains committed to a conception of God as a supreme person. The second group is convinced that the greatness of God transcends personhood, even though God is ‘imaged’ in persons and open to description by analogy with their attributes.

Philosophers in the first group in some way *attenuate* the personal omniGod conception in characterising their understanding of God. Open theists, for example, hold that God cannot control or know in advance how free agents will act, thereby limiting divine power and knowledge. Process theism further postulates a reciprocal relation between God and created beings in which the latter’s creative contribution to the world’s development is essential. Developmental theism speculates that God changes, developing from an exuberant primordial omnipotence into a morally perfect being no longer all-powerful.

Such attenuated conceptions present a personal God that conforms to the living God of the scriptures more closely than the God of classical theism or even the personal omniGod. Some attenuated conceptions are also more in tune with paradoxical Christian ideas about divine power, reigning *on the cross* in the suffering of Jesus. Whatever makes this power – scandalously – the power that is authentically supreme, it is not omnipotence as construed by analytical philosophers. Conceptions of God that attenuate omnipotence, then, fit better with the Incarnation and *kenosis*, the ‘emptying’ of the divine in becoming incarnate – or, even, in the act of creation itself. Attenuating omnipotence has the evident further advantage that it helps with the problem of evil. (Conceptions that attenuate God’s perfect goodness – which would also yield a ready response to the Argument from Evil – are, unsurprisingly, not common currency, although the God-character in the Scriptures acts on occasion quite immorally according to any reasonable moral consensus.)

**Pantheism and its limits**

How are trans-personal alternatives to the personal omniGod generated? What could have divine supremacy other than a supreme person? The Universe – all that is – may seem a likely candidate for ontological supremacy, and might count as divine provided it constitutes an overall organic *unity*. Christianity does see the Universe as such a unity, but interprets it as the unity of *creation*, and identifies the divine as Creator, the source and goal of that unity, rather than as the unity itself. The Christian conception of divinity thus transcends any purely pantheist conception, yet incorporates the pantheist conviction that the Universe is a meaningful, purposive, whole.

**The divine as explanatory ultimate**

That God is Creator is essential to the God-role. Only something that counts as Creator *ex nihilo* could be God, since God must be creator of all else, not merely transforming what already exists.
but creating ‘from nothing’. This aspect of the God-role is open to a more fundamental characterisation, however. God is the ultimate explainer of all else, in the sense that God’s reality has itself no need of further explanation. The divine has to be a non-arbitrary stopping place for explanation of the relevant kind. But what kind of explanation is that?

**God as ultimate productive cause**

A common answer is that the kind of explanation in which God counts as ultimate explainer is causal explanation, where causal explanation explains an effect in terms of what produces it. God must then be the ultimate producer of all else, and therefore be, himself, a necessarily unproduced producer. For God to have this status he must be a supernatural agent: the only alternative is for the Universe to be its own producer, and this may be ruled out on the grounds that a cause must be distinct from its effect.

If a supernatural agent that produces the Universe has to be a person, then God’s explanatory ultimacy will require a conception of God as an immaterial person, though perhaps not necessarily fully omnipotent. Yet the idea of a supernatural personal agent who produces the Universe runs into difficulty. First, its own existence will need, for some non-arbitrary reason, not to require causal explanation, and so must be necessary. But some will either doubt the coherence of the idea of a concrete entity that cannot but exist or else suspect that appeal to this notion is ad hoc. Second, a supernatural personal cause produces independently of any material medium; understanding how this is a coherent possibility faces difficulties familiar from interactionist mind–body dualism. Third, the causal influence of the ultimate producer of all that exists will be pervasive and perhaps too dominating. If the ultimate producer is itself a person, how can created persons be significantly free in their decisions and actions? The Argument from Evil threatens, of course, since the ultimate producer seems complicit in all evil doing and suffering. This third set of problems, however, may prove less serious on conceptions of the personal creator that relax the ‘omni-’ attributes, and place God’s creative activity at some distance from the actions of free creatures.

Could the unproduced producer of all be other than a supernatural person? An influential tradition conceives of God as ‘Existence itself’ or ‘Being’. When Moses encounters God in the burning bush and asks what he is to say when the Israelites ask for God’s name, God replies: ‘I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I am has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). The conception of God as Being is often taken to be the classical positive conception of the divine, since Aquinas says that God is *ipsa esse subsistens*. Existence itself, however, seems to be either a universal or another name for all that exists; in neither case does it seem that Existence itself could be the unproduced producer. Tillich describes God as ‘the Ground of Being’, but this serves only as a placeholder for a non-personal creator until a positive account of this ‘ground’ is given.

**God as ‘the ultimate point’**

To think of God’s ultimacy as belonging to the productive causal order may be misleading, however. That interpretation brings theological explanation uncomfortably close to natural scientific explanation, exposing theism to being misunderstood as bad scientific theory. If God is the ultimate productive cause, scientific explanations are not complete in their own domain, since an added supernatural cause will be required for them to ‘terminate’. Yet there seems little theoretical gain in appeal to the supernatural over the ‘naturalist’ acceptance that scientific explanations rest on foundational facts about the laws of nature.
But theological explanation does not aim to add to theoretical scientific explanation: it purports to explain what is wholly outside the scientific domain. To explain existence as God’s creation is to explain it as a unity that exists for a purpose and is, in that sense, a meaningful whole. Furthermore, it is to explain it as having and achieving a supremely good purpose. God’s reality is thus explanatorily ultimate as that which makes meaningful human (and, indeed, all) existence and does not stand in need of anything beyond itself to give purpose to its own reality. God is the necessarily final answer to the question ‘what’s the point?’: an answer that, according to Christianity, holds firm in the face of everything that seems to annihilate worth.

This account of theological explanation restores the ethical to its place, but not by displacing the ontological. It is God’s reality that explains why anything exists – an explanation in terms not merely of causality, but of what gives the Universe worth, and makes it worthwhile for its human creatures. God’s reality thus makes fitting the responses of thankfulness, hope and trust at the core of the ethos of Christian worship.

**What is ‘salvation’?**

God also has salvific ultimacy: human salvation comes from God alone. Salvation is salvation from sin, understood as the condition that blocks our wholehearted commitment to and proper enjoyment of the ideal of supreme goodness which, according to Christianity, is to live in agape, love. ‘Sins’, in the plural, are transgressions against the law of love. Sin itself is a condition at the root of moral failure, and ‘original’ in the sense that humans are intrinsically disposed to it. At the individual level, sin at its core is the tendency to egotism, to behave as if one were oneself the controlling authority over one’s life and the centre of what matters most. Some validate this egotism by rejecting love as a remote ideal whose law only a fool would try to live by ‘in the real world’. Others recognise love’s concrete worth, yet sin persists for them as despair at the world’s moral indifference, with the rain (and worse) falling on the just and the unjust alike. Sin is also understood as a collective, ecological, and even cosmic condition, cutting off nations, humanity, and all creation from full enjoyment of the good.

God is the one who saves from sin. At the individual level, this requires that God’s reality makes it irrational to treat love as a remote ideal, whether in self-assertive egotism or with moralising despair. God also enables individuals to be ‘born again’ as selves liberated from selfishness and false self-reliance who can therefore love freely.

**How can a personal God be both creator and saviour?**

When God is understood as a person, filling both the creator and the saviour role creates tension. As creator, God must have presided over the origination of the sin from which he saves his creatures. If God’s overall creative power can somehow be coherently limited so that any implication that God is personally responsible for sin is blocked, it may then be doubtful whether God has power enough to achieve a worthwhile salvation. For example, if – as process theism suggests – we share actively in the grand drama of the developing creation, and God suffers with us, what is the ‘cash value’ of its being God who suffers with us? Could a God who lacks final control be the saviour who ensures the victory of the good?

A lot depends on how wide and full ‘salvation’ is supposed to be: there has, of course, been much Christian controversy over this question. Its importance here is its bearing on the fitness of a given conception of God to fill the saviour-role, since what that requires will vary according to different notions of the nature and extent of salvation. If, for example, salvation has to be universal, with all ‘participants in horrors’ – perpetrators as well as victims – finally
reconciled and redeemed in the joy of eternal relationship with God.\textsuperscript{24} then a personal God would surely have to be the omniGod. Indeed, an omnipotent person with the power to save all would be unjust or at least mean-spirited if he did not — and morally monstrous if he deliberately pre-destined only an ‘elect’ for salvation. A ‘Calvinist’ picture in which only some are saved under the providence of a wholly good creator would make more moral sense, however, if the personal God’s power to save were somehow limited (as on a process theological view, for example — though Calvin held no such view, of course: he was a classical theist).

A non-personal saviour?

How could a non-personal conception of God fill the saviour role? An interesting recent proposal in the ‘theology of Being’ tradition that explicitly recognises the saviour role is due to Mark Johnston. For God, the Highest One, ‘to be of salvific interest,’ Johnston (2009: 94) argues, it must be the ‘common source’ of transformative grace. Submission to God’s grace will be necessary if we are to live well, acquiring the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love that are needed properly to come to terms with the ‘large scale structural defects in human life that no amount of psychological adjustment or practical success can free us from’ (ibid. 15).\textsuperscript{25} Johnston proposes a Heideggerian ‘process panentheism’, according to which the Highest One is identified with ‘the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence Itself’ (ibid. 116). Instead of God as Being, then, God is the activity of Being.

How could the ‘outpouring’ of Existence itself be salvific? It is, Johnston says, ‘a process that makes up all of reality, and, arguably, to affirm this process and thoroughly identify with it is to truly love God’ (ibid. 116). ‘Affirming’ and ‘identifying with’ Existence’s outpouring amount to accepting it in a positive spirit: but God’s reality is supposed to make that response — and, indeed, the more complex one of hopeful commitment to the ideals of love — the apt and fitting response to how things are. It is hard to see how ‘things doing their thing’ (if that is a fair gloss) can be enough for that, even when it is added that they do their thing ‘in order to’ make themselves known.

God as the Good

The Christian view of ‘Being’ is that it ‘does its thing’ ultimately for the sake of the Good: our human existence is meaningful through its potential for participation, by divine grace, in realising the Good. Further content for a conception of God in the ‘theology of Being’ tradition may thus be supplied by emphasising the purpose for which Being discloses itself, namely for the sake of the Good.

There is a Platonic tradition that has influenced Christianity that directly identifies God with the Good. Classical theism holds that God is his goodness (a consequence of divine simplicity). Could this understanding qualify as an adequate Christian conception?

Goodness itself is a universal: how, then, could it fit God’s role as creator? John Leslie has defended the coherence of axiarchism, the thesis that the Universe exists because it is ethically required, taking his cue from Plato’s assertion that the Good, itself ‘beyond existence’, is ‘what gives existence to things’ (Republic, Book VI).\textsuperscript{26} Axiarchism has to hold that the Universe is overall good despite suffering and sin, a stance open to ethical critique as arguably encouraging in its adherents too quiescent an attitude to evil. Nevertheless, since it is good that the Universe should be hospitable to the good, making the hopeful pursuit of the highest ideals reasonable and accessible through ‘overcoming self’, once it is conceded that, thanks to axiarchism, the Good
can play the creator role it seems it must also be accepted that it plays the saviour role (salvation from complacency in the face of suffering and injustice will thus be accommodated on this conception as much as on any other).

**Beyond productive causality?**

The principle that a thing’s ethical requiredness can produce its actual existence seems far-fetched, however: ethical requiredness explains that it *would* be good for the required thing to exist, but more is needed, surely, to explain how it *actually* comes to be if it does? It may be a mistake, however, to assume that the Christian theological explanation of the Universe’s existence must be an explanation that posits an ultimate *productive cause* of all that exists.

As already argued, divine ultimacy is *ontological* and *ethical*: God is a greater than which cannot be conceived both *ontologically* and *ethically*. But perhaps ontological greatness is not equivalent to – and may even necessarily transcend – absolute priority in the order of productive causality? Theological explanation of the Universe will be bound to have *some* unique feature, and the present question is whether God’s having the status of the necessarily existent unproduced producer is the right kind of uniqueness. It is, of course, a constraint on the theological explanation of the Universe that it be sufficiently analogous to familiar forms of explanation to be intelligible as an explanation. Build too transcendent a uniqueness into your theological explanation and you will be bound to sacrifice intelligibility. Nevertheless, the idea that the Universe’s existence might ultimately be explained in terms of the Good may be intelligible even though the Good is not the kind of thing that could be the *productive* cause of the Universe, or, indeed, of anything. But how so?

How can the Good, the ethically ultimate, also be ontologically ultimate? How else could the Universe’s *existence* be explained by the Good, if this explanation does not proceed by citing the Universe’s ultimate producer? To recognise something as good, as worthwhile, is to *make sense of it from the perspective of our practical engagement with the world* (‘practical’ is used here in the broadest sense that includes contemplative engagement). The Genesis creation stories are presented in terms of creative production (of a unique kind, where the creator says ‘let it be’ and it is), but their real force is to make sense of the Universe as a worthwhile and well-ordered cosmos with which finite agents may engage to their own fulfilment. (In Genesis 1, ‘And God saw that it was good’ is repeated following the stage by stage accounts of creation, and the chapter’s final verse concludes: ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good’.)

**A ‘euteleological’ conception**

Seeing the Universe as ‘very good’, and hospitable to human commitment to the Good, may be vital for the stance of the engaged agent. But it seems a matter of *placing an interpretation* on the world, rather than *explaining* its existence. Perhaps, then, explanation is not – at this level – what is important? Alternatively, perhaps something may be added to the interpretation that yields an explanation without recourse to an ultimate productive cause? For, Christianity is not only an invitation to see one’s engagement with the world in a positive light, it is a proclamation, based on a claim to revelation, that the world *makes reasonable* the hopeful pursuit of the highest ethical ideal, revealed in Christ as the ‘law’ of love.

Christianity understands God as the end, or purpose, of the Universe, and not only as its source: God is ‘alpha and omega’. A teleological addition is thus fitting: it is not just that the Universe is good, it has the good as its *telos*, and it exists *for the sake* of the good. Of course, something may be directed upon an end, yet not achieve it. The theological explanation of the
Universe cannot, then, amount just to the fact that the Universe has the Good as its end. If the Universe’s end, the Good, is actually realised, however, then a euteleological explanation of it becomes available: the Universe exists so that the Good may be realised and ultimately only because the Good is realised. (Adding the ‘eu-’ prefix thus connotes the ‘good news’ that the Good is not a mere ideal but is fully realised and so realisable within the Universe.)

Many will suppose that the Universe could be directed upon an end only if some agent so directs it with that end in mind: if that is correct, attending to teleology will return us to a personal conception of the divine as ultimate producer. But the euteleological proposal maintains that the reduction of teleological to productive causal explanation does not apply to its explanation of the Universe. Here, then, is a different way in which theological explanation of the Universe could be unique, and, arguably, still bear enough similarity to teleological explanations generally to remain intelligible, if not fully comprehensible (as noted, no religiously authentic theological explanation could be fully comprehensible). On the euteleological conception, then, God’s reality is identified with the Universe’s being directed upon the Good as its telos, and existing ex nihilo because it realises that ultimate, most final, end.

‘God is love’

Christianity holds that, in Christ, the Incarnate Word, the true character of the divine and the fullness of what it is to be truly human are revealed. God is revealed as love, with Christ’s living and dying showing the pattern of that love and its power. That God is love – where this is more than metonymy for God’s being a supremely loving person – deserves serious philosophical consideration as a Christian conception of the divine. This conception fits well with what is perhaps the most comprehensible interpretation of the distinctive Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the ‘social’ interpretation, according to which what is primarily divine is the loving society into which the persons of the Trinity enter. God may then be understood as the eternal love that unites the Trinitarian persons, with created persons ultimately destined by divine grace for ‘divinisation’ in the sense of participating in that eternal love.

Christian doctrines of Incarnation (the divine as manifest in its full character within the natural Universe), of the Trinity, and of God’s nature revealed as love, place constraints on what can fill the Christian God-role. Philosophical accounts of the Christian God often do not place much weight on meeting these constraints, or else suppose that doing so is straightforward. Reconciling the dominant personal omniGod conception of the divine with viable interpretations of these doctrines may not be easy, however. Can God really be a personal substance and also consist of three such substances? How could the supernatural ‘person without a body’ be incarnate as fully divine in Jesus? How could a personal God be love, if that does indeed go beyond being loving?

A ‘God is love’ theology may do better in accommodating doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. But can love fill either the creator or the saviour roles essential for the God of Christian worship? Will those roles not require recourse to a supernatural personal agent? Perhaps not necessarily. With love identified as the supreme good, both the axiarchic and the euteleological conceptions offer a way of interpreting how love itself, in the absence of supernatural agency, could be creator ex nihilo. (Note, incidentally, that under the euteleological conception the Universe’s existence is explained in terms of love as its telos only if love is actually realised in the Universe – so this conception of the divine has incarnation as a logical consequence.)

As to the saviour role, Christian revelation holds that true spiritual power is the power of love, victorious in the risen Christ, and poured out on the Church and ‘all flesh’ in the coming
of the Holy Spirit. It is love as manifest in Christ that has the power to transform our selfishness and despair and enable our participation in its own full reality: love thus has a power to reproduce itself. Whether love’s fecund power could, without supernatural intervention, be power enough to bring a worthwhile salvation may be moot, however: but those who dare to think so may be able to build ‘God is love’ into a genuine alternative to conceptions of the divine as a supreme supernatural personal agent.

It is often said that, though God is love, we must beware of holding that love is God. That observation may be intended to alert us to the meaning of ‘love’ in this context: agape, love after the pattern of Christ, which can be understood only open-endedly in lived experience. But the observation may also convey that one should not identify actual cases of agape in action and relationship – even their historical sum – with the divine, and it might be objected that a naturalist (in the sense of ‘anti-supernaturalist’) ‘God is love’ theology must make just such a problematic identification. That trap could be avoided, however, by emphasising the distinction between the divine reality and its manifestations or incarnations. While the divine – love – is indeed fully realised in natural states of affairs within the Universe, God’s reality may be understood as transcending any of its incarnations. Again, recourse to the supernatural beckons, but may be avoided if divine transcendence is understood (as on a euteleological conception) as consisting in the Universe’s directedness upon, and existing in virtue of, the realisation of agape, the Good.

**Conclusion**

Philosophers who inquire into Christianity will find its concept of God secure enough. God is the sole proper object of worship, Creator ex nihilo, and the One who alone saves from sin and death. It is, however, controversial whether what fills the Christian God-role has to be the personal omniGod. What does fill that unique role will not be fully comprehensible, yet a faith that seeks understanding, as any faith that fears idolatry must, stands in need of an intelligible positive conception of the divine. To be adequate, such a conception must meet the need for both ontological and ethical supremacy. I have suggested that, with the divine reality recognised as making reasonable hopeful and steadfast commitment to living in accordance with the ideal of Christian love, alternatives to the conception of God as a person in supernatural control of the Universe do open up, not least the conception of God as that love itself, understood as the realised telos for the sake of which the Universe exists.

That the world is God’s good creation, hospitable to commitment to the highest ethical ideals, comes as good news. Christian faith accepts this good news in the face of the contrary evidence provided by evil – especially the evil done by political and religious institutions (that Jesus’ public death was religiously sponsored and politically authorised is essential to its Christian significance). Belief in God under any viable Christian conception, then, will be open to the objection that it is unreasonable given the facts of evil. A reflective Christian’s decision to endorse a given conception of God may be influenced by several kinds of consideration, including all those canvassed here. But one, I suggest, is paramount: namely, that God under that conception may be judged wholly good according to our best ethical understanding, itself informed – though not solely determined – by the moral content of Christian revelation.

**Notes**

1 Another kind of challenge is to the very coherence of the conception of God specified in Plantinga’s description. For a thorough inquiry into that question, see Swinburne (1977/1993).
Christian conceptions of God

2 See Johnston (2009: 6). Johnston notes the corollary that one cannot tell by introspection whether one believes in God: that which one takes to be God might, in fact, be an idol.

3 Feminist critique goes further, suggesting that the personal omniGod is a gendered, patriarchal construct. For a helpful overview of feminist philosophy of religion see Frankenberry (2011).

4 As David Burrell observes, ‘to picture God as an additional being over against or parallel to the universe itself will be to treat God similarly to objects within the universe, related to the universe itself as objects within the world are related to each other’ (1998: 72).

5 Peter Forrest has an interesting defence of what he calls ‘properly anthropocentric metaphysics’ (‘anthropomorphism’ he evidently supposes to be an intrinsically pejorative term) in Forrest 2007, Chapter 2, Section 2.

6 A major support for this confidence is the judgment that Alvin Plantinga’s ‘Free Will Defence’ succeeds in rebutting the ‘Logical’ Argument from Evil. See Plantinga (1974a; 1974b). For an important response see Mackie (1982).

7 Wykstra (1984)’s reply to Rowe (1979)’s ‘evidential’ version of the Argument from Evil has led to widespread discussion of so-called ‘skeptical theism’, thought by many to be the current ‘cutting edge’ of discussion of the Argument within analytical philosophy.

8 See Adams (1999). For discussions of the Argument from Evil as it relates specifically to the Christian concept of God, it is her work, perhaps, that has the best claim to be classed as ‘cutting edge’.

9 For a recent discussion and endorsement of ‘anti-theodicy’, see Gleeson (2012).


11 See Bishop and Perszyk (2011).


13 See Aquinas Summa Theologiae I, q 3, 9, and 10.

14 Fides quaerens intellectum is the stance Anselm (1078/1965), following Augustine, explicitly adopts in Proslogion.

15 See, for instance, Sarot (1992)’s defence of divine passibility.

16 This response was employed in classical theism – medieval doctrines of analogy are a major specialist subject: see Ashworth (2009).

17 Consider, for example, Magritte’s famous 1928–29 oil painting La trahison des images: a painting of a smoker’s pipe, with the inscription, ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (‘This is not a pipe’).

18 It might be suggested that, properly understood, Plantinga’s account of the divine with which I opened should be rephrased so that it does not hold that God is a person – only that God is analogous to a person. That view may be held by a philosopher who – unlike Plantinga – is a materialist about created persons, and so holds that ‘God’s being a person without a body’ involves an analogous extension from our understanding of personhood. Such a philosopher’s conception of the divine may still count, however, as personal omniGod theism: though not strictly a person (relative to the materialist view that a person is essentially physically realised), God may still be thought of as a free intentional agent responsible for his actions.

19 For open theism see for example Pinnock et al. (1994) and Sanders (1998); for process theism, see for example Cobb and Griffin (1976) and Hartshorne (1984); for developmental theism see Forrest (2007). Nagasawa (2008) argues that Anselmian theism (i.e., theism that accepts Anselm’s formula) need not entail personal omniGod theism, but only ‘the maximalGod thesis’ that ‘God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence.’ It may be doubted whether the degree of attenuation involved in a shift from a personal omniGod to a personal maximalGod is by itself sufficient to overcome objections to personal omniGod theism.

20 For a thorough consideration of pantheist conceptions of the divine, see Levine (1994).

21 Of course, Tillich does offer an account of what the ‘ground of being’ refers to. See, for example, Tillich (1955: 81 ff).

22 There may be good reason to think that God’s reality makes the Universe worthwhile for all its creatures – obviously, however, the value-world accessible to us is our own, just as the perceptual world accessible to us is our own.

23 Though collective salvation is at least equally important as individual salvation, I venture no account of it, noting only that it will presuppose an identification of the pathologies of collective sin – for example, the phenomena of herd behaviour, and the way institutions can cause harm despite the good intentions of the individuals who constitute them.

24 As Marilyn Adams supposes (see Adams 1999).

25 Johnston’s list of these ‘large-scale’ defects is as follows: ‘arbitrary suffering, aging (once it has reached the corrosive stage), our profound ignorance of our condition, the isolation of ordinary self-involvement,
the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and, finally, to untimely death’ (ibid. 15). As already hinted (note 94), certain collective defects may need to be added to this list.

26 See Leslie (1979, chapter 1; 1989, chapter 8).

27 Analytical philosophers have noted several different ways of interpreting social Trinitarianism: the one I have in mind is closest to ‘Perichoretic Monotheist Social Trinitarianism’ (see Tuggy 2009).

28 Swinburne (1994) comes close to answering this question in the affirmative.