



GRESHAM COLLEGE
Founded 1597

Supreme Being or Beyond Being? Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 5 November 2002 - 12:00AM



Supreme Being or Beyond Being?

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Last time I suggested that one fundamental difference between conceptions of the divine is whether God is identified with material world and immanent within it, or is contrasted with it and transcendent over it.

The second most crucial - and divisive - question across faiths is whether divinity is a personal entity or an impersonal reality. Is God a personal reality with whom we can form a relationship? Or is Ultimate Reality something which transcends the concept of personhood, not so much 'a being' as Being Itself?

This is often stereotyped as an East-West divide; or a divide between monotheists and monists. But in both the Indic traditions and in the Western monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we can find a more complex picture of how God is conceived in relation to something we might refer to as 'personality'.

If you consider something people in the West call 'Hinduism', it seems to be populated by a generous number of gods and goddesses, so it seems odd on the face of it for it to have acquired the reputation of not believing in a personal God. But when people think of Eastern religions without a personal god, they are usually thinking of the traditions of philosophical reflection like Advaita Vedanta. As we saw last time, for Shankara and other Vedantin thinkers, nothing is ultimately real except Brahman. Brahman, as ultimate reality, is unconditioned, indescribable $\frac{3}{4}$ but not an abstraction or nothing. It is being, eternal. It assumes different forms because it is its nature to express itself. Beyond name or form, it cannot even be separated into itself and its attributes. So, for example, it doesn't 'have consciousness'. Therefore Shankara says we cannot even speak of Brahman as knowing. We cannot describe Brahman by means of any attribute or name; but only by negation of all possible attributes. So Brahman is limitless, without distinction or character, unborn and unchanging, imperishable, devoid of form or parts, beyond cause and effect. It transcends knowledge and speech, and the best way to discuss it is, paradoxically, in silence. But positive ways of speaking include speaking of Brahman as the reality of realities, as truth, as bliss; as intelligence, consciousness or mind; all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present; and so on.

This does place a question mark against the usual characterisation of Shankara's Brahman as 'abstract' or 'impersonal'. Brahman is not an idea or a concept. An idea cannot be all-knowing, and a concept cannot experience pure bliss. What is true to say is that Brahman doesn't have emotional reactions, or boundaries to its being that marks off its identity from that of others. Does that mean that Brahman is 'not a person'? Perhaps it depends on what you think the essential qualities of personhood are. (There is a reason that I have not chosen to start this lecture with the philosopher's etiquette of defining my terms; in this case, 'person'. It has to do partly with the fact that who or what a person really is, is highly contested and not simply a term in a dictionary.)

However, this is not the end of the story, even for Advaita Vedanta and other monist traditions who don't see the ultimate reality or deity as a divine person.

For Brahman is not only 'nirguna Brahman' - ultimate reality beyond attributes. There is also what they call 'saguna Brahman' - Brahman with attributes. Another term used for this is 'Ishvara' (often translated into English as 'Lord'). Ishvara is a mode of Brahman's expression that is the cause of the world and makes the empirical world possible. One way of describing Ishvara is as Brahman when viewed from the perspective of ignorance. When viewed through the veil of ignorance, Brahman is seen 'as it were' (Shankara's phrase) as Lord, Creator, one with qualities. It is no longer an impersonal absolute, but takes on the qualities of the Governor of the Universe. This is 'God' as immanent in the world, as the inner self, the 'inner ruler'; the judge of individual souls who gives rewards, according to the laws of karma.

Other traditions in Indian religions do not see the deity ultimately as this impersonal reality of nirguna Brahman. The Nyaya tradition sees God as one; omniscient and omnipotent, by which he guides the universe, who directs souls inspiring them to act in accordance with their karma. This God is involved in the creation of the universe. In the Yoga religious tradition, God is a single self, perfect, free from affliction, dispositions, ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, fear of death. This God does not perform actions, good or bad but as it were rises above action. Ten qualities are ascribed to God in the Yoga system: knowledge, detachment, lordship, austerity, veracity, forgiveness, patience, creative power, self-knowledge, superintendence. (Detachment means being free from desires and selfishness.) This God is personal, because he has understanding and is

compassionate to individuals. Many Upanishadic texts also speak of Brahman in personal terms; as a 'shining, immortal person'¹; 'the Supreme Person of sunlike colour beyond the darkness...'²

Ramanuja considers Brahman to be personal, not as 'bare identity'. Religious feeling, he says, can find no meaning in an impersonal 'absolute', with no qualities and no feeling, no thought and no will. This doesn't meet our deepest needs, especially for fellowship and communion with an other. The Supreme Other then must be a personality.

'To Ramanuja, then, God is a person, and because he is a person, he is the unifying principle that brings all things together, not into a featureless but organic unity. In such a unity we have an ordered system of relations in which the relations are not all of the same type nor the related all of the same kind. In Ramanuja's view this is the highest kind of unity and belongs peculiarly to personality or spirit. It is in personality alone that unity comes to express itself in purpose, in works, cognition, enjoyment and freedom.'³

Buddhism is frequently described as non-theistic. But if we glance at the range of traditions in Buddhism, the different kinds of writing and imagery, across centuries and nations and cultures, a more complex picture emerges. It is not unlike 'Hinduism' in that it encompasses a range of views from belief in gods or god-like beings, demons, Bodhisattvas to a firm insistence that there is no divine Being and that the Buddha is not a god. But even in its more philosophical, though still devotional forms, we find ways of speaking about Eternal Mind, or the Buddha himself, or Bodhisattvas in general that appeal to similar ideas and imagery as Vedantins or theists use to describe Brahman, or Jesus, or God. The Mahayana thinker Ashvaghosa writes of tathata - Suchness, or sometimes described as Buddha-nature - that it 'is fully provided with all excellent qualities...great qualities... great wisdom...true cognition...eternity, bliss, Self and purity...immutability and freedom'⁴. He also writes, 'True Mind is eternal, permanent, immutable, pure and self-sufficient.'⁵ Bodhisattvas, meanwhile, who vow to help to liberate all sentient beings, are said to be able to manifest themselves everywhere in the universe^{3/4}a clearly personal but more than human attribute. So although clearly one must not slip into speaking about the Buddhist 'God' as being eternal, immutable, etc., in the diverse strands of Buddhist writing the same or similar religious tendencies of description of what lies at the edges of ultimacy appear; and they appear both as having characteristics of the personal and as being beyond our ways of thinking about human persons.

This shifting between more and less personal ways of conceiving the divine is not foreign to Western thinking and the three monotheisms of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Certainly the picture of God as personal is salient in these three traditions. God is a personal sort of being, one you can have a relationship with, one with a name (or many names). God may or may not have attributes; but if (as in some Islamic debates) it is denied that God 'has' 'attributes', that does not seem to mean that God is unconditioned and undetermined and without qualities in the way that nirguna Brahman is.

And yet, all three traditions do contain thinkers or tendencies who strive to rise above what they feel are the limits of a personal Being. Certain German philosophers after Kant seemed to feel they had moved beyond cosy notions of such a Deity. Fichte said he couldn't describe God as personal, because 'personality' is essentially finite. 'Speaking in a purely philosophical manner, one would have to say of God: He is... not a being but pure activity, the life and principle of a super-sensible world-order.'⁶

It is not only those who 'speak in a purely philosophical manner' who depart from more personalistic language about God. The rich vein of the 'via negative', the way of negation in the Western monotheisms abounds in language which strains to go beyond the limits of human language, imagery and concepts. This can include the concept of 'person', if it seems in any way to circumscribe the transcendence of God. Less personal terms such as 'Actus Purus', pure act, 'Being Itself', self-subsistent being, or Ultimate Concern spring readily to the lips of theologians and philosophers who feel keenly the inadequacy of the white-bearded chap in the stratosphere. But mystics and other people with a strong spiritual experience also want to speak about 'the Ground of Being' rather than 'Father'; they too take the path of negation and that negation can include the category of 'person'.

The discussion of God as a 'person' (or not) in Western traditions usually focuses on the problem of anthropomorphism. It is a constant embarrassment for sophisticated thinkers in Judaism, Christianity and Islam that on the one hand God is above all creatures, and yet the Scriptures continually portray him using imagery drawn from human beings. It gets worse when ordinary religious believers go on to take such language literally. God sees, hears, is angry, jealous, bares his holy arm, is a man of war, and so on. It is particular problem whenever belief in God is ridiculed, and people who do believe in God have to add health warnings against an old man with a long white beard in the sky.

Stewart Guthrie, in what he offers as a new theory of religion, says that religion just is anthropomorphism⁷. Anthropomorphism

is a basic perceptual strategy we have^{3/4}we see it in our propensity to see faces in the clouds or the moon, to see the face of Jesus in a tortilla, to imagine human emotions in our pets, human figures in root vegetables and so on. We find it in literature, art, advertising, and of course, concepts of God. Since according to Guthrie religion is anthropomorphism, he thinks any attempts to create a notion of God without being anthropomorphic are doomed to failure. But clearly he thinks that this anthropomorphism, and therefore belief in God, are illusory.

Given that the norm in elevated discussions is to decry anthropomorphism, I want to make a different suggestion. There is, I suggest, something we can call 'deanthropomorphism'. By this I mean language about God which has not successfully escaped anthropomorphism, but has just stripped away its telltale signs.

Its forerunner is Ludwig Feuerbach, who in *The Essence of Religion*⁸ lets us see that the de-anthropomorphised God is the essence of reason. Feuerbach intends this as a compliment. But I think it shows us what has happened here. We have still made God in our own image; we have just selected a different aspect to deify: reason. Human reason, human logical requirements have been made divine and Maximally Great; God is that than which nothing more reasonable can be conceived.

This little lapse is characteristic, I represent, of much of present-day philosophy of religion. In discussions of whether or not God can suffer, be acted upon, or feel emotions - God's impassibility - we find, reasonably enough, suggestions that it is anthropomorphic to suggest that God can. But can it not also be anthropomorphic to say that God must not?

Brian Davies OP, as a follower of Thomas Aquinas, would certainly want to rise above crude anthropomorphism. Indeed, one of his reasons for opposing the idea that God can feel emotions or be affected by anything is that such an idea is anthropomorphic. Here is how he argues against the idea that God could be affected by another: 'God would seem to be something vulnerable and defective.'⁹ 'If that were true, then God could be out of control and something could have its way with him and be capable of acting independently of him.'¹⁰

Here we still see the embodiment of human fantasy. Not, on this occasion, the fantasy of Big Daddy, who feels so strongly about us that he can become emotionally worked up by our sorrows. The anthropomorphism is less infantile but perhaps more adolescent than that: God as James Bond, neither shaken nor stirred, never out of control. It is the morphe of a different anthropos, that is all; one who fears loss of control, and who equates receptivity with vulnerability, and openness with defectiveness.

At the same time, much contemporary philosophy of religion fails to do away with a crude anthropomorphism that can still take hold where human reason can invent a logical problem for God, as in problems concerning the compossibility of attributes. One of example of this is the 'stone paradox'. This is a logical trap for God's omnipotence: can God make a stone that is too heavy for him to lift? - Either way you answer it, if you play the game by its rules, God is not omnipotent. - But do you think a transcendent God puts together rocks - let alone picks them up? Do you think God is in trouble, as a being lacking in power, if He does neither?

The Indian Muslim Nagendra Singh writes: 'When God is named it means that he is brought into the human context and we talk about Him in terms which have relevance for us. Thus anthropomorphism in some form or other cannot be dispensed with.'¹¹ If that is so, it may not be so foolish to follow a strategy which Johann Georg Hamann called 'privileged anthropomorphism'. 'Privilege' here means not social status or wealth, but something bestowed though undeserved. In Hamann's theology, speaking of God in anthropomorphic terms has been explicitly licensed and welcomed by God. For Hamann the Christian, it finds its ultimate justification in God's Incarnation in Jesus: it was God's own choice to speak himself in human terms. Why are we too squeamish to do so? Hamann's theology stresses God's 'condescension'; a thoroughly positive term here, it portrays God everywhere as reaching out to us, at our level, communicating to us in ways and manners as lowly and unworthy as necessary for us to understand and respond.

This theme of divine condescension or accommodation is not a uniquely Christian idea. It is also part of Ramanuja's picture of God. 'How can a lame man climb on an elephant if you tell him to do so? Likewise how can an insignificant soul in this imperfect world...approach the Lord of All...? The answer is surely that the elephant can accommodate itself, kneeling down so that the lame man can mount. God likewise makes Himself very low so that He can be worshipped by the soul in this imperfect world.'¹²For Ramanuja, interestingly, as for Hamann the Christian, God's willingness to lower himself for the sake of communicating for us is seen pre-eminently in his willingness to become incarnate: 'But being a shore-less ocean of compassion, gracious condescension, motherly love and generosity, while still not losing his own inherent nature and attributes, he has assumed his own bodily form, which on each occasion has the same generic structure as one of the various

classes of creatures, and in these various shapes he has descended again and again to the various worlds where they dwell, where having been worshiped by these different kinds of creatures, he has granted them whatever they prayed for, whether meritorious action, wealth, physical pleasure, or deliverance, according to their own desire.' ¹³

Hamann sought out particularly striking ways to speak of God anthropomorphically. For example, he speaks of God playing in the garden of Eden with his creatures, not just taking an evening stroll and addressing them magisterially. Even more provocatively, he says he can't help thinking of God the creative spirit as possessing genitalia (and an oriental dressing-gown to cover them). This deliberately provocative language is a crucial part of the strategy of privileged anthropomorphism: use anthropomorphic language that is so concrete or inappropriate that we cannot possibly deceive ourselves about our incapacity to describe God in adequate ways. Draw the imagery of God not from those aspects of ourselves which are most abstract or most refined; draw on those gifts which are devalued or scorned: our embodiment, our childish play.

I have come to suspect there is another aspect to our ambivalence about anthropomorphism. Whose religions are anthropomorphic? - Do you find it plausible that the sun is a white cockatoo? Do you think it reasonable to suppose that a God you could believe in takes the form of a sweet potato?

Anthropomorphism is the language of the 'primitive'; the child, the uneducated, the 'native'. It is found in so-called 'indigenous religions'. It is a reason for rejecting the religious beliefs of those whom you intend to convert, or if necessary, to conquer. It is the religion, the theology or the spirituality of those who should not be allowed to keep it.

There is, I suggest, a connection between well-educated scorn of anthropomorphism and a tacit imperialism or even racism. Anthropomorphism is the foolishness of The Other; it does not mark our own thinking. Euro-American Christians who believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in bread and wine laugh at the idea that the Hawaiian god Lono could take the kinolau (body form) of a sweet potato. The civilised rejection of anthropomorphism therefore becomes a mode of superiority, cultural, personal or otherwise. Jean-Luc Marion, for example, distinguishes 'idols' (which are bad, of course) from 'icons', which are good and revelatory of God. But the inescapable impression from his work is that icons are what Europeans and Americans have, and idols are the religious imagery of the developing world and its religions. Anti-anthropomorphism thus becomes a mode of superiority, cultural, personal or otherwise.

A nicer way of saying it comes from Radhakrishnan: 'The monotheists are quite certain that the gods of the polytheists are symbolic if not mythological presentations of the true God, but they are loath to admit that their own God is at bottom a symbol. All religion is symbolic, and symbolism is excluded from religion only when religion itself perishes. God is a symbol in which religion cognises the Absolute.' ¹⁴

That is why I am happy for Hamann to speak of God's genitals and for the Sufi Rumi to speak of grasping God's skirt, while I am apparently scornful of the philosophers' God making rocks and then worrying about lifting them. But that is because neither Hamann nor Rumi have forgotten the symbolic nature of their language. They do not think that they have come up with the linguistic formula that adequately states how God must be. Many philosophers are guilty of thinking they have done just that.

One question, then, is which form of the human are you deifying? What is it about the human being that you are implicitly declaring admirable, exalted, and worthy of emulation? It is interesting to see which kinds of attributes or images are denigrated as mere anthropomorphism; they are often those warm and friendly characteristics that comprise so much of people's everyday faith. In contrast to Davies' concern about creatures having their way with God, we have this suggestion from Nagendra Singh: 'The most distinctive mark of personality is that God should respond to the call of His creatures.' ¹⁵

So in considering whether or not the divine is 'personal', we can ask: is it in fact anthropomorphism to speak of the divine in a personal way?

My answer is: anthropomorphism may be inescapable, as Guthrie suggests. It may be nigh on impossible for us to do other than imagine that reality is personal like us in some way, perhaps by imagining a Deity that we conceive as something that can relate to us. But if anthropomorphism is inescapable, I suggest that it is also 'privileged', as Hamann and Ramanuja suggest. God could be seen as not only tolerating, but encouraging us to imagine this. In short, our human limitation-that we always tend to perceive things in personal ways-may be genuinely revelatory. So it might well be anthropomorphic to see God as 'personal'³/₄so much the better for our understanding.

Last time I suggested that the apparent opposition between seeing God within the world and seeing God outside the world was

not in fact a pair of mutual exclusives. I spoke about the variety of answers on these issues as 'discourses', which could be united. I suggest now that even though personal vs. impersonal really do seem like opposites on the face of it, these too can be integrated.

We can start by questioning whether the terms 'personal' and 'impersonal' as used here are really opposites. How do they function in concepts of the divine? I suggested earlier that it might not be right to describe Brahman as 'impersonal'; and that it depends on what qualities you choose to include as essential to personhood. What we see instead is that Brahman clearly transcends certain limits or attributes which we see in human persons. But so does a 'personal' God, in the minds of most who believe in one. So 'personal deity' and 'impersonal Reality' may not be mutually exclusive opposites, but two different emphases which have been driven apart by the short-hand terms people use to characterise a complex reality which thinkers try to describe.

Next, we can view our tendency to speak of God as personal as a piece of inescapable but privileged anthropomorphism. It is an endearing little characteristic of ours to make God in our own image. Naturally God is more than that, but such symbols contain genuine insight. At the same time, we have another tendency. That is to strive beyond our limits; to perceive the confines of our thought, imagination, and language as something we must always negate, even if we cannot transcend them. So although we see anthropomorphism everywhere in religion, we see something else too: the insistence that God transcends everything, our knowledge, understanding and language; - and our tendency to anthropomorphism. Thus the religious discourses that speak of God as personal, and the discourses that depict the Ultimate as transcending the concept of person are both important religious impulses that should accompany and balance one another. As Radhakrishnan says, 'Personality is a symbol and if we ignore its symbolic character it is likely to shut us off from the truth.'¹⁶

There are three other strategies, or thoughts, I want to propose as ways of deconstructing this opposition between personal and impersonal visions of the divine.

One tactic we find among religious thinkers in many traditions is to draw a division between the knowable and the unknowable God; or the God with and the God without attributes; or the God that can be spoken about and the God that cannot, or barely can. This distinction is clearest in the distinction in Hinduism between Brahman and Isvara; or Brahman as Nirguna and as Saguna, as we have already seen. Even Ramanuja, who does not go in for this distinction in the way that Shankara does, has a polarity in his picture of God, between the God that is unknowable and the God that reaches out to us, above all in making himself incarnate.

A distinction roughly of this kind is not unknown in the West. Meister Eckhart makes a rather controversial distinction between 'God' and 'the Godhead'. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between God's Real Being and God's Intentional Being. 'Real being' is God as God is in himself, intrinsically. 'Intentional being' is something as it is perceived, known, experienced (intentional here signifying not 'deliberate' but 'as an object of someone's perception'). God's real being may be unchanging and impassible, while God's intentional being we can experience as responding to us in our pain.

Even Islam, so insistent on the unity of God, finds occasion to portray God in this twofold way. 'Ibn 'Arabi and his school were fully cognizant of this nominal dimension of the Godhead and His creation-oriented dimension and accordingly distinguished between wahid and ahad, God as manifest and God as supreme mystery beyond our reach. It is His transcendental absence that defies understanding. Only when God comes as a person, as a self in His I-ness that we can talk about Him and He talks to us. And as a consequence a dialogical relationship ensues between God and [humanity]....'¹⁷ But Singh, as a Muslim among Hindus, also goes on to observe: 'The distinction between nirguna brahman and saguna brahman is familiar to Hindu thought. But in the Quran the personal aspect of reality is not an illusion superimposed on a nameless reality, but its manifestation. Whatever we can say of God, we can say only in His personal dimension.'¹⁸ So in a characteristically monotheist way, he alludes to the transcendent unknowability of God, but also maintains that human language cannot but speak of a God who communicates in a personal way. This is not an inferior mode of God for Singh, but how the unknowable God manifests and reveals himself.

[For some, this is a distinction made with reference to our epistemological limits: that is, that there are limits to what we can know about God. For others, this is in fact a real, ontological distinction in God. There are those who see God as a being in evolution, as in 'process theology', which has a dipolar God. The German mystic Jakob Boehme also has a complex and unique picture of God that is differentiated into manifest and un-manifest, inner and relational.]

A third way of understanding personal language about God and its confines we can construct by taking a leaf from a book by

Barry Miller. Miller calls our attention to the concept in set theory of a 'limit case'. A limit case is not part of a set or series. It is something that, while not a member of the group, nevertheless sets a limit to it. For example, 0 miles per hour is not a speed - it is the absence of speed. But it sets a lower limit to the range of speeds without itself being a speed. The limit case, then, 'is that in which a defining characteristic of the members has been varied to the point of extinction', in other words, it does not belong to the series at all. ¹⁹

A series of lines getting shorter and shorter might be 'stopped' with a point; but a point is not a line, not even a tiny one, so it is a limit case of the set of lines. A series of polygons, with progressively greater number of sides, becomes 'rounder and rounder' and closer and closer to a circle. A circle, then, is that to which such a progressive series points, or 'implies', as it were-but a circle is not a polygon and does not actually belong to the series, and so a circle is the limit case of a series of polygons.

We can see personal language, or anthropomorphism indeed, in this way: as part of a series towards personhood. We feel our pet dogs, our horses, dolphins all partake of qualities that we feel as personal, even if some people think this is 'anthropomorphic'. God, then, is the limit case of personhood - not the best version of a person, but something outside the series, yet clearly pointed to by the concept of person. As a polygon points to a circle, aspects of the human person point to God: - as what transcends what we normally understand by person, but is a more perfect exemplar of being oneself and not other, yet being in relation to another; unconditional love.

Finally, one last idea: many philosophers of religion today fall into speaking about God as maximally great, as the most powerful, most knowing, etc. of all beings. I find this an undesirable approach. We can contrast it to the way Plato and Plotinus speak: God is not 'the best' but 'the source'. God is not the most good, but the source of goodness. God is not the best being, but the source of all being. In the same way, we could speak of God not so much as the best person, but as the source of all personhood. In this way God transcends our concept of person because a source is not the same as what it gives rise to. But God does not transcend the idea of 'person' by being non-personal; rather, God remains pure and unconditioned love and identity.

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2. Svetasvatara Upanishad, III.8
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4. Ashvaghosa (1967). *The Awakening of Faith*. New York, Columbia University Press, p. 65.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
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8. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Religion*, X, 14.
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13. Introduction to Ramanuja's commentary on the Bhagavadgita, reprinted in *Ibid.*, pp.96ff; this on p. 97.
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