

Issues in Thinking about God

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Week 6: God as Person and Trinity

- V. Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God*, Cambridge 1992
- P. Fiddes, *Participating in God. A pastoral doctrine of the Trinity*, London 2000
- C. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, Cambridge 1993

God as Person

- Can God be personal?
- Critique: person is limited (anthropomorphism):
- *What then do you call 'personality' and 'consciousness'? Surely that which you have found within yourselves, those aspects of yourselves with which you have become familiar and to which you have assigned those terms.*

JG Fichte: Critique of God's personality

- *By paying even minimal attention to your construction of those concepts you learn that you cannot think those without limitation and finitude. Thus by using those predicates you make the divine being finite, a being like yourselves, and you have not, as you meant, thought God, but merely multiplied yourselves in and through your ideas. (JG Fichte, On the basis of our belief in a divine governance of the world, 1799)*

Can God be personal?

- Difficulties with personal predicates don't lead to affirmation of non-personal predicates.
- God of the Bible must be 'personal' (cf. his justice, love, forgiveness etc.)
- He is *free* albeit it in a special sense (no deliberation, choice etc.).
- Human beings respond *to him* in faith, gratitude.
- He is an inspiration for one's own perfection.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995)

- *Totality and Infinity* (1960)
- *God, Death, and Time* (1993, ET: 2000)
- J. Bloechl (ed.), *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, New York 2000
- Philosophy is either 'ontology' which seeks to capture in a totalitarian fashion the world around us.

Levinas II

- Or it is 'metaphysics' which recognises the transcendence of the world outside ourselves.
- Encounter with the 'other', the 'neighbour' exposes this outside reality in its difference:
- *The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness. (Levinas, Totality and Infinity)*

Levinas III

- This encounter with the 'face' of the other places a demand on us, 'takes us hostage'.
- Ethics is thus foundational.
- God must be thought 'on the basis of ethics'.
- God is 'beyond being', but is approached not through meditation, but through an encounter with the fellow human.

Martin Buber (1878-1965)

- *I and Thou* (1923)
- H. Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, Indianapolis 2008 (ch. on Buber and Levinas)
- Two essentially different relationships: I-It; I-Thou.
- The 'I' is different in each of them.

Buber II

- *The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego and becomes conscious of itself as a subject (of experience and use). The I of the basic word I-You appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity (without any dependent genitive--i.e., without any "of" clause). (Buber, I and Thou)*

Buber III

- *When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things.*
- *He is no longer He or She, limited by other He's and She's, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighbourless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light.*

Buber IV

- Buber's notion of personal encounter is more positive than Levinas'.
- There is a special bond between the I and the You (Thou).
- This ultimately leads to the 'eternal You', God.
- Only in personal address is God rightly understood (not in I-It relationship).

Buber V

- *Some would deny any legitimate use of the word God because it has been misused so much. Certainly it is the most burdened of all human words. Precisely for that reason it is the most imperishable and unavoidable. And how much weight has all erroneous talk about God's nature and works (although there never has been nor can be any such talk that is not erroneous) compared with the one truth that all men who have addressed God really meant him?*

Buber VI

- *For whoever pronounces the word God and really means You, addresses, no matter what his delusion, the true You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other and to whom he stands in a relationship that includes all others.*
- *But whoever abhors the name and fancies that he is godless--when he addresses with his whole devoted being the You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other, he addresses God.*

Person and Trinity

- God as a person or as 'three Persons'?
- Trinitarian theology sparked off debate about concept of personality
- Some have argued that today reference to 'Persons' in the Trinity is misleading (Barth, Rahner)
- God is 'Person' in several 'modes of being'.

John Zizioulas

- *Being as Communion* (1985)
- Trinitarian theology in the 4th century meant a 'revolution in ontology'.
- *Entities trace no longer their being to being itself – but to the person, to precisely that which constitutes being, that is, enables entities to be entities. In other words, from an adjunct to being (a kind of mask) the person becomes the being itself and is simultaneously – a most significant point – the constitutive element of beings.*

Zizioulas II

- *Among the Greek Fathers the unity of God, the one God, and the unity of the 'principle' or 'cause' of being and life of God does not consist in the one substance of God but in the hypostasis, that is the Person of the Father.*
- *Hypostasis is not merely individual, but 'person'.*

Zizioulas III

- Person is based on the notion of freedom.
- Being is 'product of freedom'.
- *God 'exists' on account of a person, the Father, and not on account of a substance.*
- The root of this discovery is 'ecclesial experience' (the relevant fathers were all bishops)

Zizioulas IV

- *The experience [of the ecclesial being] revealed something very important: the being of God could be known only through personal relationships and personal love. Being means life and life means communion.*
- Being is communion: of the Church which is rooted in life of the Trinity.