

Is God a "Person"?: Thomas P. Flint

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Tom, as I consider the question: is there a God -- and if there is a God, is it worthy of worship and changing your life? The concept of God being a person is a critical one that theologians, philosophers of religion talk about as, as, as, absolutely essential to understand what God is about. It's a strange question: is God a person? How do you begin to understand that?

Thomas Flint:

It is a strange question and it's one that I think is very difficult to deal with. From a Christian perspective, it's even more difficult to deal with because Christians think of there as being three persons in one God. I think I'd like to sort of ignore all the complications that go with the Trinity and just think that we're talking about one person here. Some of the elements that seem to me to be crucial to thinking of God as a person would be these: I mean, first of all, God has to be -- to use a philosophical term -- of substance. He has to have the kind of independence and autonomy that we think of ourselves as persons as having. Secondly, God has to know things. He has to have an intellect if he's going to count as a person. I think we would view any, anyone who knows nothing, who has no intellect whatsoever -- no knowetic (sic) abilities whatsoever -- as being less than a person. So, I think for God to be a person, he would have to have intellect as well. And I think furthermore we'd want to say that God must have will -- that he must be able to choose the actions that he's going to perform, and I would say choose them freely as well. So, I think at least these three components are going to be... I don't know if this gives us a definition, but at least there are parts in what's involved in saying that God is a person. He's a substance, he has intellect, he has will; and, of course, Christians would insist as perfect with regard to that intellect and will.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Let's explore each of them and see if we can dig, dig deeper. Substance, when we think of material substances, we think of things that, that have extension and take up space or moves through time whether changelessly or not, has parts -- a lot of things in substance in the physical world. Now which, if any of those, would carry over to God in an immaterial sense?

Thomas Flint:

Right. There's clearly going to be no extension. Most Christians traditionally would say that there's nothing akin to parts within God; so those sorts of things aren't going to be there. And I think a standard bold medieval definition would be to say that a substance is an ultimate subject of predication. It's sort of the thing to which the properties apply. You have a red ball. We could argue a lot about the redness and what exactly that is if that's an abstract object or a concrete object; but it's an attribute of something else -- something distinct from itself -- the ball. The ball we might think of as a substance. That is, it's not itself an attribute of something else -- other things are attribute to it; qualities are attributed to it. That at least gives us some idea of I think what the better notion (ph.) of a substance is.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Without anything else implied because substance is a common term that we normally think of... you know, you could hold in your hand or maybe it oozes or something, you know. But, but that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about defining it as, as, as something that as a predicate which means to which properties can be assigned?

Thomas Flint:

I think that's a fair way of viewing it, right? You know, we're talking about an individual, which might be another somewhat less technical way of speaking about what we're saying when we say that God is a substance. He's an individual who's not sort of part of or dependent on some other individual. There's this kind of independence/autonomy to it. That's part of what's involved in the notion of some things being of substance, I think.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, if God is a substance, but being immaterial has no extension -- there are other beings in the Christian tradition that are immaterial -- angels. They don't commingle, I assume; they are independent substances, right?

Thomas Flint:

Right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay, so we now have independent substances existing each of which can take attributes or predicates. Can we say any more or that's about it that we want to say for substance?

Thomas Flint:

I think that's the core of what we would want to be saying there.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, let's go on -- the second was intellect/knowledge -- unlimited knowledge in God's sense or omniscience. And that knowledge is, is, is known intrinsically... I mean, we can't ask where it's stored because there are no parts.

Thomas Flint:

Yeah, the issue of where God gets his knowledge from is very hard, I think, for us to say. Clearly, he can't get it from something outside of him; because at least according to the Christian tradition there is nothing outside of him unless and until he decides to create; or at least that would be the dominant sort of view. So, the knowledge has to be all within him, in some sense. And, again, the bulk of the tradition is that even God's knowledge of the physical world is not knowledge that comes from outside of him. His knowledge is so complete and so perfect that it's not the knowledge of the perceiver -- it's the knowledge of your Creator. God knows things because he knows that he's creating them and what situations he's creating them in and what they will do in those situations; so, his knowledge is never going to be observational. Even once we have creation on the scene, the created world on the scene, it's still going to be knowledge that comes not from without but is always from within -- from his knowledge of himself and his own decisions as to what he's going to do. In that sense, we were talking about these three elements of being a person, being a substance, having knowledge, having, having intellect. I think...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Having will.

Thomas Flint:

Right, having will -- sorry. I think there's a sense in which we have to see at least part of God's knowledge flowing from his will. God knows what the physical world is like, for example, not because the world had to be that way but because God freely decided to make it that way. It's his will that's bringing about the truths that his intellect knows. But it still has to be all completely internal within God -- none of it is coming from without.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

What can we say about God's will, then -- its intentionality. What are some terms that we can enrich that concept?

Thomas Flint:

Well, intentionality is one term; choice is another term we could use. We could speak of God's having a plan for the creation that he makes. I think all of those would be part of God's having a will. If we think of God's will as being primarily the will of the Creator -- deciding with whom is he going to share existence, what kind of existency (sic) are these beings going to have, what situations are they going to be in -- we're thinking of God as providential when we're thinking in that way. That's the way in which his will is being... is operative in the sense that he's deciding, choosing, intending to bring about a certain kind of world. I think at the broadest level that's the way we have to think of God's will as operating.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And so, integrating it all together -- when you think that God is a person, what does it make you feel?

Thomas Flint:

I mean, it's always dangerous to ask that question of a philosopher because we tend to so intellectualize all of these sorts of things. I mean, when I think of God as, as a person, I do think of him as a substance who has intellect and will; but I think when I don't have my philosopher's hat on, I think of him as a being who not just has will to create this world but loves this world that he has created. Who is involved in some way with what's going on; who's responsive to what his creatures do; and in that sense an individual with whom we can have genuine personal relationships. If we thought of God as a person and it was very abstract; but we couldn't think of ourselves as have, having anything like a personal relationship with him. Well, that might do philosophically but I don't think it would do religiously. So, I think when I think of God, there's part of me as a philosopher who's thinking of him in that very abstract way, but part of me also is a believing Christian, who's thinking of him as a person to whom I'd like to be closer than I am.