

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

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Transcript - Short

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Tom, as I consider God and wondering whether God exists, the concept of God being a person is extremely important; What do we mean by that?

Thomas Flint:

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. 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... 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:

Substance, when we think of material substances, we think of things that have extension and take up space or move through time. 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. I think a standard old 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. 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 is not sort of part of or dependent on some other individual.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, let's go on -- the second was intellect/knowledge.

Thomas Flint:

His knowledge is so complete and so perfect that it's not the knowledge of the perceiver, it's the knowledge of a creator. 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. When I think of God 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. If we thought of God as a person and it was very abstract; but we couldn't think of ourselves as having anything like a personal relationship with him. Well, that might do philosophically but I don't think it would do religiously.