

The classical concept of God has no enduring relevance except as one basis of past-lived tradition that has an inappropriately strong impact on current belief. On its own philosophical terms, the concept fails due to incompatibilities amongst the characteristics it attributes to God. It was a concept that flourished within western thought, but gradually lost its resonance as the Enlightenment widened men's horizons and the desire for individuality demanded an autonomous existence for man. Because of this, the classical concept of God has little functional use in the modern world and its lack of relevance is best demonstrated by comparison with the strengths of a non-realist model of God.

In the classical western view of God, a timeless, immutable, omniscient being is posited. All these features create insuperable problems for an understanding of God that is meant to have any rational basis. It is debatable whether a being outside time can interact with persons within time in a meaningful way. Even if such an interaction is possible it has implications for the postulated unchanging nature of God seen in this classical viewpoint. Whether omnipotence means any freedom is left for the action of human independence is doubtful. If God is what draws us to practice religion then these are useful concepts for a religion based on fear, conformity and subservience. Happily, they are no longer conceivable in a realist sense by a coherent modern mind. Unhappily, the classical concept of God remains behind many of the more toxic effects of the Church. This essay will explore the failings of the classical theory of God from a philosophical perspective and then as it contrasts to process theory and beyond that to nonrealist interpretations of God

The sense of space, time and eternity that this classical view of God entails originated in classical Greek thought and was revived by the medieval scholastics. What can be made of such a concept of time in our era when relativity predicts multiple space-time possibilities and when even our concept of the size of the universe has expanded beyond the comprehension of anyone living prior to the twentieth century? From the perspective of those formulating this worldview in classical times, it was not metaphysics as such, but attempts to describe real structures of the cosmos with the earth in the centre and spheres of ascending heavens and increasing perfection.¹ The sky and God beyond were relatively close to the earth in their thought. Time, if there was any historical insight at all, did not go much beyond six thousand years before the geological revolutions of the nineteenth century, so creation was something that happened within the generations that could be ticked off in Luke's gospel.

Eternity in classical theism is not life without beginning or end, but rather a concept of a being outside time.² God is set apart from his creation by not even inhabiting the stream of time we remain locked in. The merely unending life as described as an attribute of God in the Bible is not the God of western theism.³ This idea of eternity outside of time, however, creates some logical difficulties:

The whole concept of a timeless eternity...seems to be radically incoherent...on St. Thomas' view, my typing of this paper is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Again, on this view, the great fire of Rome is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Therefore, while I type these very words, Nero fiddles heartlessly on.⁴

¹ Timothy Ferris, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (London: Bodley Head, 1988), 29.

² Brian Davies, *Thinking about God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 149.

³ Anthony Kenny *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 38.

⁴ Kenny, *God of the Philosophers*, 38-9.

If there is to be a connection between each moment in time with the eternity that God inhabits and the time we exist in, then each moment in time is logically linked also. This creates insurmountable difficulties, as simultaneous is exactly what disparate points in time are not. It has also been suggested that a timeless being's knowledge is necessarily limited to timeless ideas.⁵ If it were not, that is, if God knows and understands tensed propositions as do we creatures bound to time, necessarily God must change.⁶ If God does not change, knowing everything is impossible. This is not compatible with the God of classical theology.

The difficulty of a timeless being relating to temporal creatures is illustrated by consideration of the difficulty of communication. Petitionary prayer in particular is peculiar without a time component being available to a timeless God.⁷ It is difficult to see any point in such prayer if it has been heard already and God cannot change in response to it. This relationship is further complicated by the fact that some things are true at one moment in time but not another, so for a timeless being the same thing is both true and false.⁸ An event, for example can be about to happen, happening and in the past sequentially, but has to be all three at the same time to a timeless entity. It is true that it is about to occur before it happens, but then it is false that it is about to occur when it has already happened. For God in this classical view it is both true and false.

The classical view of God has been accepted in much of the Western tradition of the Church. Yet the lived tradition of the Judeo-Christian faith insists on a God acting in history. The history of the Jews is understood as

⁵ Arthur Prior in Kenny, *God of the Philosophers*, 39.

⁶ Kenny, *God of the Philosophers*, 51.

⁷ Jonathan Harrison, *God, Freedom and Immortality* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), 404.

⁸ Arthur Prior in Kenny, *God of the Philosophers*, 39.

their God intervening in time. Christianity takes this further with an agent, Christ, who has to be within time and therefore able to relate to people. The idea of a God totally outside time makes these features of Christianity essentially impossible. It comes down to whether God has to be regarded as a person: “to say that God is outside time, as many theologians do, is to deny, in effect, that God is a person.”⁹ The characteristics of persons involving change and growth and even life can therefore be bypassed.

So the classical idea of God outside of time is linked with concepts of immutability. A God that cannot change cannot have emotions and therefore cannot interact with humans on our most basic level. Moreover it cannot suffer and so cannot be Christ on the cross. A God that can't change is not the God described in the Christian scriptures as intervening and responding to the world in changing ways. Immutability comes from the idea that as God is perfect any change must therefore be for the worst.

Hartshorne persuasively argues that this is not necessarily the case with his statement that “an absolute maximum of beauty is a meaningless idea.”¹⁰

Along with timelessness, perfection and immutability comes the idea of omniscience. The classical God has to know our future actions with an inevitable diminution of the meaning of human choices as “our decisions bring about no additions to the divine life.”¹¹ This not an idea necessary for Christianity and is largely limited to this slice of western theism from the middle ages. If we regard humans as free to make decisions and therefore our future actions indeterminate, then there are grave problems in allowing

⁹ JR Lucas in Davies, *Eternal and Changeless*, 150.

¹⁰ Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes*, (Albany: State Uof NY, 1984), 10.

¹¹ Hartshorne, *Omnipotence*, 3.

foreknowledge to God.¹² Alternatively if we creation are not free to make decisions then religion, not to mention creation itself, becomes an irrelevance within the bleak vistas of predestination.

Despite the philosophical objections to the classical western view, there are aspects of the classical God view that fulfil certain religious needs. An unchangeable God can be relied on; an eternal God is always available; an omniscient God mean a determinism giving benign control of the future. These comforts, such as they are, are abdications of responsibility and shields against liability. If, with Cupitt, we can say “God is a symbol that represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us and promises to us,”¹³ it is clear that the classical view of God is at best unhealthy and at worse the opposite of Christianity.

In religious philosophy the classical view has been challenged by process theology. This allows for a creator to step down from omnipotence and become a participator in the progress of creation.¹⁴ Its potential strengths are acknowledged even by critics such as Nelson:

In some cases it is proposed as the only coherent and consistent way to satisfy the requirements of a constructive, systematic metaphysics. In other cases it is presented as the only way to avoid the fatal paradoxes inherent in the classical notion of the unchanging God. In still other cases it is urged as the only view compatible with the God of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures and the Christian religious experience.¹⁵

Certainly, a changing God within time overcomes some of the logical objections of the classical God. It also, by allowing indeterminism and freedom moves towards an understanding of God that in intelligible in the

¹² Kenny, *God of the Philosophers* 51.

¹³ Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM 1980), 14.

¹⁴ Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 183.

¹⁵ Nelson, H “The Resting Place of Process Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979), 1.

modern world. It is unlikely to be a lasting successor to classical theism in western thought because it remains an attempt to describe a God in real terms.

Although the classical view of God claims to represent an absolute truth, like dogmatic traditions generally, it remains unconscious to the historical necessities of its own creation. Monotheism itself required certain intellectual prerequisites for its development.¹⁶ The history of God then passed through various regional and national deities until one such strand created the amalgam that is the classical Western view of God. The orthodox strand of Christianity certainly never accepted it.¹⁷ It is hard to see how this one view of God can claim the universal validity that its internal logic demands.

If the classical strain of theism with its “rational” certainties about God dominated western theology, Eastern orthodoxy preferred the *via negativa*.¹⁸ A minority strand of western thought took up the idea and it surfaced from time to time, for example through the fourteenth century mystics like the author of the *Cloud*.¹⁹ The tradition also found expression in such diverse areas as Maimonides’ works, the *Falsafah* and even amongst certain Quaker sects.²⁰ The acceptance of a loss of certainty and even defining God as “no thing” provides an alternative tradition for the modern era in search of meaningful religious practice after the death of metaphysics. In contrast to the classical view of western theism, the negative way is mystical rather than

¹⁶ Don Cupitt *Creation Out of Nothing* (London: SCM, 1990), 118.

¹⁷ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Mandarin 1993), 235.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Touchstone, 1967), 92.

¹⁹ Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 16.

²⁰ Armstrong, *History of God* 213, 227, 367.

dogmatic, open ended rather than authoritarian and importantly an alternative tradition amenable to exploration for Christianity without the supernatural.

It is the supernaturalist basis of the classical view that ultimately dooms it to the past.

I am suggesting that just as supernaturalist ways of thinking have been expelled from all the natural and social sciences, chiefly because they just don't explain things very well, so it is about time they were expelled from religion. Supernatural theologies cannot cope with the problem of evil, cannot on their own premises explain the vast diversity of religions and their human history, and do not even do a very good job of explaining the contents of their own scriptures.²¹

Classical theory contends universals for its God. Yet the history of religion shows us that God is cultural and local.

Now if we had access to a metaphysical realm and to a universal metaphysical God independent of society, language and history, it would be difficult to understand why the ideas of God that are actually held in human societies should be so highly culture specific and so fiercely contested. But, I suggest, the endless contestation of the idea of God reflects conflict between human groups and human individuals as they define their own local ideals and identities in apposition and opposition to each other.²²

Cupitt goes on to insist, rightly, that the limitations of language to the time and culture of the author, irretrievably bind meaning to earth and prevent transcendence to universality.²³

Our modern society requires individual innovation and autonomy. It is the engine of the modern world. However, if God is eternally perfect, we should be seeking all knowledge from God and eschewing this rebellion against God that our modern culture demands.²⁴ Not surprisingly that was in fact the medieval position on originality, and the position in fundamentalist

²¹ Cupitt, *Creation*, 119.

²² Cupitt, *Creation*, 122-3.

²³ Cupitt, *Creation*, 123.

²⁴ Cupitt, *Taking Leave*, 20.

faiths today. Indeed, if the dogmatism of the classical theory of God is carried through logically in our world it does become modernised, not into some new glories rivalling the scholastics, but into the crudities of fundamentalist rant and reaction.

Cupitt acknowledges that despite the conditions for renewal of Christianity on nonsupernatural lines having existed for a century or more, it has proven difficult to shake. He argues that we are yet to find a substitute for the meaning given to our lives by belief in:

A single objective and final Truth of things, in a substantial and immortal self, in the possibility of absolute knowledge, and in predestined individual vocations within the overall cosmic purpose.²⁵

These are all contentions fed by the classical theory of God. The incongruity is that this reassuring overarching scheme can also be seen as a man centred myth trying desperately to confirm that man matters at all.²⁶ In the end, however, clinging to this model after science and biblical criticism had made realist faith untenable only produces “the strange but all-pervasive modern inner alienation of Christians from the true meaning of their own faith.”²⁷ He offers the alternative of dying with Christ in the “nihil” and rising to a creative autonomous faith.²⁸

Classical theology made sense to the world of Christendom and still makes sense for the controlling, fearful vestiges of Christendom that remain. Its enduring relevance is as a stumbling block to the resurrection of Christianity. While there may be comfort in the classical view of God and its

²⁵ Don Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly* (London: SCM, 1987), 150.

²⁶ Cupitt, *Long Legged Fly*, 152

²⁷ Don Cupitt “A Reply to Rowan Williams,” *Modern Theology* 1 (1984), 30.

²⁸ Cupitt *Rowan Williams* 28.

realist perspectives in appearing to offer an easier path, that route is simply closed. The abdication of responsibility entailed in its deterministic consequences and the need to split a believer from modern realities to continue to accept the supernatural elements, make the classical God decidedly unreal in our world. By pushing the realist barrow far beyond its use by date, the established Churches risk finding themselves left with precisely nothing to satisfy the religious impulse that remains undeniably strong in the world. This may, paradoxically, be a valid solution, as people pushed to the edge may be prepared to make the necessary leap of faith out of the classical view. The wrenchingly difficult confrontation with the abyss of the nihil at least offers the hope of an answer to the necessity of religious activity and the need to inhabit a coherent thoughtscape consonant with the prevailing modern world. It is not classical theology, but then that is not Christ in the modern world.

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