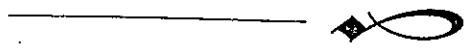
6. Who knows for certain? Who shall here declare it?
Whence was it born, and whence came this creation?
The gods were born after this world's creation:
Then who can know from whence it has arisen?

7. None knoweth whence creation has arisen;
And whether he has or has not produced it:
He who surveys it in the highest heaven,
He only knows, or haply he may know not.



JOHN BISHOP

Can There Be Alternative Concepts of God?

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1 Can it be consistent to adhere to theism, and yet to reject the belief that *omniGod* exists, where "omniGod" means a unique omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, supernatural person who is creator and sustainer of all else that exists?

On the assumptions prevailing within Philosophy of Religion, at least as practised by analytical philosophers, the answer is clearly "No." Such philosophers typically presuppose that theism virtually *by definition* requires belief that omniGod exists.

But this presupposition may be questioned, and could be overturned by articulating *an adequate alternative concept of God,* satisfying the following requirements:

(i) the concept must be genuinely distinct from the concept of omniGod;

and

(ii) the concept must be acceptable as authentically a concept *of God;* that is, belief in the existence of a God of the kind the concept specifies must be *religiously adequate* to the theistic religious tradition, in the sense that it could count at least as one viable expression of that historical tradition.

2 My aim in this paper is to contribute some philosophical prolegomena to the search for alternative concepts of God: how best should one approach the project of trying to decide whether there *are* any alternative concepts of God in the sense described?

But first let me explain why this project should be considered important. It is important, in the first place, for those who (like myself) aspire to remain within a theistic faith even though they have come to reject the reasonableness of belief in omniGod—for example, through being persuaded by the Argument from Evil—and who are nevertheless not prepared to retreat into irrationalist fideism (that is, the view that belief that omniGod exists can properly be held by faith contrary to reason). The

intellectual integrity of such a position requires that there be an adequate alternative concept of God—and, moreover, an adequate alternative concept of God in whose instantiation it is reasonable to believe.

In the second place, the issue is important for the philosophical critics of theism. Someone who seeks to establish the unreasonableness of theism itself had better find out whether establishing the unreasonableness of belief in omniGod (on which so much atheistic philosophical effort has been expended) is indeed sufficient for this purpose. Such a person will need either to show that there are no adequate alternative concepts of God, or else to widen the attack on theism so that it deals not only with belief in omniGod, but also with belief in God according to each adequate alternative concept. The impatience of convinced atheists with radical theology is well known: they jealously guard the kind of God they don't believe in! They would thus gain comfort from discovering that God-concepts genuinely distinct from the concept of omniGod and yet admissible as religiously authentic are just not to be had.

3 What method should be used in tackling the question whether there are any alternative concepts of God?

At first sight, it might seem sensible to begin by conducting a grand survey of theologians and philosophers who have thought of themselves as proposing alternatives to the traditional God of theism. And the survey may also have to include a number of philosophers who have *not* so thought of themselves, but about whom it might plausibly be claimed that, for all their professed atheism, they were in fact postulating alternative concepts of God. Each concept on the list produced by such a survey would then be examined to see if it does indeed count as an adequate alternative to omniGod, satisfying the two requirements stated in Section 1 above.

In fact, however, before conducting any such survey, it is important to begin by considering the question *what the criteria are* for a putative God-concept to be religiously adequate to theistic tradition.

4 One reason why this is important is that initial clarity about the criteria for a God-concept to be religiously adequate will provide intelligent focus and thus greater efficiency to any survey, by giving us from the outset a grasp of what it takes for a proposal for an alternative concept of God to count as a serious candidate.

But there is a more important reason why an inquiry into alternative concepts of God needs to begin from a discussion of criteria of religious adequacy. For, "omniGod conservatives"—on both the theistic and the atheistic side—will surely maintain that a proper account of the criteria for a God-concept to be adequate to theism will entail that any departure from the essential features of the concept of God as omniGod will breach the criteria. Accordingly, anyone who thinks it worthwhile exploring for alternative concepts of God must be prepared to offer and defend some account of the criteria for religious adequacy of a God-concept which would at least prima facie leave it open that some God-concept genuinely distinct from the concept of omniGod might turn out to satisfy those criteria. Obviously, this has to be done at the outset: the argument which concludes that the quarry is not there to be found must first have its force significantly blunted if there is to be any point in the hunt.

Furthermore, to begin by trying to provide religious adequacy criteria which leave it open that some concept other than that of omniGod might turn out to be adequate may provide heuristics for specific candidates for an alternative concept of God. Insight into what it is for the concept of God to do the work it is supposed to do in the context of theistic religion might suggest ways of constructing a viable alternative concept of God from within the resources of theism. Lengthy surveys of historical attempts at alternative God-concepts might then prove otiose.

5 How may criteria for the religious adequacy of a God-concept be generated in such a way as to make appropriate room for the possibility of there turning out to be some adequate alternative concept or concepts of God?

Traditionally, the criteria for the religious adequacy for a God-concept have been set by means of a straightforward argument which seems to make it clear that only the concept of omniGod can be religiously adequate to theism. The concept of God has to be the concept of that which is worthy of worship. Worship requires a uniquely excellently worthy object: an object which is supremely perfect, that than which a greater cannot even be conceived. From this, the "omni-properties" of such an object have been directly inferred.

Now, of course, the proponent of the idea that there is a real possibility of there being an adequate alternative concept of God will eventually have to come to terms with this argument. And, since there would seem to be little point in trying to deny that one criterion of religious adequacy is indeed that the concept of God must be the concept of that which is worthy of worship, the traditional route from there to the conclusion that God has to be omniGod in order to be worthy of worship will have to be disputed. The would-be radical theologian will, however, start off very much on the back foot if he or she tries to take on this dispute at the outset. A better plan, I suggest, is to dig deeper and try and get at the source of the criteria for a God-concept to be religiously adequate, to see if—once we identify that source—we can find at least some additional criteria of religious adequacy which don't seem to lead quite so swiftly to the conclusion that a decently theistic God really has to be the traditional omniGod.

6 I believe that *a certain kind of* "functionalist" proposal provides the source for criteria for the religious adequacy of a God concept. I suggest that the concept of God is *the concept of something belief in whose existence plays a certain functional role* within what might be called the psychological economy of the theist. And the question whether there are any adequate alternative concepts of God then becomes the question whether belief in God according to any God-concept other than that of omniGod is fit to play this functional role.

7 Let me explain further just what kind of functionalist proposal I am here making, by distinguishing it from other kinds of functionalist proposals.

One widely current kind of functionalist proposal is the idea that some of our concepts are functional-role-concepts, in the sense that they are concepts *of* that-which-plays-a-certain-functional-role, where that role is implicitly specified by the theoretical laws of a theory or by the platitudes at the core of a body of discourse and practice. My present proposal, however, is *not* the proposal that *the content of* the concept of God be analysed in terms of that which plays a certain functional role implicitly specified by a set of theological platitudes. (This proposal would, I think, founder on the difficulty of identifying a set of genuinely platitudinous platitudes about God. Anything any given theologian offers as a theological platitude will either be so vague or ambiguous as to be useless for specifying the God-role, or else will turn out to be significantly theologically contestable. For example, many theists would take it that God's having the defining properties of omniGod is the central "platitude" of theism—yet, of course, this will be contested by anyone who thinks that it remains open whether the God of theism is indeed omniGod.)

Since I seek to leave the way open to an alternative concept of God, I resist the idea that there is such a thing as *the,* uncontested, "God-role" and that it's then a factual question what it is, if anything, which fills this role. I want to suggest that the concept of God as omniGod can have competitors—and so I want to get a grip on what these competing concepts may be understood as competing for. My proposal that *the belief that God exists* plays a certain functional role is intended to indicate what they are competing for: namely, the status of *being a specifier* of the concept of God under which belief that God exists plays the functional role which that belief plays in the psychological economy of theism. There is, so to speak, something which the belief that God exists is supposed to do for you (or, at least, for the theist), and potentially

more than one specific concept of God might be such that belief in God according to that concept does that something for you. And—my proposal then is—what it is for a God-concept to be religiously adequate is for it to be such that believing that God exists according to that God-concept does that something for you, plays that functional role.

I do not exclude the possibility that, *once we have established the criteria for religious adequacy,* it may *then* be appropriate to analyse a given God-concept which meets those criteria as a functional-role concept—to hold that what it is to be God is to be that which fills "the God-role" according to that concept. The burden of my present point is to emphasise that, *while we are still seeking to develop criteria for religious adequacy,* our focus needs to be on the functional role which is played by *the belief that God exists,* or—and this is merely a terminological variant—by *the concept of God* in virtue of the role played by the belief that the concept is instantiated.

Finally—in case this isn't already obvious—I should add that what I mean here by the functional role of the belief that God exists is distinct from what a functionalist in the Philosophy of Mind would mean by that: namely, the causal role, specified in terms of actual and potential inputs, outputs and relations to other intentional states, which something has to fill in order to count as a belief with the content "God exists".