



# St Mark's CRC

Centre for Radical Christianity

## Resource Paper

### 'God Talk': Why thinking and speaking about God can be so challenging

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*Many of us struggle with the word, 'God' – not least because it can be used in so many different ways, for good or ill. We may also have grown up with an image of God that has become increasingly unbelievable in the light of experience and reflection. This brief paper invites you to explore God in an unthreatening and thoughtful way. It doesn't have the answers, but hopefully it will help you to gain a fuller appreciation of why it is that God raises so many questions. Please note, I have used God with a capital 'G' throughout for consistency and convenience, rather than for any other reason.*

#### **Words, words, words**

WHEN YOU COME TO THINK OF IT, words are pretty much all that we have to make sense of things and make sense of things is what most of us feel the need to do at some point or another. Through time, we humans have generated vast vocabularies articulated through numerous grammatical forms enabling us to describe, explain, refer, express, perform, inquire, command, accuse, plead and undertake many other operations besides. Yet underpinning pretty much all of them is a desire to communicate, with others as well as with ourselves (try thinking without words!), and be drawn into conversation. As such, words serve as vehicles for human encounter.

Of course, we rarely analyse them in this way; instinctively, we put them to work as our experience of living and capacity for language develop. Mostly, this requires us to assimilate the conventions governing the latter for, whilst we use words and grammar to express ourselves personally, unless we adhere to certain rules and constraints our capacity for communication is greatly diminished. Here Humpty Dumpty was surely misguided when protesting, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' (*Through the Looking Glass*) This is not to say that language doesn't evolve (self-evidently, it does – we need it to!), but rather to recognise that without words possessing a relatively stable core of meaning and sentences functioning in a predictable way its principal purpose would be frustrated.

Yet, for all that, in most cases the relation between the form of a word and its meaning is arbitrary. For example, the letters of the word 'l-o-v-e' do not inherently convey anything about what we mean by 'love'; what is more, change their order, 'v-o-l-e,' and the same letters denote something very different. Further, because the same word can carry more than one meaning and perform various functions grammatically, the context is often determinative. Consider, for instance, the word 'green':

meanings: colour, immature, unripe, grassy, natural, common space, etc;

syntax: to green the planet (verb), the grass was green (noun), the green fruit (adjective);

context: 'the house, backing onto the village Green, was painted bright green and within the garden stood a glass greenhouse ...'

Nor should we overlook that we don't always use language literally. What about metaphor and myth to mention just two alternatives. Phrases such as, 'He was a rock during my illness' or 'life is a journey,' are misunderstood if taken at face value, just as we miss the point if we expect to see a 'Trojan horse' or the 'sword of Damocles' every time these figures of speech are employed.

## **What about the word 'God'?**

Which brings us to God. What does the word 'God' mean? Do these three letters in this order possess a stable core of meaning in the same way as they do when reconfigured to form another word, 'dog'? True enough, dogs come in various shapes and sizes, embracing many breeds and crosses, but characterizing them all are certain familial traits that are identifiably canine. Can the same be said of God?

The short answer is probably not. Ask a philosopher of religion, a Church of England bishop, a Hindu priest and a Buddhist monk what God means to them and I suspect you would receive very different and, in some cases, contradictory responses - from a necessary uncaused cause for the universe, through a relational being incarnated in time to a mysterious otherness defying description. What is more, pose the same question to a cross-section of any of these groupings, say bishops, and believe me, a huge variety of meanings would emerge!

It was ever thus. Does it matter? Should we be concerned that through time there has been no convergence over God's meaning or even over whether the whole notion of God is meaningful? In fact, quite the contrary. But does it matter? I suppose, it depends on how we account for this diversity which, in turn, raises fundamental questions about the nature of God. A number of observations may help us to gain a deeper appreciation of the issues raised by these questions.

For one thing, most interested parties, people like you and me, experience God within a particular religious tradition, such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam, which informs our appreciation and shapes our beliefs. What is more, we do so not as detached observers, but as active participants for whom God shapes our experience of living and elicits our worship. Basically, what God means matters because we have much invested in a particular understanding. So much that it can seem all but impossible to acknowledge that alternative meanings could be equally valid without feeling our own approach undermined in some way. A response exacerbated by the exclusive theological claims implicit within many religious traditions which can engender suspicion, rejection and even outright hostility:

Judaism: I am Yahweh your God ... you shall have no other gods before me.

Christianity: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Islam: There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of God.

For another, despite protestations to the contrary, there is no independent standpoint or frame of reference from which different meanings of God can be evaluated because each is shaped by and makes sense within the religion to which it belongs. Further, within each religion there are different interpretations and meanings. As a consequence, when we encounter someone whose understanding of God is unfamiliar, we tend to interpret it from our own perspective where it will almost invariably appear strange and impoverished – incomplete, misguided or plain wrong.

Let me try to offer a partial analogy. If you were to ask a number of persons participating in fruitful committed relationships of various kinds to define the qualities of an ideal partner, they are likely to respond on the basis of their own experience. If these definitions were then compared, areas of convergence and divergence would emerge. Does that matter? Not as long as the integrity of each relationship is acknowledged and respected; however, if the participants of any one, believing what they had discovered personally to be definitive, attempt to impose their own understanding and approach on others or at least evaluate them in its light, then conflict is sure to follow.

### **Realist, expressive, heuristic**

Thirdly (this may take a little time to sink in), the meaning of God is not only determined by context, supplied by a religious tradition and associated ‘flavour’ (eg Theravada Buddhism, Orthodox Christianity, Sahajdhari Sikhism), but also by the status attributed to the word. Let’s consider three possibilities: *realist, expressive, heuristic*. Of these, the most common is probably the first, *realist*. Here God relates to someone or something – a subject (heavenly Father, incarnate Word) or object (spirit, essence) beyond us with characteristics which can be defined in terms of specifics (eg God is personal, relational, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving) or non-specifics (eg God is mystery, ineffable, absence, nothingness). This usage is rooted in the conviction that God is an independent being or entity, discrete from us. Traditionally, this is how the word God has been used within the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

From this perspective, it’s not difficult to envisage how different realist understandings of God could appear incompatible, giving rise to speculation over whose is correct or most adequate. After all, to cite an exclusive claim from Christianity, God either became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth or God didn’t – it’s difficult to see how God could be both! Furthermore, meanings of God within this approach are open to scrutiny in the light of experience, sometimes with far-reaching consequences as illustrated by the following challenge posed by the existence of evil:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent.  
Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent.  
Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

(David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779,  
possibly quoting the ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus)

Moving on: consciously or unconsciously, God can also be used in a very different way, *expressively*. In this case, God isn’t ‘out there.’ In fact, God isn’t beyond us at all; instead, the word expresses our highest aspirations and convictions as well as our deepest fears and longings. For example, we may choose to define God as justice and truth, beauty and goodness, the guarantor that life is purposeful,

worthwhile, enduring. In doing so, unlike realist usages, we are not affirming there is a transcendent being corresponding to this definition, but that these are the foundational values and commitments upon which our lives are based. Projecting qualities and hopes such as these onto God elevates their status, investing them with permanence, gravitas and authority thereby intensifying their aspirational quality. In this way, believing in God is translated into the celebration and furtherance of honourable goals and morally-worthy pursuits.

Using God to give expression to some of our fundamental instincts and aptitudes is less threatened by difference, recognising each 'god-image' to be a human creation. Yet acknowledging this doesn't necessarily empty God of meaning, inspiration and hope – anymore than acknowledging the human origin of music, art and literature renders them barren in these respects. For this reason, it has been argued that these two meanings of God – God existing independently of us and God as a human construct – are indistinguishable in terms of their utility, each serving us equally well in this life. But is this the case? After all, by way of an analogy, seeking to be loving in our dealings with other people is not the same as falling in love with an actual person. The former is a personal undertaking; the latter is a reciprocal relationship. Why, then, restrict God to the limits of our own commitments and imagination? Paradoxically, expressive understandings, by rejecting the possibility of God being any more than a human invention, can be no less dogmatic than their realistic counterparts.

So far we have considered realist and expressive understandings of God. What about the third – heuristic? This word may be unfamiliar. It derives from the Greek verb, 'to find' or 'to discover.' Heuristic approaches to God, then, are experimental and pioneering. They lack the certainty of the realist and the control of the expressive. For a heurist, to believe in God is about living in openness to the possibility that there is more to life than meets the eye and that our lives may be part of a greater truth and integrity than human beings can conceive or realise left to their own devices.

In certain respects, heuristic approaches to God are similar to the outlook of the pioneer explorer or scientist. Before embarking on research, they must immerse themselves in what has been discovered to date and become proficient in the requisite skills and disciplines to enable them to participate constructively. They must learn to belong to communities committed to their respective endeavours where their contributions will be encouraged, received and assessed. And any subsequent breakthroughs they may make will emerge from a capacity to remain open to and inquisitive about the physical universe which remains discrete from and greater than current levels of understanding.

So it is with using God heuristically. It's about recognising that our existence as conscious beings raises many questions about why we are here, what life is for, how we should live and where it's all leading. It's about acknowledging that questions of ultimate concern such as these are life's vocation and, as a consequence, finding our place within a community committed to their pursuit. A community grounded in a living tradition, hospitable and companionable, animated by wisdom, where enduring values are nurtured, good habits acquired, valuable insights absorbed and sustaining practices shared. Yet one, aware of its own limitations, rooted in humility. In contrast to the explorer or scientist, the heurist doesn't expect to demonstrate that God exists or indeed to prove the opposite, but appreciates cultivating a way of being that is vulnerable to and radically open to otherness, however conceived or encountered.

Three observations about our usage of God. For most of us, we learn to use the word within a particular tradition such as Christianity, Islam or, for that matter, atheism – one to which we are committed. There is no independent frame of reference from which different meanings of God can be assessed. The word God can be used in at least three different ways – realist (God is an independent 'being'), expressive (God is the sum of aspirations and convictions), heuristic (God embodies yet transcends our human being with all its capacities and potential).

By now, we may be a little dizzy or confused, even overwhelmed. Some may be frustrated or angry. After all, how can such a small word offer so much promise yet deliver so little certainty? Perhaps, that's its genius. It seems that God has evolved a life of its own – a word we invented yet is manifestly beyond us. What is clear is that none of this uncertainty, nuance and complexity is going away. We can attempt to live in the bubble of our own belief system, ignoring or rejecting those who speak of God in different ways. Or we can apply what we have assimilated to date to help us engage – in a respectful, constructive yet discerning way – with those whose appreciations of God have been shaped by different influences.

### **Three suggestions**

Let me offer three suggestions for those who wish to pursue the latter.

We can reflect on why different meanings of God can seem challenging or unacceptable. This will help us to appreciate the importance of God for many people – in fact, the strength of reaction to alternative understandings is often a measure of devotion! It will also bring into focus an important distinction easily overlooked. Although, as we have seen, not everyone uses God in a realist way (ie relating to a transcendent being/essence) many of us do and the manner in which we do is likely to have been shaped by one of the world's religions. Put simply, we relate to the infinite by means of the contingent, because however inspired we consider our religious tradition to be, it is ultimately a human construct and, as such, is provisional and open to error or change. It is a means of accessing God, but cannot be equated with the divine so, in principle, many religions could be serving the same end, making God accessible, albeit in different ways and, possibly, to different levels of adequacy (although that's another question!). Hopefully, this will help us both to feel secure within our own religious tradition and open towards those belonging to others. It will also underline a dimension of faith that many of us struggle with – trust and unknowing.

But more than that, we can let our own appreciation of God serve both as an mirror and a window. This needs explaining. As we've noted on several occasions, the meaning of God for most of us is shaped by the religious tradition to which we belong and which reinforces that meaning through its scriptures, teaching, rituals and practices. Through doing so, it acts as a mirror for those within this tradition, reflecting back the view of God it espouses. However, the meaning of God animating a religious tradition can help us to discern God in the lives of members of other religions as well. It can act as a window or prism through which divine presence can be recognised and celebrated. For instance, if we believe God to be the source of wisdom, then as we become acquainted with the role of wisdom in other religious traditions so we are able to recognise God's presence there also. This can be a real impetus to find out more about other people's beliefs and practices, although we need to be careful not to convey the impression that our meaning of God is the measure for everybody else's!

Taking time to meet with and learn from people of different religions and, for that matter, approaches within our own can help to foster understanding and forge friendship. We will need to be respectful of difference and ready to value what others consider sacred, especially when we don't. Religions are not all the same, even if they can perform comparable functions in people's lives, and it can be as dangerous to pretend that they are as to fixate on their dissimilarities. Where common ground can sometimes be found, however, is not in the sphere of understanding, but application – the outworking of meanings and beliefs in life. A Jew, Hindu and Muslim may not be able to pray together, but they may be able to work together to tackle humanitarian priorities such as poverty, dislocation and disease. Here convergence can sometimes be possible without compromising firmly-held convictions.

## **Finally**

Throughout this exploration, I have attempted to talk about God dispassionately and, I suppose, analytically – more like how a surgeon views the body of a patient than how the patient does. I hope this has yielded a more comprehensive and accessible discussion than would otherwise have been possible. In the name of balance, I have also attempted to maintain a neutral stance even where I hold strong views. However, on drawing to a close, I would like to nail my colours to the mast on one issue. I believe God is vitally important and, for me, that is the God of Jesus Christ. And because God is important so are religions. For reasons outlined above, it is beyond the reach of any human being to evaluate whose meaning of God is the most truthful and adequate. But there is one measure that is sure. Jesus expressed it thus:

*No good tree bears bad fruit,  
nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit;  
for each tree is known by its own fruit. (Luke 6.43-44)*

### Three letter word

I DON'T KNOW how to pronounce your name,  
although your meaning haunts my mind  
like an unanswered question  
or sentence in search of sense.

Your absurdity offends my reason  
causing me to wonder why it is  
you loom so large in my attention,  
making claims upon my heart.

There was a time when fear  
formed your letters upon my lips  
and loneliness led me to seek solace  
in the comfort of your contemplation.

Even now the bitter taste of inhumanity  
causes me to cry out,  
demanding justice and recompense  
from your direction.

You remain silent refusing  
to bow to the barb  
of protest and accusation,  
confident in your reputation.

Yet still I speak of you;  
you, who don't exist,  
is logically impossible,  
morally inconceivable.

Still I speak of you.

Somehow your impossibility  
disturbs my complacency –  
eking out a threshold,  
daring me to transgress.