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Theistic practice and God's personhood

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ABSTRACT

In a recent paper in this journal, Simon Hewitt has argued that theistic practice, at least within Christianity, does not support the claim that theists are committed to conceptualising God as a personal being. In this paper, by considering theistic worship, prayer, and understanding of scriptural revelation, I argue that at least these central theistic practices *do* imply such a conceptualisation.

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Introduction

In the answers, they give to the question of whether ultimate reality is personal, there seems to me as there does to many to be a great divide between what we might call the Eastern Religions of Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism on the one hand, and what we might by contrast call the Western Religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other variants of Hinduism, on the other.¹ For the adherents of the Eastern Religions, so grouped, fundamental spiritual reality is an impersonal supernatural force and personal beings (including gods, if there are any) find their place in the order of things within the framework this impersonal reality sets; and they find their place much lower down the order of being in terms of their spiritual significance for us than they do according to the Western religions. By contrast, for the adherents of the Western religions, so grouped, the fundamental spiritual reality is a unitary personal being. For mono-personal monotheisms, that is Judaism, Unitarian Christianity, and Islam, this personal being is a single person; for Trinitarian Christians, He is three persons in one substance. But in any case, on these Western accounts, at the most ultimate level there is a personal being, responsible by His free choices for anything contingent that may exist; there is not an impersonal force causing them by its mindless operations.²

Most Buddhists, for example, are atheists in the sense that even if they believe that there are gods, they do not believe that there is anything matching the theistic concept of God.³ According to them, there is no all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly good being who they have to thank as ultimately behind all the good things in life; with whom they may enter into a personal relationship through worship and prayer; who has revealed Himself and His will for us; and in whom they can place their faith that He will take them after their deaths to perfect this relationship with Him in Heaven – all hallmark beliefs of

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the Western Religions. Consequently, rather than worshipping a supreme supernatural being; praying to Him or taking themselves to be in receipt of revelations from Him, Buddhists meditate on what they take to be fundamental spiritual reality (the ‘four noble truths’); engage in practices designed to shape their cognitive and affective responses to it (the ‘noble eightfold path’); and take themselves to have achieved enlightenment to the extent that they consider themselves to have succeeded in doing so. In stark contrast, the idea of God as personal shapes the spiritual practices of the adherents of the Western religions in almost every respect.⁴ In the everyday attitudes expressed in (a) their worship; (b) their prayer; and (c) towards those texts which they regard as revelation, the adherents of the theistic religions suppose of the object of their devotion and reflection that He is a personal being. Or so it is my purpose in this paper to argue.

It is telling that efforts to deny the centrality of God’s personhood to Theism, as are occasionally undertaken by some philosophers, are almost always motivated by some substantial (and very controversial) philosophical thesis (e.g. that persons must be embodied; that words used of God must all be understood analogically). They hardly ever start ‘ground up’, from observations of the actual religious practices of the adherents of the theistic religions. An honourable exception to this pattern is Simon Hewitt’s recent paper ‘Does living Christianity support personhood theism?’, as published in this journal, though even he draws on such theses now and again.⁵ In the current paper, I shall concentrate on certain theistic practices – not unique to Christianity, but displayed across the Abrahamic religions and some versions of Hinduism – and seek to show that these *do* entail an ineliminable commitment to God’s personhood.

The nature of personhood is contested amongst philosophers, with most adopting a criterial approach on which being a person is said to be a matter of having a mind of a certain sort, characterised by beliefs, consciousness (including perhaps self-consciousness), rationality, and a capacity to use language. My own view on the nature of personhood would fall into this camp,⁶ but, rather than giving a particular account of personhood (the defence of which would take at least a paper in itself) and then utilising it, I shall proceed in the hope that my characterisation of the religious practices on which I shall focus will make it plausible that they imply divine personhood *on any plausible account of personhood*. As mentioned, the practices on which I shall focus are worship, prayer, and understanding oneself to be in receipt of divine revelation in scripture. I shall look at these practices in this order, worship first then.

Worship

So central is the practice of worship to the theistic religions that it has become written into the definition of ‘God’ as it appears in many dictionaries that He is the being who is worshipped by the followers of these religions.⁷ The nature of worship is contested to some extent, but the point crucial to our current purposes is conceded by most: it is that worship in part expresses gratitude. It may well express additional attitudes – e.g. awe, a desire to honour, venerate, and pay due accord to the status of something or someone – which attitudes may, with conceptual clear-headedness, be directed towards non-personal objects. But, in part, worship expresses gratitude; and gratitude is inherently a person-directed attitude, as I shall now argue.

If one goes out without an umbrella, one can be glad if, due to the weather happening to stay fine, one remains dry. But if the weather turns to rain and yet someone kindly lends one their umbrella so that one remains dry anyway, one will add something else to whatever gladness the mere fact that one has remained dry would occasion, an attitude of thankfulness directed towards the person who lent one their umbrella. (Or at least, one should add this attitude of thankfulness to them.) Note, this is not just gladness that there was present someone from whom one could obtain an umbrella. In a third scenario, where the weather turns to rain but someone racing past accidentally drops an umbrella at one's feet, an umbrella which one can consequently pick up and use to remain dry (guilt-free – there is no realistic way of reuniting it with its owner, who has sped off out of earshot before their dropping the umbrella has become apparent), one will not feel similarly thankful towards the person who provided one with an umbrella, as one will suppose that they did not intend to do so for one's benefit, *contra* the second case. In the second case, one has a benevolent benefactor; in the third case, one has simply a benefactor. In the same way, I am suggesting then, worship does not merely express awe, wonder, or gladness that creation or some aspect of it happens to be as it is, but also gratitude to the being whom one supposes is intentionally behind its being so, with its doing so entailing that this being must be being supposed by the worshipper to be a benevolent benefactor, a personal being. The inherently person-directed-gratitude aspect of worship then entails that someone clear-headedly engaging in it is committed to the personal nature of the object of their worship.

Of course, even in the first scenario, where the weather happens to stay dry, if one is a theist, one can hold an attitude of thankfulness similar to that which one holds towards one's natural benevolent benefactor in the second scenario. If one is a theist, one can hold it towards the personal being whom one supposes is one's ultimate supernatural benevolent benefactor, although one is unlikely to do so unless one subscribes to what might be called a meticulous providence view, which view ascribes the weather staying fine to God's intention in creation, or ascribes its staying fine to a miraculous intervention, perhaps in response to a prayer one uttered. But such person-directed gratitude is an attitude which most atheists cannot appropriately have in the first scenario for there is, on the view of most atheists, no personal being who would be the proper object of it were they to hold it in the first scenario; they do not, they think, have any ultimate supernatural benevolent benefactor to thank for the weather staying fine as it does. According to such atheists, its staying fine is not down to some providential purposing or miraculous intervention; it is solely down to mindless factors, as it is in fact on those theistic views which take a looser view of providence and do not attribute its staying fine on this occasion to God's intention in creation or to a miraculous intervention.

Admittedly, those who are atheists, in the sense operative here (believing theism false), but polytheists and who happen to believe in a god responsible for the weather might coherently believe they should thank this god for the weather staying fine in the first scenario. And the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for those who don't believe in the God of Theism, but believe in a singular god (who they may in fact name 'God') with a proper subset of the properties of the theistic God.⁸ So, there are atheists in the sense operative in this paper who may yet coherently worship supernatural beings. But none of these details undermine – indeed they all reinforce – the inherently person-directed aspect of the expression of gratitude that is a part of worship. Theists worship God for creation in

general and those aspects of it for which they are especially grateful in particular. And in doing so, their supposition is that the thing towards which they are directing their acts of worship is the sort of thing towards which (or rather then, person towards whom) gratitude is appropriate, i.e. the object of their worship is a personal being who freely chose to bestow whatever blessing is the focus of the worship, rather than an impersonal force that mindlessly generated it. And the same is true for any atheists in my sense who nevertheless believe in a god or gods as responsible for the weather or what have you. In thinking of this god or these gods as the worthy object of their worship in light of the weather or what have you, such atheists will be conceiving of this god or these gods as a personal agent or as personal agents freely acting in ways that have affected them.

A couple of qualifications are in order.

Firstly, it is not quite true that in all cases we insist that only persons may appropriately have gratitude directed towards them. It sometimes makes sense for one to be grateful to an institution, not simply to a particular person or persons within it; and it can make sense to be grateful to some advanced, yet clearly sub-personal, animal. For example, I can be grateful to my College for supporting my work through granting me, as is its policy, one sabbatical term out of every seven; and I can be grateful to my dog for alerting me by her barking to the arrival of the postman. But these, I submit, are derivative cases: institutions are proper objects of gratitude only due to the actions of those who comprise them; sub-personal animals are proper objects of gratitude only to the extent that they approximate persons in their behaviours. Some of our ways of behaving towards institutions and sub-personal animals are best explained as pragmatically useful fictions (e.g. juridical persons) or figures of speech, which – on reflection – we recognise as such, and by diagnosing ourselves as subject to harmless instances of personification (e.g. ‘The current government smiles on polluting industries.’).⁹ The fundamental and paradigmatic category of thing towards which gratitude may be properly displayed is personal beings. It is by analogy to this paradigm case that such practices make sense.¹⁰

Secondly, gratitude is an inherent part of theistic worship, but it should be conceded that there are cases where non-theists can coherently perform acts which are acts of worship and yet do *not* express gratitude. One might consider someone who has not, so they suppose, as yet had any benefits bestowed on them by Satan coherently worshipping him by saying, ‘Oh Satan, I worship you today – you really are impressively bad. And I pledge myself to your service; I ask in return only that you strike down my enemy. On those terms, I sell you my soul. What do you say? Do we have a deal?’ Even if such a case undermines the bold claim defended hitherto, that *all* acts of worship display person-directed gratitude, such non-theistic acts of worship as imagined here obviously do not undermine the conclusion based on that bold claim, that worship involves supposing of the object of worship that it is a personal being. The more modest claim to the effect that in most (but admittedly not quite all) cases, worship involves gratitude and thereby the supposition that the object of worship is personal and in all cases of coherent *theistic* worship it involves that supposition is defensible in the light of the example of someone committing themselves for the first time to the service of Satan in the manner described. And neither of these qualifications undercuts the conclusion that worship is an activity which supposes in all cases the personal status of the object of worship.

At this juncture, one might profitably linger to ask *why* gratitude is intrinsic to clear-headed theistic worship at least. After all, most dictionaries define worship as

the expression of reverence, honour, worth (etymologically, the term may be thought of as a contraction of worth-ship), directed towards a deity;¹¹ and thus there is no straightforward conceptual necessity that someone engaging in an act of worship entertain any attitude *at all* towards the object of their worship. One can certainly be insincere, expressing attitudes one does not have; and one can certainly engage in all the outward practices of worship for reasons that have nothing to do with taking any attitudinal stance towards its nominal object, e.g. merely to fit in with one's community; to participate in a tradition; or to honour one's culture. Many of those who would describe themselves as atheists yet 'cultural' Jews, Christians, Muslims, or Hindus do such things every day. Furthermore, as the example of the first-time Satan-worshipper shows, someone might not be grateful to the object of their worship for they might simply not regard the object of their worship as having (yet) given them anything to be grateful for; they are getting into worshipping Satan precisely so as to persuade him to give them something for which they can *then* be reasonably grateful to him, or so they naively suppose.

At least the example of allegedly *bona-fide* worship performed by atheists who are motivated by attitudes that do not focus on the nominal object of worship, seems to be best described not as worship, but as fake worship. One no more genuinely worships God in the case where one believes that He does not exist and one's motivation for going through the outward observances suggesting otherwise is solely to fit in with one's community; to participate in a tradition; and so on, than an actor genuinely worships Satan if, in performing the lead role in some *Faust*-like play, he utters a line such as that attributed to the first-time Satan-worshipper in the example above, presuming he is uttering it with the sole intention of entertaining his audience. In genuine theistic worship, by contrast, the act of reflecting on the grounds for God's worshipfulness (worship-worthiness) cannot but cause the attentive believer in His existence to realise that He is their ultimate benevolent benefactor and the only rational attitudinal response to that realisation is gratitude. Or at least it is for those for whom life is, even if only on balance, a blessing. I think that this helps explain why acts of theistic worship are hard when one is unable to feel gratitude for the world or one's life, either through a non-rational depressive illness or through a rational assessment of the world's or one's own condition, hard even if one finds undiminished one's belief that there is a God who would be the appropriate object for such an attitude were one able to summon it. Hard, though not impossible, I shall in a moment argue.

For most people, the closest analogue to all of this in a human-to-human context will be revealed by reflecting on the answer they would give to the question, 'What did your parents do for you?' Certainly, all human parents fall short to a greater or lesser extent, and, for some, reflecting on the answer they would give to this question will leave them coming up rather short of positive things to say. Philip Larkin (if his famous poem 'This be the verse' is anything to go by) would perhaps be a good example of such a person. But in many of our cases – including the author's own, happily enough (for him) – the more one reflects on what a full answer to this question would look like, the more one comes to think that one could never finish giving it. And so, the more one reflects, the more gratitude towards them one will feel, or at least should feel – one may be suffering from some depressive illness or have had such a run of bad luck recently, that it occludes one's affective response to that of which one's list-making has reminded one.

I have spoken of an ‘attitude’ of gratitude, which perhaps suggests that gratitude is primarily something one feels – an emotion, with God as its object in the case of theistic worship. A feeling of thankfulness no doubt is often present in theistic worshippers during their acts of worship and is, I suggest, ideally present; but, notwithstanding that, it can be helpful to think of gratitude less as a feeling and more as a decision. In this respect, it is like certain other attitudes, such as trust or love. In the ideal case, holding such an attitude involves a feeling, but, in a non-ideal case, as for example when, for whatever reason, the appropriate feeling just cannot be summoned, the cognitive acceptance of the facts which would make such a feeling apposite as such suffices for the attitude to be present and the relevant acts, if performed due to that acceptance, count as ones of gratitude, trust, love, and so on. Some examples may be of assistance.

Consider a child hoping for a particular toy from her father for her birthday who instead receives as her present from him a copy of one of the works of Philosophy, which he himself has penned. The child will naturally be disappointed and, let us suppose, she finds herself unable to feel any gratitude towards her father for his present. Whilst this lack of warm feeling will naturally make it harder for her to thank her father for her present, it does not, I suggest, mean that she cannot genuinely do so presuming that she can, despite the lack of an affective spur in this direction, choose to do so. In particular, the absence of the *feeling* of gratitude does not entail that any act of thanking him, which she performs must be a fake one. As long as she believes that the present she has actually been given has been given with the intention that it be good for her, the fact that she cannot herself summon the feeling which this makes apposite does not debar her act of uttering ‘Thank you, daddy’ or whatever from being an expression of genuine thankfulness. She has the attitude of thankfulness cognitively, even if not its usual (and ideal) affective accompaniment. Similarly, one could genuinely thank one’s dentist for performing a painful procedure on one, even if the pain was still such that one could not *feel* any positive emotion about it or him whilst saying the relevant words as one stumbled from the chair, as long as one believed that the procedure was performed intending a benefit. The same is true *mutatis mutandis* for acts of trust or love. One genuinely has put one’s trust in George Bailey if, at his request, one has wilfully failed to withdraw all one’s money from his ‘Building and Loan’ company, even if one feels nothing but nervousness about leaving some of one’s money there as one does so. One genuinely has been loving towards one’s spouse if, by an act of the will, one has resisted the temptation to have an affair, even if, at the time one resisted, one felt the emotion of love more towards the person whose advances one was in the act of rebuffing than one did towards one’s spouse.

Thus, the attitude of gratitude and thereby genuine worship of God is always a possibility for any theist, regardless of their affective capacities; and thus ‘I didn’t feel like it’ cannot be an excuse for not offering God worship. Given this, it is no surprise to find the practice of worship unqualifiedly endorsed in all theistic religions. ‘Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.’ (*1 Chronicles* 16:34) ‘O man, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may become mindful of Him.’ (*Quran, Surah* 2, 21) ‘The yogi who knows that I and the supreme soul within all beings are one worships me and remains in me in all circumstances.’ (*Bhagavad Gita*, 6.31)

As well as gratitude, worship – at least in the theistic context – also seems to most to involve an element of praise and praise involves attributing to its object goodness

of the sort that only persons may have, moral goodness. (Again, we probably do need the ‘at least in the theistic context’ clause to cater for Satan-worshippers.) We praise people for doing their duty and *a fortiori* for going above and beyond the call of duty; we do not praise inanimate objects, even when they produce similar effects. So, for example, if a would-be assassin’s bullet is stopped from reaching its intended target by a bodyguard wilfully throwing himself in its path, we hail the bodyguard as a hero, think he should be given a medal, and so on. Even more do we do so if the person throwing herself in front of the bullet is a civilian with no particular responsibility for the safety of the intended target. If the same effect, the bullet being stopped, is instead produced merely by the fortuitous positioning of a wall, we might be similarly glad that the assassination attempt had failed, but we would not hail the wall as heroic, needful of a medal in recognition of this, and so on. Each of us will be able to call to mind our own particular examples of heroes who we think are particularly worthy of praise, either from our own personal experience or from our knowledge of history and the wider world; and I shall not delay us by giving real-world examples now. The point to note is that these examples of praiseworthy things, whatever their differences, will all share a common feature: they will all be persons. Or again, at least the paradigmatic examples will all be persons.

Again, a couple of qualifications are in order.

Firstly, it must be admitted that there are certain non-persons to which we can be persuaded an attitude of praise is not conceptually ill-suited. One can praise one’s College for its ethical investment policy; one can think that a particular pigeon one reads about in the paper is a worthy recipient of the Dickin medal (often referred to as ‘the Victoria Cross for animals’). But, again, such cases are derivative; institutions and animals are at best usefully treated as or are analogous to genuine heroes: genuine heroes can only be persons. Praiseworthiness in anything but derivative or analogous cases is a property that can only be had by persons.

Secondly, it may be conceded that there are cases where one could coherently worship a being without praising that being in the moral sense. ‘Oh Satan, I worship you; you’re the best at being bad; indeed, it’s impossible to imagine someone worse than you; frankly, I’m impressed. Anyway, about that deal . . .’ But, in such a case, the Satan-worshipper is equally supposing the personal status of the object of their worship.

So, again, these qualifications do not undermine the conclusion.

These two attitudinal elements of worship, gratitude and praise, inherent in the context of coherent theistic worship even if not in the context of all acts of worship *per se*, presuppose the personal status of the being towards whom worship is directed. And the examples of worship which do not have these features – e.g. initial acts of Satan worship – do nothing to undermine the claim that worship in *all* cases encodes the supposition that the being worshipped is a personal being. In short, on these grounds alone, we may conclude that it is only ‘conceptually appropriate’ to worship something one regards as personal. The words in quotation marks are Leftow’s, and Leftow has his own argument for why worship entails a supposition of personhood concerning its intended object in the mind of the clear-headed worshipper. We’ll look at this next.¹²

Worship, Leftow argues, inherently involves linguistic address. ‘At a minimum, to be conceptually appropriate for worship, an item must be able to be aware of us addressing it and to understand enough of our address for there to be a point to it . . . when we

worship, we *say things* to what we worship. We sing hymns *to* God; we pray *to* God; we declare *to* God our belief in Him . . . The point of the practice is for these words to be heard and understood . . . Nothing can deserve worship if trying to worship it cannot accomplish the point of worship. It cannot accomplish the point of worship to address something which cannot be aware of or understand what we say.¹³

I think Leftow's argument clearly tells of linguistic acts of worship, which assuredly are prevalent in all theistic traditions. I think it less clearly tells of non-linguistic acts of worship, which are arguably not infrequent. Wordlessly waving 'the four species' at the Jewish festival of *Sukkot*; silently kissing an icon in certain Christian traditions; participating in the *tawaf* (walking around the *Kaaba* in an anti-clockwise motion) as a part of the *Hajj* for Muslims; and offering food or other substances in the context of *puja* for Hindus can all, without conceptual violence, be construed as acts of worship which do not depend on any form of linguistic address as they can, after all, all be undertaken by mutes (and do not need to involve sign-language, writing, or some such). In addition, across the monotheistic religions, playing music without vocals; creating other works of non-linguistic art (e.g. paintings); and even engaging with the right heart in various menial tasks, have all been routinely counted as acts of worship. I remember my father telling me the medieval story behind a pair of corbels in Exeter Cathedral, the one being a carving of the Virgin Mary; the other, on the wall immediately opposite, being that of a *jongleur*, i.e. a type of entertainer or jester. According to (one version of) the story, a *jongleur* whose particular speciality was buffoonish slapstick joined a monastery. Goofy and unlearned as he was, he felt inadequate in the sombre and word-heavy manners of worship that were practiced by his fellow monks. So, at night, he stole into the chapel and by way of worship did the only thing he was good at – his clowning – in front of the statue of the Virgin. One night, he was discovered so performing by his Abbot, who was horrified at such undignified antics in so holy a place and started berating him severely. At this moment, the Virgin herself interceded, through the statue coming to life and telling the Abbot, 'Do not attempt to stop him. *I* like it.' One might wonder whether the monk intended (or could have intended in a way compatible with his theological commitments) to *worship* Mary, rather than simply to venerate her (in a way that fell short of worship), but an adaptation of the example would see the monk performing his antics in front of a statue of Jesus, someone who his tradition would have regarded without any qualification as the proper object of worship. A version so adapted then could render him as unquestionably intending his wordless slapstick routine as an act of divine worship.

However, it is worth noting that in all these examples of wordless worship, there is still a sense of address – even if not linguistic address – to a supposed personal being. The *jongleur*, for instance, in either the original case or the adapted one, is directing his antics towards a statue (so as to venerate or worship the person who the statue depicts), not facing a blank wall; and parallel points can be made of the other examples. It is also the case that such rituals and so on can only make sense to the people performing them as acts of worship (rather than, say, rehearsals for acts of worship or simple amusements) due to their thinking that the being to whom they are directing these performances will understand them as offered up in that spirit. The *jongleur*, for example, must suppose that the Virgin (or Jesus, in the adapted example) will understand that he is performing his slapstick routine as a way of honouring her (Him), not ridiculing her (Him). That

being so, I think Leftow's analysis that worship involves address to what the worshipper supposes is a personal being can be made to fit what are at first glance hard cases for it in that they do not involve the use of language.¹⁴ But, at any rate, Leftow's analysis applies all the more clearly to the offering of prayers, for offering a prayer – whether out loud or in quietness – does seem inherently to involve addressing to someone (the person to whom one is praying) something with cognitive content (that which one is praying), which fundamentally requires the use of language and the supposition that one's addressee will understand what one says, persons being the only things we suppose may understand language. We shall look at the practice of prayer next with a view to establishing this analysis more securely. In summary of this section, to quote Kvanvig, worship is 'a communicative act, and such communicative acts make sense only when directed at things with intelligence and will – which is to say, to persons.'¹⁵

Prayer

As well as worship, another characteristic theistic religious activity is prayer, which itself comes in several forms, most of which (possibly all of which; we shall return to this in a moment) seem to rely on the person praying believing that they are addressing another personal being for a characteristic (if not the only) mode of prayer is speech, either uttered out loud or quietly in one's mind. One paradigmatically addresses speech only to persons as one paradigmatically addresses speech only to things one supposes are capable of understanding it and persons are the only such things in our experience, as we saw Leftow pointing out in connection with worship a moment ago.

Again, there are derivative and analogous cases – speaking to sub-personal agents, e.g. shouting 'On' to one's voice-activated electronic device or saying 'Fetch!' to one's dog as one throws a ball. But again, reflection reveals these practices to be useful fictions and the like. One is not really trying to express one's desire to the voice-activated device that it will turn itself on in the hope it will look on one with sympathy and respond positively to one's plea as a result. In fact, one is no more supposing that one is communicating with it than one is supposing one is communicating with a device that has a more conventional 'On' switch by one's flicking of that switch. One is regarding it simply as a mechanism which one is causing to go mindlessly from one state into another by, as it happens, making a sound which is such as one might have made towards a person and which in *that* context might well have constituted an attempt at communication. Something more analogous to communication may be supposed without incoherence to be going on in the case of one's dog, but that is only to the extent that one does regard one's dog as analogous to a person, rather than a simple mindless mechanism. This is all shown by the fact that one feels mildly foolish when one inattentively personifies a voice-activated device – e.g. by absent-mindedly thanking it for something, 'That's awfully good of you, Alexa; thank you so much.' It is also shown by the fact that one can use personification to humorous effect – e.g. by claiming that one's dog was very gracious in hiding her disappointment at not winning first prize in the dog show by feigning enthusiasm for the 'participant' rosette which she was given.¹⁶ No possible ground of foolishness or similar humour can arise in the context of interactions with literal persons or descriptions of them. In short, speech is paradigmatically supposed by someone engaging in it to be a person-to-person activity for it is supposed to be a mode of communication.

Petitionary and intercessionary prayers are particularly good examples in that they involve asking God for things, perhaps for oneself – e.g. patience, acceptance, wisdom – or for others – e.g. safety, healing, peace. They are particularly good examples as they are particularly resistant to any analysis which makes the linguistic couching of them an irrelevance, in that they gain their identity as the prayers that they are by their linguistic expression of who it is to whom the person uttering them is praying and what it is that they are praying for. Of course, one can misspeak oneself in prayer no less than one can in everyday communication, but, putting aside the complications that can raise, if it is to be true that one has prayed, say, to God for Jones to have been healed, one must have uttered, even if only in one's mind, something which makes it true that it was God, rather than Satan, say, to whom one was praying; Jones, rather than Smith, say, about whom one was praying; and healing, rather than a new hat, say, for which one was praying. This sort of intentionality involves one's use of a language, or at least it fundamentally does so – I shall explain what I mean by 'fundamentally' in a moment. Fundamentally, one will need to have said, even if not out loud, something such as 'God, may Jones be healed.', rather than 'Satan, may Smith get a new hat.', 'God, may Smith get a new hat.', or any of a multitude of other things, if one is to have ended up praying to God that Jones be healed.

One could probably construct an activity which counted as a prayer to God for Jones to be healed and yet did not involve a language by outsourcing the intentionality of prayer to some complex ritual. One could imagine a context in which, for example, carefully brushing a photograph of Jones (and not one of Smith) with a medical kit (and not something else), whilst standing in front of an altar (rather than somewhere else) counted as praying to God that Jones be healed. But it is hard to imagine how such a practice could come to have the required meaning – rather than say be expressive of the desire that photographs in general be brushed whenever one happens to be standing in front of some piece of religious furniture or architecture – without the use of a language. To get such a practice of non-linguistic prayer started as a practice of prayer and one directed to God, one would have to say something along the lines of, 'In this practice, let the person prayed for be the person depicted in the photograph one holds and the effect asked for be that most usually thought of as the purpose of the object with which one touches the photograph. And finally, let the being to whom one is addressing one's prayers be the supernatural being most closely associated with the piece of religious furniture or architecture immediately in front of one.' And, as one said something along these lines, one would have to be intending that it be heard and understood by God. We have seen in the case of worship that one can coherently go through with a wordless ritual and thereby consider oneself to be worshipping God (rather than ridiculing Him, say) only if one supposes God has understood this as one's intention in performing that particular ritual. And the same applies here *mutatis mutandis*. Only having uttered (even if only silently) a complex explanation of the ritual one is about to perform and supposing that God has heard one's explanation, understood it, and thereby attributed to one an intention to pray to Him for this by one's subsequently performing the ritual, can one then coherently perform the wordless ritual described with the intention that it constitutes praying to God for Jones to be healed. This is what I mean by saying that prayers – at least of the petitionary and intercessionary sort – fundamentally require the use of language.

It is also true that one can – on some religious traditions – sensibly address one's prayers to spiritual persons other than God, e.g. 'Oh St Antony, patron saint of lost things, assist me in finding a substantial point for this paragraph.' But of course, that does nothing to undermine the claim that prayers are in all cases directed to those supposed to be persons.¹⁷

In short, the paradigmatic case of a petitionary or intercessionary prayer – and the vast majority of cases of prayers of all sorts conform to this paradigm – is a spoken utterance, one starting with an explicit address to God, after which follows a verbal description of that for which the person uttering the prayer is praying. The supposition in this is that God is a person, persons being those who may understand language. Examples of rituals we might describe as non-verbal prayers seem to rely for their meaning on presupposing some prior and more fundamental linguistic acts, setting them up, again supposing God's personal status.

At the risk of repeating the point, the same is vividly true for what could be considered a significant sub-class of petitionary prayers – prayers of confession/requests for forgiveness. They characteristically start with an explicit addressing to God of what is to follow (for only God, it is usually supposed, may forgive sins) and they continue with a verbal description of what particular sin it is to which the person praying wishes to confess and for which they are seeking forgiveness. One can confess and ask for forgiveness in more general ways than this, e.g. 'for any sins which I may have committed since my last confession', but one is encouraged where possible to bring to mind particular sins in the act of confession and to pray as specifically as one can about them. In either case, what one is doing is using language, which again entails the supposition that the being 'on the other end' of this conversation is a personal being, capable of understanding it. In some traditions, there is a human intermediary for this conversation with God – a father confessor, for example – but, even when such a person is involved, they are clearly understood not to be the only person with any role in the process, or even the most important person with a role in the process. They are the facilitative intermediary between persons, not the final personal link in a chain, which terminates at the other end in a non-person.

There may be humanistic echoes of confession and pleas for forgiveness in some new-age spiritual practices which do not involve supposing an address to a personal God and do not involve the use of language. One could imagine some new-age practice involving writing what one is ashamed of on a piece of paper which one then screws up and wordlessly tosses into a fire. But such a ritual would not, as such, count as a confession/plea for forgiveness for, as it stands, there is not supposed to be any person other than oneself who interprets it as having any meaning at all and there is nobody, other than perhaps oneself, to whom one is in any sense confessing what one has done and from whom one is in any sense seeking forgiveness in performing the ritual. It seems to me that such a ritual would better be described as a 'spiritual cleansing ceremony' or some such, than it would be as a confession to or a plea for forgiveness from another. A standard confession supposes not just something for which one feels the need to confess, but also someone (other than oneself) to whom one feels the need to confess; and a standard plea for forgiveness entails one thinks it at least possible that the person other than oneself to whom one is confessing is capable of forgiving one for whatever it is one is confessing, i.e. as a necessary condition, *is a person*, for what beings other than persons may forgive? We

may imagine raising this wordless new-age ceremony into a confession and plea for forgiveness, as we raised the wordless brushing of a photograph into a prayer, by couching it around with words such as ‘Oh Lord, when I do this in a moment, this is how I ask you to take it . . .’. But then it will be these words that are fundamentally doing the lifting, and again, in that it is persons who understand words, the practice will suppose God to be a personal being. Again then, we have reason from the widespread theistic practice of confession and pleas for forgiveness to suppose that those engaging in this practice are committed by a proper understanding of it to the supposition that God is a personal agent, one able to hear our prayers of confession and pleas for forgiveness, understand them, and grant us forgiveness for our sins. When, as they occasionally are, prayers of confession and requests for forgiveness are offered to non-divine beings – ‘Oh St Antony, forgive me for maligning you a moment ago under my breath in my frustration at your not helping me find a significant point to a paragraph.’ – the personal status of these other non-divine beings is similarly assumed.

Finally, I suggest that the sort of clearing of one’s mind, which is encouraged in some contexts by theistic traditions and sometimes called ‘centering prayer’, ‘contemplative prayer’, or ‘mediative prayer’, and which does not in all cases seem to involve address or linguistic forms is not genuine prayer. This is not to denigrate its spiritual usefulness. All sorts of things which are not prayers may be spiritually useful. Each of the theistic religions has any number of such practices which it holds up as such; and there are some interesting interreligious commonalities between them. For example, the practice of fasting appears intermittently across all the theistic religions; so too does the practice of ritual ablutions prior to acts of worship. So, declassifying so-called ‘centering-contemplative-meditative prayers’ from being prayers has no implication as to their appropriateness or utility within the spiritual life. With regards to these so-called prayers, insofar as they do not involve directing one’s thoughts towards God and utilising the vehicle of language to give those thoughts specific content – ‘Oh Lord, please help me lay to one side the concerns of the day, so that I may be more open to hearing what you have to say to me.’ – they seem closer to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness than they do to prayer. They seem to be more meditative preparations for prayer – emptying one’s mind of intrusive thoughts through one’s own efforts – than prayers themselves – asking for God’s help in, for example, removing intrusive thoughts. They are the mental corollary of the bodily purging and cleansing rituals which are also encouraged, or, perhaps more closely, they are the spiritual equivalent of going to a quiet room with someone so as to better have a conversation, not the equivalent of starting that conversation. When they are conducted in the middle of a prolonged period of prayer, they are the spiritual equivalent of (having said what one wanted to say to someone whose hearing one knows will have been up to the task of hearing it, however noisy the room one happens to have been in when speaking) moving to a quiet room so that (as someone whose hearing is not as good as one’s interlocutor) one might better hear any reply.

In the same way, the sort of non-linguistic examples of ‘crying out’ wordlessly to God which again are not uncommon in a theistic context seem best categorised as something other than prayers. Suppose one of my students annoys me by not accepting some simple formal point about the validity of a section of an argument in his essay. After having tried to explain to him several times why, whatever its virtues, this part of his argument is simply not – as he persistently claims it is – deductively valid, I might inarticulately cry

out, ‘Arrggh...’ whilst rolling my eyes, and thereby express my frustration. In so crying out, I will have communicated to him my frustration. But it would be hard to count such an expressive utterance, i.e. one of which a non-cognitivist analysis is clearly correct, as a part of our conversation, rather than as a pause in that conversation. And so correspondingly, I think that we should count any inarticulate cries to God, as are sometimes made by believers in the context of genuine existential crises, as prayers; we should regard them as mere expressions of emotion; they have the directedness of prayers – they are addressed to God (or may be) – but they have no cognitive content. They may function as preludes to a conversation with God; interruptions in a conversation with God; or terminations of a conversation with God; but they do not count as parts of a conversation with God, having a conversation with God being what it is to be praying. The same may be said of certain passages in the scriptures of the theistic religions, e.g. certain passages from the Psalms.¹⁸

In making these final points, classifying as non-prayers a couple of the practices which nevertheless form a part of the spiritual lives of many theistic believers, I could fairly be accused of allowing theory to drive evidence, rather than evidence to drive theory. Someone might point out that my Leftow-inspired argument for the personhood-supposing nature of prayer started from the premise that prayer inherently involves address through language and that – derivative and analogous cases aside – one can only clear-headedly address through language something which one supposes may understand that it is them to whom one is praying and what it is one is praying for, which is going to involve one supposing of the addressee that they are a personal being. But, when faced with apparent counterexamples to my premise that prayer fundamentally involves language – so-called ‘contemplative prayers’ and ‘expressive prayers’ – I classified these phenomena as non-prayers on no grounds other than that they seemed to me to be best so classified given that prayer is best understood as conversation, and they are not plausibly conversational. In response to this point, I think I should concede it and withdraw to the claim that at least paradigmatic and central cases of prayer fit the model; in praying in any of the standard ways then, I may suggest, the supposition is that one is in a relationship with a personal being, making one’s supplications to Him and, ideally, being attentive to any reply He might give. Characteristic examples of prayer involve the person uttering the prayers supposing through their use of language the personal status of the being to whom they are praying. Perhaps, some activities which do not fit this model may nevertheless be counted as prayer, but the central cases *do* fit this model of conversation between persons.¹⁹

I have latterly spoken of theistic prayer as being supposed by those engaging in it to be their having a conversation with God (or in some cases with another, St Antony, say). And it must be underscored that this sort of conversation is typically not one in which God (or St Antony, or whoever) replies to prayers with sentences heard by the person uttering the prayers in the interstices between their own sentences, so that the whole forms a dialogue of a sort which could in principle be written down as a transcript by a spiritually attuned stenographer. Whilst, according to theistic religions, some of the greatest prophets of these religions did at least sometimes converse with God in this manner, most who pray receive their answers in less linguistically inflected ways. For example, most do not hear a declarative sentence in their own language clearly asserting the relevant proposition a moment after they have asked a question in prayer, but rather

they come to feel or believe over a longer period that God is telling them whatever it is they come to believe is the answer to their prayer. In prayer, even if God is inherently supposed to be an attentive listener and as such a language-understander, He is less frequently experienced as an active speaker, a language-utterer. But, as I say, according to the theistic religions, He is sometimes so experienced, e.g. by some of the greatest prophets; and we shall come to this as another reason to think God's personal status is supposed by theistic practice in a moment, in our discussion of revelation.

Finally on the topic of prayer, one thing is understood so clearly that it is a hackneyed commonplace of spiritual instruction: one cannot force God's hand by prayer. This understanding again is implicative of God's personal status. Why is it that one cannot force God's hand? Precisely because He is free agent – free to respond to one's prayers as one might wish Him to respond to them and free not to do so, determined in the end by nothing other than a choice, which He alone will make, certainly bearing in mind the prayers of His creatures, but equally certainly not being governed by them. And this again implies that one is supposing that one is uttering one's prayers in the context of a person-to-person relationship. One is not simply aligning oneself with some karmic force which is such that, were one to align oneself with it properly, it would have no choice over whether or not to give one whatever effect aligning oneself properly with it spits out. By contrast, in the case of prayer, there is no implication that if one does not get what one prayed for, that must be because one did not pray for it properly; it is understood that it may well be simply because God – in His perfect wisdom and goodness – did not choose to give it to one: He listened; he understood; and He answered, but His answer was 'No.' And what sort of being is it that can understand and choose in this way? Personal being.

In short, 'In asking God [for something] we as petitioners acknowledge that God is a personal agent, and we accept that we are at the mercy of God's free agency for whatever it is that we ask of God ... petition can only be meaningful within the context of a personal relation.'²⁰

We turn now to consider how revelation is understood in the theistic context.

Reflection on supposed scriptural revelation

The theistic religions are often described as revealed religions; each supposes that God has spoken to His people through prophets in the past and perhaps continues to speak to individual believers and others in the present, directly and through intermediaries, e.g. one's rabbi, priest, imam, or pujari. These religions suppose that the historical revelations have been preserved carefully (and more or less accurately) under divine superintendence so as to form their scriptures. A large part of a religious community's devotional life is consequently spent reading and reflecting on these texts, seeking in them guidance on both doctrinal and practical matters. The operating question is always of the form, 'What is God telling us in this passage?', which question in itself presupposes that God is a personal being, the sort of thing that, or rather person who, could be telling us something with language. It is in its understanding of scriptural revelation – if anything, even more clearly than it is in its understanding of prayer – that we may see Theism's fundamental commitment to thinking of God as a language-user: He is viewed in revelation as a language-utterer, not merely as a language-understander, not simply as someone to whom one may speak, but as someone who may speak back.²¹ Indeed, the

view of the adherents of each of the world's theistic religions is that God *has* spoken and that we have a record of His words. The aim in understanding those texts which are taken to be records of His speaking is thus always *exegesis*, not *eisegesis*; and that supposes there is some meaning in the text prior to our coming to it, which supposes a personal agent other than ourselves to have put that meaning into it. The crucial point for our current purposes is that in regarding some piece of text as a revelation, one must regard it as potentially evidence of the thoughts of the *person or persons* whom one supposes to have spoken it (or to have otherwise caused it to have been written down), and thus these religions are committed to the personhood of the revealer.

If one places a monkey at a typewriter and subsequently observes him apparently banging keys at random so as to produce some text, one will not regard that text as revelatory of anything, even if the monkey happens to bang out 'I want a banana' unless, that is, one starts to think that the monkey has *not* in fact banged out letters entirely at random, but has done so with the intention of conveying an aspect of his or her mental state. Certain non-human animals *can*, it appears, be taught language to a rudimentary level and it is not clear whether they should be counted as persons or not. It could thus be contended that perhaps some sub-personal animals may develop language skills sufficient to communicate at least some of their mental lives to us using this language and yet remain, despite that, rightly thought of as non-persons. But, even so, it is clear we shall be justified in treating the typed messages of such animals as revelatory of their mental states only to the extent that they approach personhood and it is notable that the animals who do manage to develop even rudimentary language skills are, to the extent that they do so, uniformly treated as at least approaching persons – being accorded rights, and so forth – by those who interact with them. In short, taking a text as a revelation paradigmatically implies taking its author as a person or persons.

A complication can arise in that for most putative revelations, a dual-author thesis will be endorsed by many of the adherents of the religions which regard them as revelations. For example, the question, 'Who wrote the Pentateuch?' would have traditionally been answered by a Jew or a Christian by attributing it both to Moses and to God; Moses wrote the text, but he was inspired to write it as he did by God. On such a view, it becomes potentially open to legitimate contestation which aspects of a text are conveying more the thoughts of its human author and which more the thoughts of its divine author, even if there will always be presupposed to be at least an extremely high degree of correlation between them and, at the extreme, the possibility of any divergence at all may be denied by particular schools of thought within these religions, those schools which teach certain versions of inerrancy. On some traditions, a third player is introduced, a divinely-guided interpretative authority the traditional interpretations of which are thus to be given weight. Roman Catholics, for example, hold the Church as they identify it to be such. Matters are, at least initially, simpler with mainstream Islam, in that no dual-author thesis is held of its primary revelation – the *Quran*. With regards to the *Quran*, Muhammad had no authorial, stylistic or even editorial input; on a mainstream way of putting it, he simply repeated word-for-word what was already written in what is called *The Heavenly Quran*. Matters are initially simpler with mainstream Islam, but of course how to interpret an *ex-hypothesi* single-authored text is not a question which is itself answered simply by reference to the supposed fact of its single authorship. For example, even if there is only one person whose intentions are relevant to answering the question

‘Is this passage meant literally or figuratively?’, the fact that there is only one person whose intentions are relevant does not as such answer that question. There are many issues here, but, as they are besides our current purpose, we shall return to the point which all these issues being issues in itself presupposes: God’s being thought to use language to convey some of His thoughts to us presupposes God’s personal status, for it is only persons who use language to this end.²²

Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have shown that the theistic practices of (a) worship, (b) prayer and (c) reflection on scriptures taken to be revelation, each presuppose in the minds of clear-headed theistic believers the personal status of God, the supposed object of their worship and prayer and the supposed revealer of Himself and His will through His use of language in the scriptures. It will be noted that no particular theory of the nature of personhood has been supposed in this argument; the claim defended has been that for any plausible account of personhood, these core theistic practices can be seen to presuppose God’s personhood.²³

Notes

1. Hewitt, 2022. Hewitt himself speaks of the claim to which he suggests common Christian practice does not commit its practitioners as the claim that God is “a person,” noting in correspondence that he prefers this way of phrasing things as he “like Adrian Thatcher, who made the distinction some years ago, think that there are many senses in which it is right to say that God is personal; crucially God is of personal significance for the faithful. It’s just that God is not a person.” However, in that orthodox Trinitarian Christianity would also deny that God is *a* person (singular), Hewitt’s choice of terminology strikes me as less than ideal. I thus use the phrase “personal being” to allow for mono-personal conceptualisations and tri-personal ones; in other words, as I use the term “personal being” in this paper it means “a single person or set of two or more persons.” So, translating Hewitt into my terminology has him arguing that Christian practice does not commit its practitioners to conceptualising God as a personal being.
2. There is scope for some variants of Hinduism to place within a worldview that at least to an extent resembles the Eastern sort as it has been described, a personal being, Vishnu, who is ultimate within the realm of *concreta* even if Himself existing only under the *aegis* of an ontologically more fundamental impersonal and abstract Brahman. And Vishnu, so conceived, can consistently be attributed the nominally essential properties of God, e.g. omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness. Likewise, within the Western Religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is scope for conceding that God is subject to metaphysical truths – e.g. that nothing can cause itself. So, the division between the Eastern and Western way of conceiving of ultimate spiritual reality as outlined in the main text is not a sharp one.
3. One of the referees for this paper considered this claim of mine an example of “mixing up empirical and normative statements.” To be clear then, I understand it simply as an empirical claim, about the metaphysical commitments that are in fact held by most Buddhists. (This particular referee was obviously not a native English speaker, and perhaps in some languages the word best translated into English as “atheists” invariably carries (negative?) normative connotations, as historically “atheists” did once in English. I thus take the time to note that the term “atheists” does *not* now carry any normative implications in English; though it is variously defined, in this paper it means simply those who believe that God as construed by Theism does not exist.)

4. Inevitably there is scope for positing “a third way,” something *sui generis* at the base of reality that stands ontologically between a personal being on the one hand and an impersonal mechanism or force on the other. Hewitt himself says in correspondence that he would endorse taking such a third way. My point in this paper is that the religious practices on which it focuses *per se* give one no reason to think that everyday believers take God to fall into such a third *sui generis* category; on the contrary, they seem to imply straightforwardly that they conceive of Him as falling into the category of personal being. Some may of course argue that a less “philosophically flat-footed” approach to the practices than the one I take in this paper would demonstrate that a more philosophically defensible view would see God conceptualised in terms of this third category. But I am not arguing that the ordinary adherents of these religions are right to conceptualise ultimate spiritual reality as a personal being, just that they do in fact conceptualise it thus; and so I would maintain that a less philosophically flat-footed approach (or, as I would prefer to point out, one which relies on what will be very controversial philosophical assumptions, e.g. that language must work a certain way) would be inherently revisionary, not descriptive.
5. Hewitt, 2022. Hewitt at various times calls on such theses as that persons must be material (Hewitt (2022), 352 & 357); that language-users must acquire skills as part of a community (Hewitt (2022), 352 & 358); and even that to be a part of our language-using community would require being “rooted in our animal life” (Hewitt (2022), 358). He also seems committed to its being a conceptual truth that God cannot have mental states in anything other than an analogical way (Hewitt (2022), 353); to think otherwise, he tells us, would be to commit a “category mistake” (Hewitt (2022), *passim*). Rather than engaging in a detailed way with the philosophical theses Hewitt occasionally relies upon, I shall make my case in my own terms, looking at the practices of worship, prayer and reflection on texts supposed to be revelation directly. However, readers with an interest are encouraged to go back and read his paper and then see whose view of the matter they judge depends on the least controversial philosophical theses and thus allows the practices most to “speak for themselves”.
6. I give my account of personhood in my 2005. As will have already become apparent, I write from within the tradition of analytical philosophy and the “most” to whom I refer here is most philosophers writing on the nature of personhood within that tradition. One of the referees for this paper pointed out that, as it goes on, I give “clear evidence of British culture,” and suggested it was “not unnecessary to somehow make explicit this positionality – cf. Paul Ricoeur’s advice to always clarify ‘from where’ one speaks (‘d’où parlez-vous’) , even if the author belongs to a philosophical tradition that claims to make abstraction from a specific cultural embedding or surrounding.” Very well then: it is as that referee suspected – I am British and I self-identify as part of a philosophical tradition that sees that fact (as well as many others, e.g. my sex, my sexual orientation, my ethnicity) as irrelevant to the soundness of the philosophical arguments I present.
7. Collins UK, 2003, for example, states that “The name God is given to the *spirit*. or being who is worshipped as the creator and ruler of the world, especially. by Jews., Christians., and Muslims.” The relevant entry in *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* (Merriam Webster, US, 2024), reads, “God . . . the being perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness who is worshipped (as in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism) as creator and ruler of the universe”.
8. I am grateful to Simon Hewitt for pointing this out to me; he mentions in this context the view of Thomas J. Ord. Ord is an atheist on my preferred definition – not believing that the God of Theism exists – though he might eschew that label.
9. Similarly, atheists might express a feeling towards a certain happening by saying the words “Thank goodness it’s stayed dry”, or even, “Thank God it’s stayed dry”, but I think it would be a mistake to read anything into such constructions; they seem best analysed as non-cognitivist expressions of emotion. I am grateful to Simon Hewitt for drawing my attention to this.
10. As Hewitt has also pointed out to me, this provides a possible avenue of response for him. He could say that the characteristic theistic practices I am focusing on suppose not divine

personhood *simpliciter* (as I am suggesting) but only personhood *simpliciter* OR something closely analogous to that, and that thinking the second of these disjuncts true would fit with the strand of the inter-religious philosophical tradition which says that God is not literally a personal being but only analogically so. Again I would say that I am here seeking faithfully to reflect the conceptualisation that is as a matter of fact supposed by the majority of those engaged in the practices under consideration, which practices in themselves – I hope to be in the process of showing – give one no reason to think God is not being supposed to be a personal being *simpliciter*. If later philosophical theorising leads a minority of believers to think of God as, on reflection, only analogous to a personal being (as indeed it does), that is this minority revising their pre-theoretical conceptualisation; and it would be a revision for the majority of believers who have not as yet been persuaded by such philosophical theorising.

11. For example, see “Worship” in Simpson, J.A. and Weiner, E.S.C., 1989; and in Merriam Webster, US, *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*.
12. Cf. the following with Hewitt’s negative assessment of Leftow’s case (Hewitt, 2022., 353 ff).
13. Leftow, “Naturalistic Pantheism,” 70–1
14. The same can be said of Hewitt’s examples of non-linguistic acts of worship, as he discusses them (Hewitt, 2022, 354–355).
15. Kvanvig, *Depicting Deity*, 112–3
16. Hewitt points to Burns’s “Address to a Haggis” (Hewitt, 2022, 354), the humour of which I would explain as due in part to such over-personification.
17. If one thinks that St Antony is currently a disembodied soul in an intermediate state (awaiting the general resurrection), then one might wonder if he satisfies the criteria for personhood. But this is a highly sophisticated philosophical ground for doubting the personhood of the intended addressee of the relevant prayer, so I don’t think it tells against the presupposition that personhood is supposed by most engaging in prayers to St Antony and the like. The case is similar to my sending an email to someone in another time-zone, who might well, at the moment of my sending it, be in a period of a dreamless sleep (and hence not currently satisfying the criteria for personhood); such a possibility does not undermine the general thesis that emails are sent to those supposed to be persons. I am grateful to Simon Hewitt for drawing this case to my attention.
18. I am grateful to one of the referees for this journal for pointing this out to me.
19. It’s been suggested by Hewitt in correspondence that, on some accounts, prayer without words is the “highest” form of spirituality. To this I would say that it might be right, but, in this paper, I am addressing whether the more ordinary cases of prayer imply the persons engaging in them are committed to a conceptualisation of the one to whom their prayers are addressed as a personal being. If the highest form of spirituality requires one to transcend this conceptualisation or in some way bracket it, so be it; the highest form of spirituality may be revisionary of this conceptualisation, requiring some “conceptual re-engineering,” as it were.
20. Brummer, *What are We Doing When We Pray?* 53.
21. Cf Hewitt, 2022, 352: “we cannot take God to be a language user.” On the contrary, God must be taken to be such, to have embedded himself in the linguistic communities of those to whom He has revealed Himself, by those who take their scriptures to be His revelations. For a contrasting view, see also Hewitt, 2018.
22. I should acknowledge that there are actions God might perform that are properly called revelations and yet do not involve communication through language. God might simply cause a mental image of my father to form in my mind or He might draw my attention to a photograph of my father on the wall in response to a prayer asking Him to put me in mind of anyone who would welcome a telephone call from me today; and, in either case, it seems right to say that God has revealed to me (non-linguistically) that my father would welcome such a call. Although in both cases there is a way to express what God has revealed in language, *viz.* “He has revealed that my father would welcome a telephone call from me today,” God did

not Himself use language to convey the relevant proposition. In this section of the main text, I am focussing on those instances of revelation which *are* supposed to involve God using language, the language of the scriptures. I am not intending by so focusing to suggest that I think God cannot communicate by any method other than this. Mavrodes discusses various non-linguistic modes of revelation (as well as linguistic ones) at greater length in Mavrodes, 1988. And the seminal book-length discussion of the issues of God's communicating using language is given by Wolterstorff in Wolterstorff, 1995.

23. I am grateful for the comments of Simon Hewitt and Brian Leftow on this paper. I am also grateful for the comments of the anonymous referees of this journal, though considerations of space mean that I have not been able to make all the additions they suggested.

I dedicate this paper to the memory of my parents, both of whom have died in the last year, my father dying between the date I submitted this paper for consideration and its acceptance. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

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