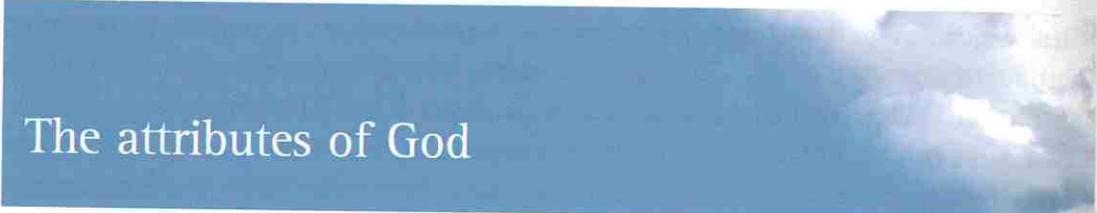


- It could also be argued that Wiles misses the point of miracles; they are not meant to be simply helping people in need, but have the purpose of revealing something about God, and therefore a comparatively small miracle might be more significant because of what it shows about God.

### Practice exam question

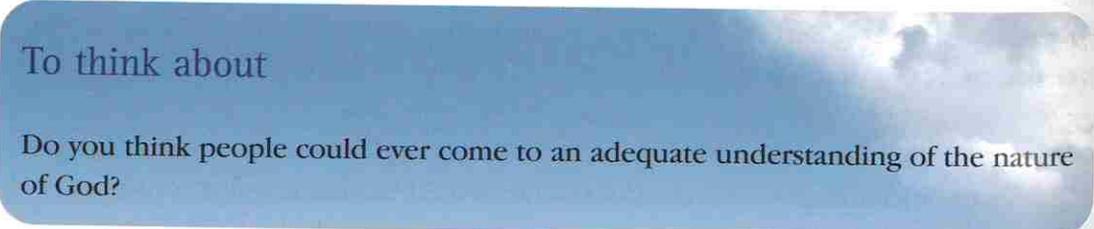
**'A God who performs miracles is not worthy of worship.'** Discuss.

This question relates directly to the views of Maurice Wiles, and therefore your essay should focus on his work and a discussion of it. In your essay, you should explain the point of view expressed in the statement, and demonstrate that you understand why some people support it. You should also give some counter-arguments. You might want to extend the discussion to a consideration of other issues connected with miracles, before arriving at your conclusion.



## The attributes of God

One of the most fundamental questions in the philosophy of religion is, what do people mean when they talk about 'God'? Theists are people who believe that God exists – but what exactly is it, that they are saying exists, and what are they asking other people to believe in? Are they talking about an object, one amongst all of the other objects in the universe? Are they, perhaps, talking about 'Existence-Itself', encompassing all of the universe within it? Or are they perhaps talking about a concept that exists in our mental perception of the world but would cease to exist if there were no one to think about it? What do they understand the nature of God to be?



### To think about

Do you think people could ever come to an adequate understanding of the nature of God?

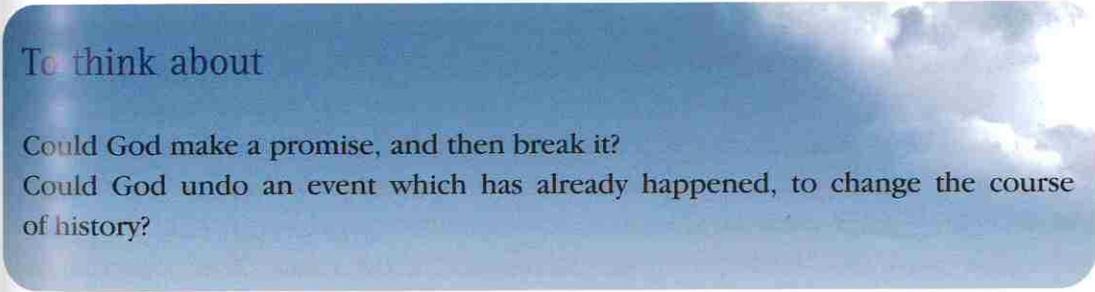
As we have seen, most philosophy of religion as we know it comes from within the Christian tradition. Because Christianity began and grew within the context of the Roman world, Christian understandings of the nature of God developed from the interweaving of biblical ideas and concepts from the ancient Greek philosophers. Christians inherited the language, symbolism and poetry of the Old Testament, in which God is anthropomorphised, involved with the world and unpredictable;

but the early Christian fathers also came from a culture in which classical ideas of a timeless and spaceless First Cause were very attractive. In particular, ideas from Plato and Aristotle were adopted and woven into Christian interpretations of the nature of God – sometimes successfully, and sometimes in a way that produces at least apparent contradictions. Philosophers of religion have to try to untangle these ideas and work out which, if any, make more sense.



## Omnipotence

The idea that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, is a familiar one in Christian thought. However, it has caused a considerable amount of controversy, where people have wondered whether the concept of God's omnipotence is compatible with other attributes ascribed to God, and also wondered whether omnipotence is in itself a coherent concept. For example, people have for years debated the questions of whether God can create a stone too heavy for himself to lift, or a knot which he cannot himself untie. People discuss whether God's omnipotence is compatible with his being all-loving, since it would be illogical for God to be both able to do evil (because he is able to do absolutely everything), and unable to do evil (because he is perfectly loving) at the same time.



## To think about

Could God make a promise, and then break it?

Could God undo an event which has already happened, to change the course of history?

There are many passages in the Bible which support the view that God is omnipotent. For example, in the book of Genesis there is the story of Abraham and his wife Sarah, who showed kindness and hospitality to three strangers, bringing them water and preparing a meal for them to refresh them before they went on their way. As a reward, God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have the son they had always longed for – even though Sarah was well past child-bearing age. The idea was so ridiculous to her that she could not help laughing:

*Then the Lord said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son'. Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now*

*have this pleasure? Then the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.' Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, 'I did not laugh'. But he said, 'Yes, you did laugh'. (Genesis 18:10–15)*

There is a similar story in Luke's Gospel, where Mary the mother of Jesus hears from the angel that her cousin Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist, despite the fact that Elizabeth, like Sarah, has passed the menopause and has never been able to have children: 'Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God' (Luke 1:36–37).

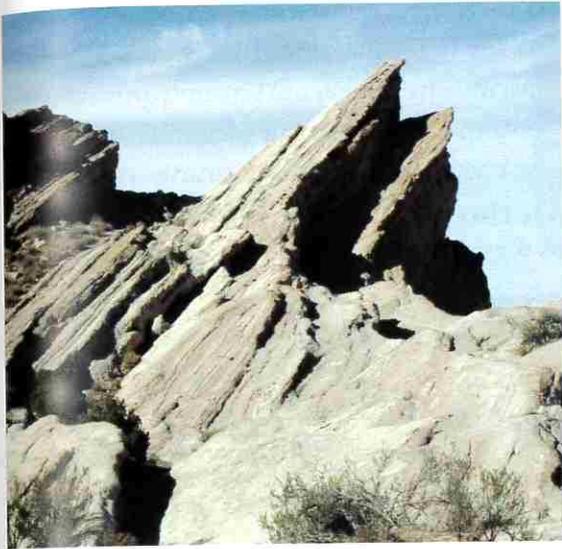
Even miracles which go against the laws of nature are within the powers of God. In the Abraham story, God asks a rhetorical question 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?', implying that God can do anything and everything that he wants to. It is this idea of 'everything that he wants to' that has given many Christian thinkers a way of solving the difficulties of God's omnipotence: if God is capable of doing anything that he wants to do, then he is omnipotent – but there are things which God would never want to do because they are against his nature, such as breaking the laws of logic, failing or doing something unjust.

In the New Testament, God's omnipotence is declared by Jesus in the context of the story of the rich young ruler:

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.' (Matthew 19:23–26)*

Christian theologians have taken the view that if God did not have supreme power, he would not be able to do the things that are necessary for human salvation. Unless God had omnipotence, he would not be able to carry out his plans for the universe; he would not be able to save people from their sins; he would not be able to resurrect people from death; he would not be able to give them eternal life in heaven. Both Anselm and Descartes depended on this understanding of God when they formed their ontological arguments, claiming that God is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' (Anselm), and that God has all the perfections (including perfect power). If God were anything less than omnipotent, then we would be able to conceive of a greater, more perfect and more powerful being; so God, by definition, must be omnipotent.

When Descartes explored what it meant for God to be perfectly powerful, he therefore came to the conclusion that God can do absolutely anything, even that which is logically impossible. God is the source of logic and can therefore suspend logic or replace it whenever he wants to.



*Could God create a rock so heavy that he could not lift it?*

However, most scholars have believed that this kind of view turns God into an unpredictable and arbitrary tyrant, who might do anything (and therefore cannot be relied upon). If God is really all-powerful in the sense that he can do anything at all, then God has to be capable of doing evil, of being unforgiving, of turning against us, and of failing. He has to be capable of being self-contradictory.

The problem of whether God is or is not capable of doing evil, for example, could be answered by saying yes, admittedly it is contradictory that God should be both capable of evil because of his omnipotence, and incapable because of his love. However, because God is omnipotent, he can get around that logical problem (even if we, as humans without omnipotence, cannot see how). For some people, it is enough to accept that the human mind cannot comprehend the omnipotence of God; but for others, this kind of approach is just dodging the question, and is nothing more than a refusal to admit that religious belief does not make sense.

Descartes' view creates difficulties for theodicy. The theodicies which have been put forward by most Christian thinkers suggest that God could not act in any other way than the way he does, without depriving us of our free will; suffering is a price which has to be paid for us to make free choices and be autonomous moral agents. However, if Descartes is correct and God is capable of suspending the laws of logic to allow us to have free will without the consequent evil, then the existence of evil in the world becomes something which God could change if he wanted to, but which he just chooses to inflict on us even though there is no justification for it.



*Could God prevent war without compromising human free will? If not, then is God still omnipotent?*

### To think about

Does this qualified view of the nature of God's omnipotence mean that God still meets Anselm's definition of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'?

Thomas Aquinas argued that God is completely omnipotent in being in charge of the whole world, creating it and keeping it in existence, and with everything in the world dependent on God for its existence. Aquinas said that God is omnipotent because 'he can do everything that is absolutely possible', qualified by saying that 'everything that does not imply a contradiction is among those possibilities in respect of which God is called omnipotent'.

From this, then, it follows that God cannot do anything which is inconsistent with his nature, because that would imply a contradiction. God is incorporeal (has no body) for example, and therefore cannot swim, or die, or become tired. God is perfectly good, and therefore cannot deceive, or do any other form of evil.

Peter Vardy, in *The Puzzle of Evil*, suggests that God's omnipotence is much more limited than many Christians have previously suggested. God is not in control of the whole of history, able to move anything around like pieces on a chessboard, Vardy argues, and it is wrong to suggest that everything which happens is because of the will of God.

Vardy suggests that God created the universe in such a way that his ability to act is necessarily limited. The whole of the universe is finely tuned in such a way that if God acted in any different way, everything would not be able to exist in the way that it does. He argues that the universe is perfectly suited for the existence of free, rational human beings, and that in order for it to remain this way, God's omnipotence has to be very much limited. However, this limitation is self-imposed. God chose to create

the universe in this way, knowing what it would mean, and therefore it is still right to call God omnipotent because nothing limits his power except when he chooses.

Vardy concludes:

*To call God Almighty, therefore, is to recognise the ultimate dependence of the universe and all things within it on God. It is to recognise God's creative and sustaining power. However, it specifically does not mean that God has total power to do anything he wishes. God is limited by the universe he has chosen to create. ... This limitation does not, however, lessen God in any significant way. It is rather a recognition of God's wish to create a universe in which human beings can be brought into a loving relationship with him. (The Puzzle of Evil, Fount, 1999)*

John Macquarrie, in *Principles of Christian Theology* (SCM Press, 1966) makes a similar point. He also emphasises the need for believers to remember that when they speak of the power of God, they are using analogy, and should understand that God's power is very different from our own; following Aquinas, he argues that there will always be aspects of God's nature that remain unknowable to us. Even if we can understand them partially, and express them partially with the use of analogy, we should nevertheless bear in mind that God's omnipotence is something we have difficulty comprehending, which is only to be expected, given that we have small fallible human minds whereas God is God.

Like Vardy and Aquinas before him, Macquarrie also emphasises that any limitations on God's omnipotence are self-imposed. God is not constrained by logic, nor by the physical world, nor by the actions of human beings, but is constrained in his omnipotence merely because he chooses to limit his own power out of love for humanity. This is an idea which has been explored by Christian theologians, particularly in the context of Christology (understanding the nature of Christ). In answer to the puzzle of how Jesus could have been the Son of God, given that Jesus did not always display God's attribute of omnipotence, theologians have developed a doctrine known as kenosis. The doctrine is based on a passage from the letter to the Philippians, where the writer encourages his readers to imitate Christ's humility:

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself*

## Key terms

**atemporal** –  
eternal, outside  
the constraints of  
time.

**sempiternal** –  
everlasting,  
moving along the  
same timeline  
that we do.

*and became obedient to death —  
even death on a cross!* (Philippians 2:5–8)

According to the doctrine of kenosis, God ‘emptied himself’ of his own omnipotence in order to come to earth as a man. It was a deliberate choice made by God for the benefit of humanity, to put limitations on his own powers so the people could make a free choice.

Most scholars, therefore, have qualified the idea of God’s omnipotence, and have concluded that God’s omnipotence means being able to do that which is logically possible and within the nature of God. In this understanding of omnipotence, God could not do evil, because it is not in his nature. He could not give us free will without the existence of evil, because it is not logically possible.

## Practice exam question

**‘If God is omnipotent, then he must be able to do absolutely anything.’ Discuss.**

This is a straightforward question. You need to be able to discuss the nature of omnipotence, and what it might mean when applied to God. A good answer would probably include the views of Descartes, and also of other thinkers who have rejected Descartes’ view in favour of a more modified understanding of omnipotence. Aim for a structured argument with a clear distinction between different points of view.



### The eternity of God

What does it mean to say that God is eternal? There are two main views:

1 One view, which is the one most commonly adopted by classical theologians, is that God is timeless. In other words, God is outside time, and is not bound by time; God is the creator of time. God is described as atemporal.

2 The other view is that God is everlasting. In other words, it is the belief that God moves along the same timeline that we do but never begins or ends. The past is past for God as well as for us, and past events are fixed for God just as they are for us – the future is unknown to us and is also, to some extent at least, unknown to God because it has not happened yet. In this view of God, he is described as sempiternal.

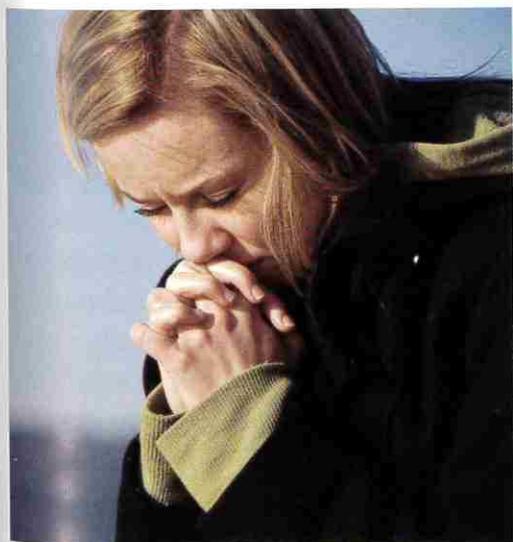


*Is God outside time, or does he move along the same timeline that we do?*

Our understanding of what it means for God to be eternal is important, because it affects many other ideas about the attributes of God. It affects ideas such as:

- omniscience (can God know with certainty the details of events which have not yet happened?)
- the problem of evil (can God see the whole picture from the beginning, in which case can he be at least partly blamed for things being the way that they are?)
- omnipotence (can God change the past, and undo events which have already happened, or is that beyond his power?).

Questions of the relationship between God and time also raise questions connected with prayer. If God is unchanging, and knows with perfect certainty what will happen in the future, is there any point in praying except for the psychological benefit to the worshipper? However, if prayer can change God's mind, so that he ends up acting differently from the way he might have acted without the prayers, then is God really a perfect being 'than which nothing greater can be conceived'? Perhaps we could conceive of a more perfect being, one who knew from all time the wisest course of action to take, and who is unchanging.



*If God exists eternally, outside time, is there any point in praying about worldly events?*

## Key term

**immutable** – incapable of change.

### The view that God is timeless (atemporal)

This is the view that has been the more popular among Christian thinkers, and has been held by, for example, Anselm, Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, and Schleiermacher. It is the idea that God exists outside time, and can see the past, the present and the future, all with perfect knowledge. Time, it is argued, is an aspect of the created world, like space, and God is in control of it. God is not bound by space, in the Christian view; he can be and is everywhere at once. In the same kind of way, he is not bound by time but exists in every part of history and in every part of the future while being present in the world today.

The view is popular because it shows that God is not limited. As an aspect of the created world, time is something introduced by God rather than something to which God is subject. God's omnipotence is not threatened if God is not bound by the constraints of time – perhaps a God who could not know the future would be less powerful than one who could. It is a view which also allows that God is immutable (unchangeable), which is argued by some thinkers to be necessary if God is also perfect.

People who do not like the idea of God being everlasting rather than eternal argue that if God were bound by time, then he would be much more limited. He would not know what the outcomes of actions might be; he would have to wait and see how events turned out, before he decided what to do next. There might be times when God's plans were thwarted because of unforeseen difficulties, and then God would have to resort to a different plan. His omnipotence and omniscience are reduced to a point where God can hardly be called *all*-powerful and *all*-knowing. A God who was sempiternal rather than atemporal would not meet Anselm's definition of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', because we would be able to conceive of a greater being than one who was constrained by having to exist within time.

### To think about

Do you agree that a God who exists outside time would be a greater being than one who exists within time?

Those who defend the view that God is outside time argue that other concepts of God's relationship with time do not recognise the uniqueness of God. God can bring things about in time, and cause changes in people without being changed himself, because God is not a person in the same way that we are. There are things which are possible for God, because of the unique nature of his existence, even if we may not be able to see how they could be possible from within our limited understanding.

### The view that God is everlasting

Other people have raised objections to the view that God is timeless, saying that it creates more problems than it resolves. It has been argued that if God is timeless, and therefore immutable, then God cannot be a person, or be said to have a 'life' – this view has been expressed by, for example, Nelson Pike and Richard Swinburne. A person with a life has to be changeable, it is argued, in order to have relationships and respond to people according to what they do. A timeless God would not be able to love, because a timeless God is immutable and therefore is not affected by anything. This view that God can be affected is associated with 'process theologians' such as Charles Hartshorne and Jürgen Moltmann.

#### To think about

Would it be possible to have a relationship with someone who was always exactly the same, no matter what you did or how you were feeling?

Their argument is that love (even unconditional love which is not because of our deserving but because of the nature of God) cannot be compatible with immutability. A loving being responds to the object of his or her love. If the loved one is feeling happy, the one who loves shares in that happiness; if the loved one suffers, then the one who loves feels pain too. But these changes – sometimes happy, sometimes sad – happen within time, as a process and a sequence of events. Therefore God has to exist within time, so that God is able to respond to us with love. If there is a living God, who has relationships with people as individuals, then God cannot also be timeless, it is argued.

Richard Swinburne writes that the view of a timeless God contradicts the Bible:

*If God had thus fixed his intentions 'from all eternity' he would be a very lifeless thing; not a person who reacts to men with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening because he chooses to there and then. Yet ... the God of the Old Testament, in which Judaism, Islam and Christianity have their roots, is a God in continual interaction with men, moved by men as they speak to him, his action being more often in no way decided in advance. We should note, further, that if God did not change at all, he would not think now of this, now of that. His thoughts would be one thought which lasted for ever. (The Coherence of Theism, Oxford University Press, 1977)*

Swinburne argues that the view of a God outside time is one which is not biblical, but which has permeated Christian thought first through the influence of the ancient

Greeks, and then promoted by Thomas Aquinas. Swinburne does not see why a perfect being should have to be changeless; it was Plato who planted the idea in Western minds that a world of unchanging and unchangeable concepts was inevitably more perfect than the changing world, but we do not have to accept Plato's ideas.

In the Bible, Swinburne argues, God does not have fixed purposes for all eternity. He does not intend for all time that something should happen on a particular day and then remain unchanged. In contrast, God interacts with people, and God's decisions about what will happen may change, because of the ongoing process of his relationship with individuals. A biblical example which might support Swinburne's view is the story in Isaiah of King Hezekiah's illness:

*In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, 'This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover'. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 'Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes'. And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: 'Go and tell Hezekiah, "This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life".'* (Isaiah 38:1-5)

Perhaps, then, Swinburne is right; God had been planning to end Hezekiah's life, but was persuaded to change his mind in response to the King's prayer. However, there are also passages where the changelessness of God is emphasised:

*God is not a man, that he should lie,  
nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
Does he speak and then not act?  
Does he promise and not fulfil? (Numbers 23:19)*

In this passage, at least, God does seem to have fixed intentions, which do not change. Unlike humanity, God knows with perfect knowledge what he will do, and has no need to alter his views or intentions.

Augustine considered the question of whether the Bible supports the idea of a God who is atemporal, or a God who is sempiternal, and reached the opposite conclusion from Swinburne. For Augustine, the problem was that God had made the world at a particular point in time, which raised the issue of what God had been doing all the while beforehand, if God moves along the same timeline as we do. Augustine wondered why, if God is everlasting, he picked that particular moment to create the universe, and how God might have been spending his time (because God would have

had time, just as we understand it) in the eternity before the universe existed. For Augustine, the biblical account of creation points towards a timeless God, who chooses to create day and night, and chooses to create the seasons, just as described in Genesis, but who transcends notions of 'before' and 'after'.

### God as impassible

One attribute that the early founders of Christianity ascribed to God is the view that God is impassible, which means that he is unaffected by anything. In the Roman Catholic tradition, following the ideas expressed by Thomas Aquinas, God cannot be changed by anything outside himself. Just like Aristotle's Prime Mover, which sets things in motion but is itself unaffected by any cause, God cannot be acted upon.

### To think about

Why might impassibility be understood as a 'perfection'?

The view that God is impassible has some subtly different understandings. To Origen, one of the early Christian fathers, it meant lacking all emotion, being unperturbed, incapable of being emotionally affected by others and incapable of feeling emotion towards others; and therefore, at one point in his career, Origen concluded that God could not suffer.

Clement of Alexandria, another early Christian teacher, suggested it meant that God could not be distracted from his essential nature: God is single-minded in his purposes. It does not mean that God is uninterested, but that God's will comes entirely from within God and is not affected by any outside influences.

R. S. Franks, in the entry on 'Passibility and impassibility' in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (T&T Clark, 1999), suggested that impassibility refers to whether God is capable of being acted upon from outside, but need not rule out that God could cause feelings and emotions within himself; so God could still have feelings of love and compassion and forgiveness, but these would be feelings that arose as part of God's own nature, rather than feelings into which God was, in effect, forced by the deeds of his creation.

This classical view of the immutability of God has its origin in Plato's and Aristotle's views of the Ultimate, the Perfect, the Unmoved. For Plato, the 'Form of the Good' was a concept, incapable of being affected by the goodness or otherwise of everything else because it had no personality. For Aristotle, the 'Prime Mover' is first in the chain of cause and effect precisely because it is uncaused – nothing acts upon it, it is unchanged by anything.

### Key term

**impassible** – incapable of suffering pain or harm; unfeeling.

Augustine and Aquinas took up this idea, and have influenced much of Christian thought. According to Augustine, in his book *The City of God*, God is absolutely immutable, completely unchangeable, and cannot be other than he is. This is firmly bound to the idea that God is timeless. Aquinas followed Augustine's view, adding the important point that when we speak of God, we need to recognise that the language we use is analogical and not univocal. This means that any words which we use to describe God cannot be applied directly, because God is not like us. We have to use words from our own experience of the world when we speak, because those are the only words which our language has; words come from a need to express common experience. But God is not like anything else in the world, and so when we use language, according to Aquinas, we have to use analogy, mentally putting the characteristics which we ascribe to God into inverted commas. We might say that God 'moves' in mysterious ways – and when we do, we are using the word 'moves' analogically; we are not saying that God goes from one place to another so that he is not in the former place any more. We might say that God is a 'loving father'; we are not saying that God's love is limited to the kind of love a human is capable of feeling and expressing, nor that God can only do as much for us as a human father could do. Aquinas, then, wanted to point out that some of the philosophical difficulties which people have when trying to understand the attributes of God, arise because we are taking our own language too literally, and failing to take account of the unknowability of God.

The idea that God is outside time, combined with the idea that God does not change, has presented Christian believers with problems. It is suggested that God cannot answer prayer, or be the source of miracles, or interact with people in a personal way at all, if he is changeless and outside time. The immutable, impassible God of classical theism might be seen to be indifferent to creation; whatever happens, however marvellous or tragic, God remains completely unmoved.



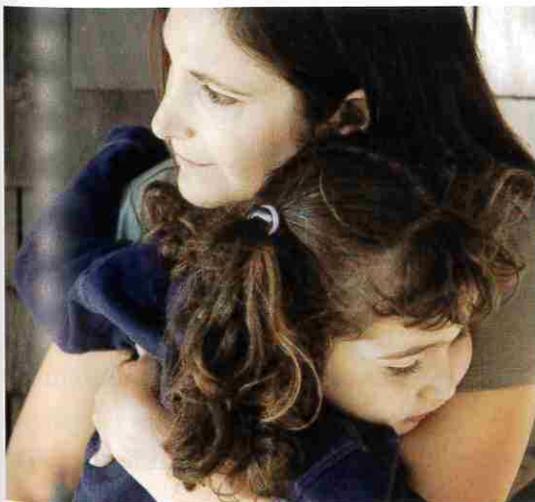
*When there is a disaster which causes great human suffering, does God feel exactly the same way before, during and after the tragedy?*

One of the most influential critics of the idea that God is impassible is Charles Hartshorne. Hartshorne not only makes a reasoned criticism of the idea of God's impassibility, but gives a coherent alternative view of a God who is capable of acting in the world. Hartshorne argues that God cannot be loving if he is at the same time impassible:

*Love involves sensitivity to the joys and sorrows of others, participation in them – but we cannot infect God with our sufferings (since he is cause of everything and effect of nothing), and our joys can add nothing to the immutable perfection of God's happiness ... one can do nothing for God, and our worst sins harm God as little as the finest acts of sainthood can advance him. (Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism, Shoe String Press, 1983)*

Hartshorne argues that, according to the classical view of the impassibility of God, God cannot enter into any give and take with the world. God is seen to be pure activity, or actuality; he can give, but not take, and remains uninfluenced by the world. Hartshorne concludes that the world could suffer the most enormous tragedies and, in this classical view, God would be completely unaffected, in just the same way that a glass of water remains unaffected by the reading of an eloquent poem. In his books *Divine Relativity* and *The Logic of Perfection*, Hartshorne concludes that if God is impassible, he cannot know us, interact with us, sympathise with us, or hear or respond to our prayers. Hartshorne also argues that an immutable God could not have a purpose which related to a changing world. God is no more of a person than someone dead. Richard Creel, in his summary of the view of Hartshorne, says:

*If God is impassible, then he is beyond our reach; for all practical purposes, he is dead – and surely one cannot have a personal relationship with a dead person. Just as clearly, such a picture of God is the opposite of the biblical picture of a living, dynamic, responding God.' (Divine Impassibility, Cambridge University Press, 1986)*



*Nelson Pike argues that where there are relationships, there must be response to the feelings and needs of each other.*

Nelson Pike is another modern scholar who has rejected the view that God is impassible. In his book *God and Timelessness* (Wipf & Stock, 2002), in which he considers the philosophical implications of the idea that God exists outside time, Pike argues that the impassibility of God is bound up with the idea that God is timeless, saying:

*a timeless being could not be affected or prompted by another ... Responses are located in time after that to which they are responses. .... I doubt if one could be emotionally involved with such a person. I don't think one could take him as a friend – or as an enemy. Further, I don't think that a timeless person could be emotionally involved with another. To be emotionally involved, one must be able to respond in some way to the actions or inactions of others. A timeless individual could not respond.*

Pike, Hartshorne, and other scholars such as Moltmann, have been part of the movement in Christian philosophy called process theology (see pages 167–72). This system of thought uses the idea that God is not outside time at all, but present in the world with us, acting and responding, loving, rejoicing and suffering as we do. God does not know the future, but only knows what possibilities there are, and people have real free will.

### **Defending the view that God is immutable**

Aquinas' defence against the criticism of these twentieth-century thinkers would be that God can be both loving and immutable, just because he is God. People cannot be loving and at the same time unchanging; but God is different from us, and things which are not possible for us can still be possible for God. Aquinas drew a distinction between God's nature combined with God's will, which are immutable, and God's activity – God's making a change in other things. Aquinas argued that God's nature, because it is perfect, is unchanging, always love, always perfect goodness. God's will, then, is always the same in that God does not change his mind. He knows perfectly what the good is because he is goodness itself, and he does not change his will because of circumstances which he did not expect. However, God is still capable of having loving relationships, because other things change in relation to God.

Creel, in his book *Divine Impassibility*, also argues that God can be loving as well as immutable. God can know what his own will is, in response to any of an infinite number of possibilities. He does not have to wait until people exercise their free will, then see how they act, and then decide how he will respond to them. Although people have a genuine free will, according to Creel, God can still know what all the possibilities are, and can know in advance what his will is in response to each of those possibilities.

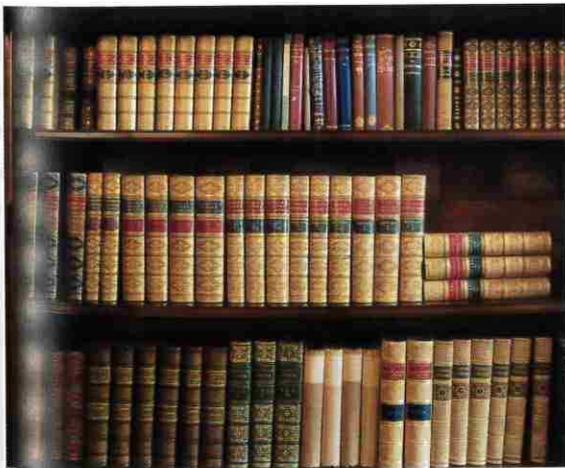
For example, we can decide in advance what we will do tomorrow, depending on the

weather. If it is sunny, I will take the children out for a picnic, but if it rains, we will go to the cinema. The weather is still 'free' to 'make up its mind', and the way I act as a result, in response, depends on the weather, but I do not *change my mind*; I know in advance the possibilities, and act according to what I have decided. Creel's argument is that God works in the same kind of way, and therefore can be seen to be immutable while at the same time responding to us, as we live and make decisions according to our free will.

God's will, then, remains immutable, unchanging because of his unchanging nature. God does not have to be changeable in order to love, because God's essence is love; God's love is not caused by anything, God does not love because of our merit but just because God is love, and therefore God can be loving and immutable at the same time. It is only our imperfect version of love which involves change.

### Omniscience

What does it mean to say that God is omniscient? Most people understand the omniscience of God to mean that God knows everything; there is nothing that he cannot know. Also, it means that God has no false beliefs, and cannot be mistaken. If God knows something, then that thing is true. So if God is omniscient, God's knowledge includes things which are unavailable to the human mind. God knows, for example, long-forgotten details of history; he knows whether there is life on other planets, in other galaxies; he knows whether there are other universes besides this one. He knows people's secret thoughts even when they are never expressed. He knows how many grains of sand there are in the Sahara.



*If God is omniscient, then he knows everything.*

However, attributing omniscience to God raises questions. If God knows everything, does this include events in the future as well as those in the past? Does God know,

for example, the numbers that will be drawn in next week's national lottery, and does he also know who will buy the winning ticket? Perhaps God does not just know who will win, but has decided who will win, and predetermined which numbers people will choose and which will be drawn.

More significantly for theology is the question of whether God knows in advance all the moral decisions that people will make in their lives. If he does know this (and his knowledge is always true) then it raises the issue of whether people have any real freedom of choice. If God knew yesterday, and a hundred years ago, and in fact from the beginning of time, that I would make a donation of £10 to Oxfam this afternoon – and if God's knowledge is always true, so that he could never be mistaken – then am I really free to do anything other than make that donation? Or, perhaps, does the very fact of God's knowing I will do it prevent me from changing my mind? If I have no other choice than to give the money, then there is no 'moral value' in my donation. I cannot be admired for giving it, as I had no choice but to give it. Similarly, I cannot be blamed for giving a mere £10, as there was no way that I could have had second thoughts and made it £20, if the figure is fixed in God's knowledge at £10.

In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, alongside belief that God is omniscient is the belief that humans are morally responsible for at least some of the actions they perform. It is believed that people have a genuinely free choice about what to do when faced with a moral dilemma. God does not compel them to choose one way rather than another, but leaves it to individuals to decide, independently, what to do in different situations as they arise, which means that they can then be held responsible for their choices. Islam, in particular, stresses that this earthly life is a testing place, where people make choices between right and wrong. Their responses to these choices are judged by Allah, and their place in heaven depends on whether they make the right decisions. There is, then, a firm belief that moral choice is genuinely free, alongside belief in an omniscient God.

Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that there is a possible solution to the problem of whether God's omniscience restricts our freedom. He drew the analogy of the knowledge that close friends have of each other's behaviour, to conclude that God could be omniscient while still allowing people to act freely:

*In the same way, we estimate the intimacy between two persons by the foreknowledge one has of the actions of the other, without supposing that in either case, the one or the other's freedom is thereby endangered. So even the divine foreknowledge cannot endanger freedom. (Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, trans. W. R. Matthews, 1928)*

His analogy, then, claims that God's knowledge of our actions is rather like the knowledge very close friends have of each other's future behaviour. Perhaps

Schleiermacher is right. If you tell my friend that you plan to travel from A to B, she will immediately start giving you advice about the best route to take and the best time of day to travel. I know that, if I ever mention to her that I am planning to make a journey, she will do this. But does this mean that, by telling her I plan to visit Oxford next week, I am somehow limiting her choice so that she is not free to say anything else but 'If I were you I'd avoid Milton Keynes'?

Schleiermacher would say that the answer was no; because although I 'know' what she will say, I am only making a *reliable guess*. There is the possibility that I could be wrong; something might fall on her head while I'm speaking to her, for example, and she might say 'ouch', or other words to express surprise, instead. She is quite free to do this. There is nothing in my knowledge of what she always says that compels her to say it.

The problem with Schleiermacher's idea is that, unlike the knowledge friends have of each other, God's knowledge is said to be infallible. I could be wrong in guessing what my friend will say, but God cannot be wrong; he never makes mistakes. There is nothing that God knows that could turn out to be untrue. So, if God knows that my friend will give travel advice, does this not make it inevitable that she will do it, so that she could not do anything else? Is her freedom to choose only apparent?

### To think about

How would an omniscient God's knowledge of us differ from the knowledge that our close friends have of us?

If our freedom to act morally were only apparent, then there would be serious implications. We would not be able to be held morally responsible for our actions, because we would not have been able to behave in any other way. A genuine freedom of choice is considered by ethicists to be essential as a basis for morality. Kant, for example, argued that without freedom, there can be no moral choices. So, if God's omniscience determines our choices, then God cannot justifiably punish us when we do wrong, nor reward us when we do good.

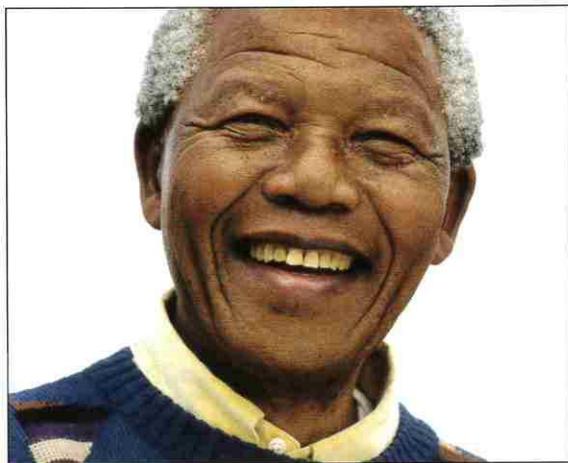


### Develop your knowledge

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997) raises the issue of freedom and morality. In it he explores questions of whether people can be condemned for actions they perform in wartime, when they are under threat of death.

The problem for our moral freedom becomes even more acute when belief in God's omniscience is coupled with belief that God intends and creates every individual life, fashioning each person in accordance with his plans. If, for example, you made a robot, and then programmed it to smash a vase with a hammer, you could not then blame the robot for the broken vase – it would be your own fault, because you had done the programming and knew, when you made the robot, what it was going to do. You could have chosen to programme it differently, or not make it at all. So if God not only knows the future with certainty, but knew when he made us exactly what we would choose at every point of our lives, perhaps God can be held responsible for all kinds of evil, including so-called moral evil. There is the added difficulty that God might know, in advance, each person's religious choices. Perhaps God knows from the beginning of time which of us will have faith and which will doubt or disbelieve; perhaps God knows, even before we are born, whether we will end up in heaven or hell, so that there is nothing we can do about it.

If, however, God does not have a clue what we will do, and wondered when he made Pol Pot or Martin Luther King how they would turn out, and was taken aback by the choices they made, then this seems to imply a less than all-powerful God. It suggests that God can be surprised, or can make choices which turn out to have been unwise. God's capabilities seem to be limited.



*Did God know, from the beginning of time, exactly what choices Nelson Mandela would make with his life? If so, were any of them real choices?*

Some of the answers to the problem of omniscience and freedom depend on our understanding of eternity. If God is timeless, and can see the whole picture, then his omniscience is eternal. He knows the present, the past and the future because he is not confined by these temporal limits.

If, however, God is everlasting, and moves on the same timeline that we do, then he knows the past and the present but cannot know the future, *except that* he understands us so perfectly and knows our conditioning so well, and knows all the contributory factors to our decision making, so that *he will know what we will choose*

to do as far as this is logically possible. But our choice remains free, in the same way that my friend can choose what to say next when we talk about travel plans. This is a view taken by Richard Swinburne.

### Boethius and *The Consolation of Philosophy*

The sixth-century Christian philosopher Boethius took up the problem of God's omniscience and the effect it might have on our moral freedom. When he wrote his book *The Consolation of Philosophy* he was a prisoner awaiting execution. He had led a life of great ups and downs. He was born in Greece into a renowned family with excellent connections and received a very good education; in his middle years, he held positions of great power in the government, and he had many academic interests. However, it all went wrong when political rivalries led to an accusation of treason, and Boethius was sentenced to death. While in prison, he completed *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and he was executed in 524.

Boethius was worried about the problem of God's omniscience, because it seemed on the surface that if God knows the future, then he is wrong to reward us or punish us for our behaviour; and yet the Bible does teach about divine reward and punishment very clearly.



*Boethius' 'consolation of philosophy' discusses questions of God's omniscience.*

Thinking 'aloud' in Book V of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius considers the different possibilities. He asks himself 'How can God foreknow that these things will happen, if they are uncertain?' If God knows that something will happen, when in fact it is uncertain, then God's knowledge is mistaken, and that cannot possibly be. However, if God knows that something might happen, and then again it might not, then it can hardly be called 'knowledge' at all, and it puts God in the position of being no wiser than we are. But if God firmly knows things, then they become inevitable. Things which at the moment seem fair – the reward of the good, and the punishment of the bad – become unfair:

*That which is now judged most equitable, the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the good, will be seen to be the most unjust of all; for men are driven to good or evil not by their own will but by the fixed necessity of what is to be.*

Boethius reaches the conclusion that he has made a mistake – he is forgetting that God can see things in a different way from the way in which we see them. Humans exist within time. They have pasts which are fixed once they have happened, they have a present which is gone in an instant, and futures which are uncertain. Because the future is uncertain, humans have genuine free will.

However, when God is knowing, he does not have the same constraints in time that we have. God, therefore, does not have a past, present and future, and so ‘his knowledge, too, transcends all temporal change and abides in the immediacy of his presence’. God can look down on us, moving along our timelines, ‘as though from a lofty peak above them’. God can see us in the present, and also can see us in our pasts, and in our futures, so that he has perfect knowledge of what we will freely choose to do. He does not know what moral choices we will make in advance of our making them because there is no such thing as ‘in advance’ for God. All events occur simultaneously for God, in his eternal presence.

As God does not know things in advance of them happening, it makes no sense to talk of what God should have known in the past or what God will know in the future. God cannot be accused of a lack of wisdom in not realising that Adam and Eve would disobey him, nor of a lack of morality in allowing evil dictators to be born. God does not know what we will do in the future, because there is no future for God, so we have a genuine free choice and can therefore be rewarded or punished with justice.

### To think about

Do you think that Boethius has successfully solved the problem of God’s fore-knowledge and human freedom?



### Develop your knowledge

*The Consolation of Philosophy, Book V*, by Boethius (trans. V. Watts, Penguin Classics, 1999)

*Teach Yourself Philosophy of Religion* by Mel Thompson (Teach Yourself, 2003)

*An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* by Brian Davies (Oxford University Press, 1982)

## Practice exam question

**'If God knows all our moral choices in advance, then we cannot be justly blamed or rewarded for what we do.'** Discuss.

This was the issue that preoccupied Boethius, so you should make sure that you mention him in your answer. The question requires an exploration of the idea of God's omniscience and the implications for human moral freedom; there is also the linked issue of whether God is eternal or everlasting, which you should explore. As usual, you should aim to make reference to scholarly work and give evidence of your reading, as well as using specialist vocabulary where appropriate.



### God as omnibenevolent

The Christian understanding of God holds unequivocally that God's nature is love. This idea is not just a New Testament concept, but can be seen in the Old Testament too. The Old Testament speaks mainly of God's love for Israel, rather than for particular individuals. The Hebrew word used is *hesed*. God's love is not caused by any special worth in its object. God did not choose to love Israel because Israel had especially loveable qualities; Israel has special worth because of God's love: 'The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples' (Deuteronomy 7:7). God's love, like God's existence, has no cause. It is not brought into being by something else but is part of the nature of God from the start.

Love as an attribute of God is closely connected to ideas about God's goodness and righteousness.

In the Bible, God's love is compared with the love of a human parent, full of tenderness for the child and profoundly hurt when the child rejects the love shown:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
But the more I called Israel,  
the further they went from me.  
They sacrificed to the Baals  
and they burned incense to images.  
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
taking them by the arms;  
but they did not realize  
it was I who healed them. (Hosea 11:1–3)*

The prophet Hosea, living in the eighth century BCE, was given the unenviable task of forming a marriage which was to work as a symbol of God's love for Israel. Hosea was told to marry Gomer, a woman known to be adulterous, and this marriage became a kind of visual aid for Hosea as he taught the people about their behaviour and its consequences. Gomer was repeatedly unfaithful to Hosea, just as Israel was repeatedly unfaithful to God – but Hosea loved her, and took her back even though he knew she would probably repeat her behaviour. In the same way, Israel is tempted away from God by the attractions of other religions and by a secular lifestyle, and God, because of his love for Israel, is hurt and angry, determined to punish the people even though he wants to be able to restore their loving relationship:

*Woe to them, because they have strayed from me!  
Destruction to them, because they have rebelled against me!  
I long to redeem them  
but they speak lies against me. (Hosea 7:13)*

This understanding of the love of God has created some philosophical problems for Christians. Does God's love come and go, or does it stay the same? Can God be affected, and be hurt, and suffer, or does this imply a limitation to his omnipotence? Does God remain unchanging? If God loves his people unconditionally, and is also omnipotent, then why does he not stop them from doing the things which hurt him?

Although the love of God illustrated by Hosea appears to be part of a stormy relationship, in the Psalms, the emphasis is on the reliability of the love of God:

*... steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. (Psalm 62:12)*

*Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. (Psalm 63:3)*

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!  
(Psalm 118:1)*

In the Old Testament there is a strong theme of the love which the people should have for God, and for each other as a result of loving God. It is taken for granted that God should be obeyed and that his laws are right. Showing loving concern for each other's welfare is the proper response to the love that God has shown for them. When the Hebrew people have been rescued from slavery in Egypt, have been led to Mount Sinai and are about to be given the ten commandments, they are reminded that they have this special role because of the love that God has shown for them:

*You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*  
(Exodus 19:4–6)

The love shown to them by God results in heavy responsibilities. They are to become a kingdom of priests, setting an example for the rest of the world: a holy nation, set apart because of their relationship with God. God's love seeks moral fellowship with Israel. The love of God cannot be separated from righteousness. It is not sentimental love, and it goes with a demand that the people should keep the commandments.

God's love is expressed through judgement and forgiveness; his punishment of sin is precisely because of his love. The best known example comes from the book of the prophet Amos. The people were expecting to hear that although God would punish their neighbours, they would be protected because they were God's holy nation. But no. God's special love for Israel meant that they were to be singled out for punishment: 'For you alone have I cared among all the nations of the world; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2).

Some Jewish post-Holocaust theologians have built on this idea, claiming that the Jews were singled out for God's punishment during the twentieth century precisely because they are his chosen people. However, this view has not been attractive to everyone, as it implies that the atrocities of the Holocaust were God's own doing, and that God wanted them to happen.

In the New Testament, the word used for love is *agape*, which contrasts with other Greek words for love. *Agape* has the connotations of showing love through action, rather than love being just a feeling or emotion. In the first letter of John, the writer summarises Christian understanding of the love of God. He equates love with God. God is the source of love, and demonstrated his love by becoming incarnate in Jesus, giving people the opportunity to see God through seeing his love for the world. The source of all human love is God, and the love of God requires that people reciprocate by showing love for each other:

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* (1 John 4: 7–9)

In the New Testament, the theme of God's love is strongly linked with concepts of salvation, reconciliation and redemption. The life and especially the suffering and death of Christ is seen as proof of the love of God.

In the Christian view, then, God is equated with love; any love shown by humans for each other is a reflection of God. God is not only love in the Platonic sense of being the 'Ideal' love; God's love involves activity, shown supremely in the sacrifice and death of Christ. This is taken as evidence of the love of God.

The Christian understanding of the love of God is that it is perfect love. It is unconditional (*agape*); it is everlasting; and it is personal to each individual, as well as to humanity as a whole: '... even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows' (Matthew 10:30). Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, counts love as the greatest of the three things that last for ever. He explains the importance of love underpinning everything else that Christians do, and he explains how the love of God will be revealed in the way that people treat each other:

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

*Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:1-8)*

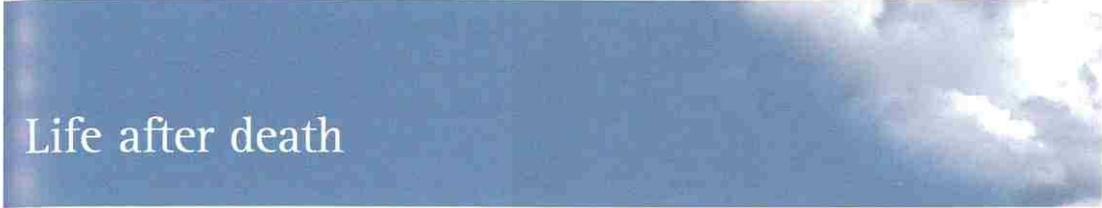
The existence of evil and suffering in the world appear to some people (such as Hume and J. S. Mill) to contradict the idea that there is an all-loving, all-powerful God.

Aquinas argued that we need to remember that when we speak of the love of God, we are using analogy; we are talking of a love which is like ours in some respects, but we have to bear in mind that God is infinitely greater than us and that we can only understand a tiny proportion of divine love (see page 214).

The usual Christian view is that people cannot fully understand the love of God. We experience it whenever we experience love, because all love comes from God, but we do not know why God acts in the ways he does. However, for many Christians, the key is that God does not leave us to suffer on our own. Christians believe that in Christ, God came to earth in human form and suffered with us. He is with us in our pain, even if we do not understand the reasons for it. This is the theme of Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Crucified God*, arguing (along with other process theologians) that Christianity shows that God does not just sit outside time being perfect and immutable; he gets involved with us and shares the pains of human existence to the extent of suffering death by torture. In the Christian understanding, we may not

understand the love of God or the reasons why people suffer, but we can still be confident of God's love and confident of a life after death when all will be made plain:

*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*  
(1 Corinthians 13:12–13)



## Life after death

*The world is like a picture with a golden background, and we the figures in the picture. Until you step off the plane of the picture into the large dimensions of death you cannot see the gold. (C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain, Geoffrey Bles, 1940)*

One of the central teachings of Christianity, and of many other religions, is that we will in some sense survive death – that death is not the end of life, but merely a stage through which we shall pass. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, speaks with absolute certainty of life after death, persuading the first Christians that their struggle against persecution was worth fighting because, even if they were killed, they would continue in the next life:

*For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' (1 Corinthians 15:53–5)*

The resurrection of Jesus is at the core of traditional Christian doctrine. Christians believe that after Jesus was crucified, he rose again back to life and could be seen walking around and heard talking to people – he could even be touched. They believe that the resurrection of Jesus shows that life after death is not only possible but certain.

For Muslims, too, life after death is a certainty, because it is promised in the Qur'an. This life is understood to be a preparation for the afterlife, when people will be judged. Their bodies will be resurrected from the graves, and there will be reward for believers and punishment for unbelievers.

In Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, life after death is seen in a different way.