

# **Theology and spirituality: The word “God”**

By Professor Dr. Peter Knauer SJ, Foyer Catholique Européen,  
Brussels / Belgium

The Jesuit Refugee Service is a Christian initiative. In this chapter, we want to consider in depth what the word “Christian” stands for. We will use a theological approach based on Ignatian spirituality. The name of the Society of Jesus implies a commitment to a general understanding of Christianity in the sense of standing before God together with Jesus, participating in his relationship with the Father.

What could the Christian faith mean to those confined in detention camps, or to those who try to stand by them? Is it only about Jesus’ dictum that by visiting prisoners you visit him? (Matthew 25,37) Is such faith only a kind of additional motivation towards a task that is worthwhile in itself? And to those in detention, is it only a comfort while hoping for a better life after death?

## **The present situation of Christianity**

Christianity continues to lose influence in Europe. The Christian message appears to many as meaningless or unintelligible. One rarely succeeds in conveying the Christian faith to young people. Yet especially today’s younger generation seems to be deeply interested in religious matters. This is demonstrated, for example, by the increasing number of conversions to Islam within Europe.

The Christian message of the New Testament, however, makes a tremendous claim: “There is salvation in none other, for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, by which we must be saved<sup>1</sup>” (Acts of the Apostles 4,12) The object of faith is something, so it is held, we can rely upon in life as well as in death. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: “Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation? or distress? or famine? or nakedness? or danger? or persecution? or the sword? ... But in all these things we overcome, because of him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in

Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8, 35-39) Faith is described as the "victory that has overcome the world" (1 John 5,4). Death is believed to have been overcome: "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (1 Corinthians 15,55) In the Hebrew Epistle it is said that the son of God became man so that he "might deliver them, who all of them through the fear of death were all their lifetime subject to servitude." (Hebrews 2,15). The root of all evil is seen here in one's fear for oneself due to our vulnerability and impermanence; this fear is made powerless only through faith.

It would appear, however, that most of today's Christians are far removed from adopting any such statements for themselves. Instead, after two thousand years of Christianity, still no way has been found of reconciling all the suffering in the world with the doctrine of a benign as well as almighty God. There is quite commonly a sense of shame especially regarding the Christian claim to absolutism. Are not all religions equally imperfect and therefore also equally valid? Just for the sake of preserving peaceful co-existence, nobody may be allowed to lay claim to the ultimate truth. To many people this seems to be the only sensible approach.

Is not such resignation validated by major world events? Anyone expecting God to intervene is bound to experience fundamental disappointment. "Where is God?" was the newspaper headline reporting on the events of September 11, 2001. Some Christian theologians felt particularly honest, progressive and contemporary in openly admitting their sense of helplessness in their own faith in an effort to at least show some solidarity with the doubters.

How can we explain why today's Christians seem so far removed from the certainty of the New Testament? Are the assertions found in the New Testament actually exaggerations?

### **The misuse of the word "God" to denote any manner of things**

There is a simple reason for the misery of Christianity today. In order to understand and be convinced by the message of the New Testament, one needs to know who God is in the first place. If instead one starts with the question, for example, whether God exists, or where He is, or how He can allow such suffering, one makes a significant mistake in the sequencing of thought. The first question should have been: What is the meaning of the word "God". For this is by no means evident from the beginning.

It would appear that over time Christianity has got used to an approach in which the meaning of the word "God" is no longer questioned or defined. The word "God" is used to denote any manner of things. It is quite common to have all sorts of different images of God. Nobody wants to be told what "God"

should mean to them, and if in doubt, a multitude of images may be placed alongside each other. Even in monasteries and convents hours can be spent discussing these images of God; such discussions may well be considered a "satisfying and enriching" experience. And given that anyhow God is incomprehensible, none of these images, in the opinion of some people, can be more than remotely accurate. Each person holds at best, so is the common opinion, a tiny piece of a huge mosaic. But it does not matter anyway; we all live far too much "in the head". Religion should better be thought of as a matter of one's innermost feelings.

In Argentina I witnessed a catechism of children. The catechist told the children to close their eyes and be completely calm and quiet. "Can you feel God?" That is how the children learnt that any talk of "God" refers to a vague feeling inside. I also know some adults who are utterly indignant if anyone dares to question any such "experience of God" of their own. I do not wish to call into question that they have such vague experiences, but rather whether they are experiences of God in the sense of the Christian message.

The assertions of the New Testament cannot be reconciled with any of these variable images of God and therefore may even appear to their holders as nonsensical. How can you ascribe to a God, who has been experienced as a vague feeling inside, the existence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? But even if one thinks that God might be the "horizon of all existence" which is beyond the realm of concrete human experience (in reality, even this horizon is still part of creation), one could ask what the New Testament's assertion that Jesus' death on the cross delivered us from our sins (Gal 1,4) has to do with this.

One should not pour new wine into old bottles (Matthew 9,17). One can only truly adopt the Christian faith if one allows this to happen at the most fundamental level instead of trying at all cost to force the Christian message into one's pre-existing ideas. The "Word of God" can only be understood as an all-encompassing last word.

The mistake in such false imagery is that one creates a god that suits oneself. Human beings have a tendency to do this. In his Large Catechism Luther posed a question regarding the interpretation of the First Commandment: "What does it mean to have a god, or what is God?" And his answer was initially intentionally an empty phrase which could serve to define God as well as any idol: "To have a god means to have something on which we rely, from which we expect all good, and to which we take refuge in all distress". And he pointed out that it is even inevitable that in this way everybody has a god, no matter what he calls him. Everybody has something which guides his life and on which he relies. This could be, for example, money, career or reputation.

“He who has money and possessions feels secure, and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of Paradise”, wrote Luther.

However, the question arises whether this is the right God after all. Luther offers at least one criterion for determining which is not the right God. If you need to have a god first in order to subsequently be able to trust in him, it could be that if what you have is taken away, the trust collapses with it. That is how one can identify the wrong god. You may have a lot of money in the bank and feel totally secure; if your account is frozen for some reason, trust quickly turns into despair.

### **The Christian understanding of God**

Faith in the true God represents an alternative to this, i.e. to every kind of idolizing as well as despair of the world. Having the true God and trusting in Him cannot be two different acts. Faith in the true God affords liberation and deliverance from the otherwise inevitable idolization, or despair, of the world.

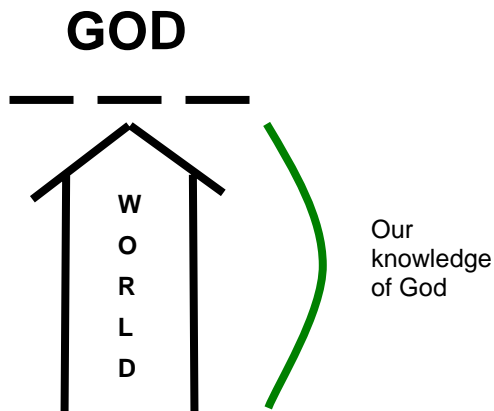
For an answer to the question who is the Christian God, we have to look within the Christian message itself. The bible condemns all images of God outright (Deuteronomy 5,8). The Christian message has also always maintained that God doesn't fall under our concepts and is neither the point of departure nor the result of logical conclusions. But how, then, can one speak of Him at all?

The Christian message declares that the whole world, everything in our experience, has been “created from nothing”. We can grasp of God only that which, being different from Him, points to Him. God Himself then really doesn't fall under our concepts; nevertheless we can still talk about Him. God is “without whom nothing exists”. This is intended to be a perfectly accurate statement. Even if God is outside the range of our concepts, this does not mean that we can only speak of Him in vague and imprecise terms, or that we should haphazardly abandon reason.

What underlies our reference to God is therefore everything that exists in our experience of the world. The Christian message only speaks of God when simply everything is involved with Him. Otherwise we do not truly speak of God. According to the Christian message, all talk of God that is not based on the premise that we are His creation, is pointless from the beginning.

To most people the word “creation” suggests the Big Bang or some other beginning of the world. However, something else is meant by the term “created out of nothing”, something that affects everything in existence at any moment in time: *If we were able to undo our createdness, nothing would*

*remain of us.* That is what "being created out of nothing" means. It is not about production, but about the necessary condition for existence. Even of a world, which had existed forever, without any kind of identifiable beginning, it would be true to say that vis-à-vis God it would be that which would not exist without Him. Equally, a world whose order had come about solely as a result of an infinite series of coincidences, would still be, in the face of God, only that which could not be without Him. What the state of having-been-created means is that the world vis-à-vis God is totally defined by its inability to exist without Him. It has an "all-embracing relationship to ... / in complete distinction from ...". The dots are meant to indicate a reality that doesn't fall under our concepts, but which we can refer to by saying that the world is wholly of such a kind that without this other reality it would not exist.



So we do not know at the outset who God is in order to then say He created the world. Rather: the only way to know who God is, is in describing the world as in every way related to Him and that it is in itself nothing else than this very relationship. The world's essence in relation to God is a total inability to exist without Him. One cannot speak of God in a way that he falls under our concepts, but only by analogy, i.e. in such a way that our concepts point towards Him.

This analogous reference to God was already explained by St. Augustine (354-430), who also showed the reason of this reference:

*"Thou, therefore, Lord,  
didst make these things;  
Thou who art beautiful, for they are beautiful;  
Thou who art good, for they are good;  
Thou who art, for they are.*

(= affirmative reasoning)

*Nor even so are they beautiful,  
nor good,  
nor are they,  
as Thou their Creator art;*  
(= negative reasoning)

*compared with whom  
they are neither beautiful,  
nor good, nor are at all.*  
(= transcending reasoning)"

St. Augustine, Confessions, Book 11, chapter 6

Man's self-awareness has made him the highest creature on earth and the mouthpiece of all creation. Therefore he cannot think of God as a fuzzy and subconscious. By analogy we will ascribe to God Self-presence, personal existence, although in a way that doesn't fall under our concepts.

Because the Christian message claims that we have been created exactly to the extent that we are, and because our own being is an object of reason, it follows that our own createdness should be recognizable by reason. Therefore it should be possible to carry out a proof of createdness. If the world had been created, it would exist in an "all-embracing relationship to ... / in complete distinction from ...". If, therefore, the world had such an "all-embracing relationship to ... / in complete distinction from ...", then (and only then) its positive aspects should correspond to its "all-embracing relationship to ...", and the fact that its positivity is pervaded by negativity should correspond to its "complete distinction from ..."

Actually, everything in this world is such a union of opposites. The world is a place of constant interaction and change. Constant change means that all identity in the world already contains non-identity within it. And all finite existence is already being pervaded by non-existence. It is in this union of opposites of everything in our world that our createdness becomes apparent. We will be content here to point out that nobody has yet succeeded in disproving this understanding of the world's createdness.

A proof of createdness is not a proof of God's existence. A proof of God is not possible. For if, as the Christian message says, God does not fall under our concepts, and one does not want to contradict this, then there can be no thought processes that reach beyond the world to God in Himself. God cannot be the result of a logical conclusion or of a sort of mathematical equation. That is why the world's existence is not explained by God, but by its

createdness. But if we can say of the world that it is defined by its "all-embracing relationship to ..." / in complete distinction from ...", we do speak of God correctly in the sense of the Christian message: Nothing can be without Him. The world exists in relation to another reality, which can only be defined by saying that the world cannot exist without it. Precisely thus the incomprehensibility of God remains acknowledged and nevertheless we can speak about him.

We are used to speaking of God as the "Almighty". Normally we imagine that He should be capable of everything possible. You could let your imagination run wild. Unfortunately, you never know whether He actually wants to do what you imagine. This is a disastrous image of God's omnipotence, which we must be redeemed from if we want to live sensibly in this world. Time and time again even Christians have confused God with such a "deus ex machina", employed to fix the woes of the world.

The Christian message does not assign such purely potential omnipotence to God; He is deemed "mighty in all" in an actual, not merely potential sense. Everything that happens is already of such a kind that it could not be happening without Him. God does not need to intervene in world events, but rather, everything that happens is already totally defined by its inability to exist without Him.

The statement that God is "mighty in all" ("No hair shall be lost from your head without the Father", Matthew 10,30) is still no comfort in itself. How much misery is there in our world! For it is also true of suffering and death, even sin, that God is mighty in them all.

Such a statement may seem hard to accept. The createdness of the world is but a one-sided relation of the world to God, and as such it implies anything but communion with God. Of God we must indeed say that He "inhabits an inaccessible light" (1 Timothy 6,16). God is not an integral part of the system we know as the world. We can only point to His existence and acknowledge that He is absolutely absolute. That is why, initially, the meaning of the word "God" in the Christian message represents the greatest possible argument against any reference to the "word of God" or "communion with God".

### **The possibility of a communion with God can only make itself evident**

The Christian message is about communion with God; it is about being secure at all times, in life and in death, in the love of Him who is "mighty in all". No power in the world could undermine such security. One could simply always rely on it. But how can such communion with God, which faith lives on, be possible at all?

To Luther has been attributed the question "How can I find a merciful god?" This question is the key to understanding his entire theology. It is based on the realization that nothing that has been created can be the basis for any communion with God. Even a perfectly created something could not transcend the unilateral relation vis-à-vis God with which the created is identical. Luther experienced at an existential level that no effort by the creation can achieve communion with God. But Paul knew this much earlier: "And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned ..." (1 Corinthians 13,3), none of these would be sufficient to reach the grace of God.

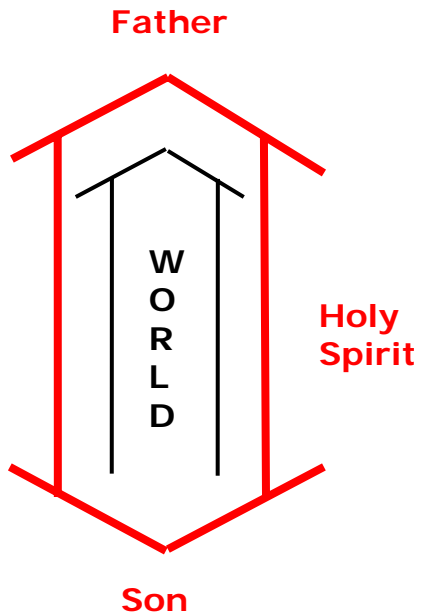
Luther's question only makes sense if createdness is a unilateral relation to God. When we call God the creator of the world, then we make a relation between our concept pointing to God and the world; it is a relation that exists *solely in our heads*, but whose foundation is *the reality* of the unilateral relation of the world to God.

How then can communion with God be possible at all? Should not communion with God consist of a loving relation of God towards the world? Should there not be a mutual relationship? But it is not possible to consider any kind of dependence of God on the world without negating that the world has been created out of nothing.

We find an answer in the Christian message itself. You cannot understand it by attempting to integrate it into a comprehensive framework of ideas to make it plausible. However, its apparently impossible claim to be the word of God becomes intelligible by referring to its content. The Christian message is not self-evident in the sense that we can understand it from ourselves and by our own means, but rather in the very different sense that it explains itself through its content.

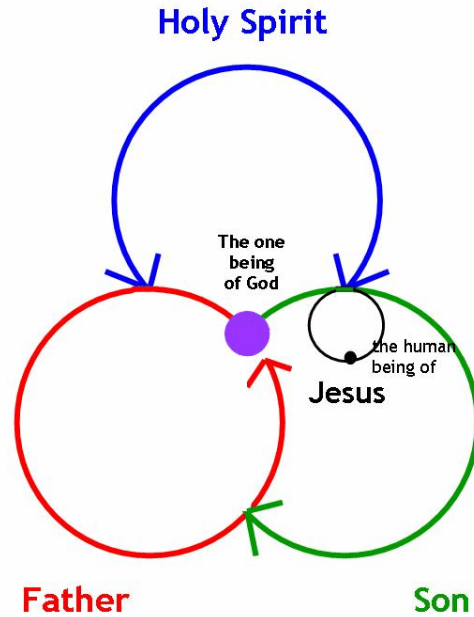
It announces that the world is enclosed in a love of God for God, i.e. the love of the Father for the Son which in itself is the Holy Spirit. It claims the world has been created into this love from the very beginning. God's love for the world then does not, indeed, depend on created achievements, nor is it sometimes more and sometimes less. God knows no other love than that from God to God, and we are included within it. If we are thus in communion with the One who is almighty, then no power in the world can harm us.





That is why the Christian message refers to the Trinity of God. There are three ways of God's being present to itself, which we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is self-presence of the one reality of God; and so are the Son and the Holy Spirit. But among each other, the three forms of God's self-presence remain different.

God's love for the world doesn't find its measure in the world and can, therefore, not become apparent, legible, in the world. It remains hidden to the world, unless it becomes known to us by a human word that conveys to us a godly truth.



We say God became man in order to make any talk of the “word” of God intelligible. The human being Jesus is created, with its human self-presence into that self-presence of God which we call the Son. That is how he can reveal to us through human language what God wants us to understand, i.e. that we are included within the love of the Father for him. Why did the Son of God become man? To make the “Word of God” possible in its strictest sense.

Jesus’ death on the cross can also only be understood as a martyrdom for his message. Jesus was nailed to the cross because his message promised liberation from the power of fear, and because he found followers who adopted his message. God’s will was that he should remain true to his mission. Jesus’ resurrection is, then, in the face of death identical with his being the Son of God.

*Believing in the created human being Jesus as the Son of God from all eternity, means a certainty based on His Word, that oneself, and all the world, has been created into the eternal love of God for God, of the Father for the Son.* This is what sums up the Christian message and on which all the individual statements of Christian faith are based. In the sense of the Christian message, nothing can be believed that does not fit within this basic formula.

Everything that is different from God is simply world and not an object of faith. In the sense of the Christian message, only our communion with God can be an issue of faith. Faith is always and solely concerned with the self-communication of God.

Assertions of faith can only be true and understood if they can be understood as the last and final word over and above all other reality. One cannot proclaim them but with the vindication of being unconditionally reliable. Assertions of faith have no comparative or superlative. Any assertions about God that can be graded in any way are pointless and cannot be true statements about the God of the Christian message.

### **The Consequences of Faith**

In his poem entitled "The Doubter" Bert Brecht defines a criterion for his own work, which can also be applied to the Christian message:

*But above all  
Again and again above all: How does one act  
If one believes what you say? Above all: How  
does one act?*

Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke in acht Bänden. IV*,  
Frankfurt am Main 1967, 587f.

The criterion for truth in the Christian message is not the behaviour of its proclaimers, but certainly, how those would act who adopt this message for themselves.

There are no new, additional ethical obligations in the Christian message, rather it refers to requirements that are already a part of human existence. And these are only about avoiding inhumane and promoting humane actions.

The belief in being sustained in the love of God liberates man from the power of that fear which stems from his vulnerability and impermanence. This fear continues to find expression in the fact that, when the worst comes to the worst, human beings may be prepared to walk over dead bodies in order to protect their own safety.

Christian faith liberates and delivers mankind from the power of this fear, which prevents humane in favour of inhumane behaviour. We deliberately do not claim that faith removes this fear, for Jesus himself knew fear. Faith, however, prepares us for fear; it gives us courage to face up even to situations of persecution by those in power in this world. Working in refugee areas, or even fighting for the rights of so-called "economic migrants" (and therefore illegal immigrants) in this country, can certainly bring many disadvantages to those who do get involved.

So long as man remains under the power of his fear for himself, the whole world becomes a parable of perdition. Impermanence and death will always have the last word and no transient experience, however positive, can put this into perspective. It is the opposite when one has faith: Every positive experience, however insignificant or transitory, becomes a parable for heaven as the eternal communion with God, and mortality and death lose their power to part one from this. They only hinder in so far as the parable of heaven may be taken for heaven itself and therefore may be mistakenly idolized.

This also provides a Christian answer to the theodicy question: How does one reconcile God's omnipotence and grace with all the suffering in the world? God's grace cannot be determined by anything on earth and therefore cannot be measured by my well-being. His grace consists of giving man a communion with God which even death cannot take away. God's omnipotence does not consist of His ability to do everything possible, but of His power in everything that actually happens. Therefore the real question cannot be how God can allow suffering. For this question presumes, wrongly, that we might adopt a position, so-to-speak, behind God and measure His actions by some kind of standard superior even to Him. Instead of asking how God can allow suffering, Christians ask how their faith should affect how they deal with suffering. We trust in God not only when we "lie down in green pastures near still waters", but also when we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23). Can such a psalm, which acknowledges the darkness too, apply to human beings subjected to the suffering brought by detention: "For thou art with me"?

## **Faith and Justice**

As stated earlier, the import of faith on our actions in the world does not consist of additional ethical standards nor of any additional motivation. It consists of the removal of the hindrance represented by the power of fear of man for himself. God's mercy then finds expression in making man merciful himself. God's justice results in making man just, and God's wisdom endows man with wisdom too.

The actions required in individual cases will have to be determined by reason and experience. By reason we mean every aware and responsible manner in which we deal with the world as well as the ability to give in an understandable way account for our actions.

The Society of Jesus sees its calling in spreading the faith and promoting justice in the world. Proclaiming the faith consists mainly of disempowering the fear that acts against justice, the fear thus which prevents mankind from exercising justice.

Ideally, it would not be sufficient to only achieve the physical liberation of political or otherwise unjustly detained persons without also conveying the inner freedom which makes people immune to attempts of repression by those who have power over them. This does not mean that prisoners or detained asylum-seekers and detained irregular immigrants should not be liberated because it would not be enough, as the higher goal was not attainable. Over and above this, one would even have to persuade the mighty to stop wielding power by conveying to them the certitude of being sustained in a communion with God that is stronger than their own fear for themselves. But attaining the release of prisoners is worth a lot.