

Brague, Rémi. *On the God of the Christians (and on one or two others)*. Translated by Paul Seaton. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2013. ISBN 9781587313455 (cloth). pp. xvi + 159. \$26.

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Rémi Brague holds professorial positions at the Sorbonne in Paris and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. He's perhaps best described as a philosophical theologian and historian of ideas, and has published widely and deeply in these fields, writing mostly in French. A good portion of his work has, during the last two decades, been translated into English, and there are now half-a-dozen books and many essays by him available in that language. The book under review here was published in French in 2009.

The book's title aptly indicates one of its main themes, which is the deep and distinctive difference between the God of the Christians and other gods, especially the God of Islam. Brague doesn't like, and wishes to place under the ban, ways of characterizing Christianity and Islam that suggest or imply that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, and that they are each monotheistic, Abrahamic, and a people of the Book; and he advocates such a ban, sometimes in excitable language, because of deep differences in Christian and Muslim ways of understanding, depicting, and analyzing God.

Difference in predicatively identifying, describing, and responding to something requires, if it reaches a certain level, Brague seems to think, the conclusion that what's being identified, described, and responded to isn't the same thing. Such difference makes, for example, shared reference impossible. If the predicate-list I supply for something I wish to talk about is sufficiently different from the predicate-list you supply for something you wish to talk about, the conclusion Brague prefers is that we aren't talking about the same thing – that we aren't referring to the same thing.

But there are problems here. Imagine the following case. I speak of someone who's female, sixty-eight years old, lives in Bangalore, writes in English, and has published seventy-four essays and thirteen books. You speak of someone who's male, seventy-three years old, lives in Montréal, writes in French, and has published thirty-nine books and more than one hundred essays. The predicates have little in common. It might seem reasonable to say that we are and must be referring to different people because no one person could share this predicate-list: the list contains noncompossibles. But a little discussion shows that we each understand ourselves to be speaking about the most eminent living philosopher; that's a description each of us applies to the person thus predicatively identified.

What to say about this? Perhaps that each of us is speaking of (referring to) the most eminent living philosopher, but that one (or both) of us has identified that person wrongly. On this understanding – not one, I think, that Brague would prefer – there's no failure of reference; rather, there's error, more or less widespread, in specifying the properties belonging to the individual to whom the overarching predicate ('most eminent living philosopher') applies. Alternatively, one might say that only one – or perhaps neither – of us is speaking about the most eminent living philosopher, and that failure to do so is guaranteed by a sufficient number of mistakes in the predicate-list. That's the line Brague would prefer.

But it's easy enough to see that such an interpretation is not necessary and may be confused. We might, after all, be in substantial agreement as to what it would take to be the most

eminent living philosopher. We might, that is, give largely the same sense to that expression, even if we disagree massively as to the particulars of the person who meets the case. And if so, the proper conclusion isn't that neither of us is talking about the most eminent living philosopher; it's rather that we're talking about just that person but disagreeing as to who it is.

Suppose we apply this line to the question of the God of the Muslims and the God of the Christians. Suppose, too, that we discover *prima facie* commonalities in understanding of what it would take to be God sufficient to make it reasonable to say that a concept with the same sense is in play. Let's imagine that those include: x is God if and only if x created all that is; and, x is God if and only if x called Abraham. And then let's imagine that we also discover deep differences (of the kind that interest Brague) about how further to specify who God is. God, for instance, for Christians is triune, and not for Muslims; God speaks the words of the Qur'an to Muhammad for Muslims, but not for Christians. And so on. What to say? That Muslims and Christians identify and worship different gods – that they are in disagreement at the level of both sense and reference? Or that they agree to some degree in sense – in the contours of the concept deployed – while deeply disagreeing about reference? Or that they significantly agree in both sense and reference – they're both speaking of God, and they deploy at least some of the same predicates in identifying who that God is?

There's no obviously correct answer here – no answer clearly right in the order of judgment, that is; it's the principal confusion of Brague's book to think that there is. There is, of course, a right answer to one fundamental aspect of the question of reference to God in the order of being. It's that there is only one God (only one LORD, I'd prefer to say, following Exodus 3:14 – *Dominus* being the name and *Deus* the kind-term), and so it's not possible to refer to another one just because there isn't another one to refer to. One may fail to refer to that one, the only one there is; or one may succeed in doing so while still making mistakes in the particular predicates one applies to the LORD being referred to. Christians, for example, disagree deeply and irreducibly about whether it's proper to apply to the LORD of Christian confession the predicate *the one whose existence cannot be coherently denied*; and about whether it's proper to apply to the LORD the predicate *the one to whom no temporal predicate is applicable*. But it doesn't follow from this disagreement that those on each side aren't referring to the same LORD; for most purposes, it's better to say that they are, but that someone's making a mistake about a particular claim.

Another line to take about reference, at least when speaking of persons – and this one, too, I think Brague finds attractive – is that if I don't know your name I can't refer to you. If, then, a Muslim doesn't take the name given in Exodus 3:14 (*ego sum qui sum*) to be the LORD's name, or doesn't take Jesus to be a name of the LORD, then, ipso facto, reference to the Lord isn't possible. But that can't be right, either. I can perfectly well refer to you without knowing your name, and even if I deny that your name is your name. I can, for instance, indicate you ostensively, and can utter many truths about you, whether or not I know your name and whether or not I deny that your name is your name. The example of the most eminent living philosopher applies here, too.

How then better to approach the question of the God of the Christians and the God of the Muslims? It's simple enough, I think. The first move is ascetically to renounce the thought that success in reference is an on-off toggle, a matter of the yes/no binary. That thought should be replaced with the idea that success in reference is a spectrum concept, a matter of more or less, and that judgments as to when success has occurred are indexed, always, to particular local interests and concerns. There's no truth of the matter (remembering always to rule out the

thought that anyone can refer to another God than the only one there is). For some purposes, it's entirely reasonable to say what Brague, in this book, takes himself to have disposed of as a possible view: namely, that Muslims and Christians refer to (and worship) the same God, and that's because the sense of the concept(s) they deploy is sufficiently similar. For other purposes, it's entirely reasonable to say what Brague in this book says, which is that the difference between the sense of the concept(s) they deploy is sufficient to make it proper to say that they're not talking about the same thing – and, therefore, not worshipping the same thing, either. What it's not proper to say is that there's a right answer to the question.

Nostrae Aetate is useful here: "They [Muslims] worship one God (*unicum Deum adorant*), living and subsistent (*viventem et subsistentem*), merciful and omnipotent (*misericordem et omnipotentem*), creator of heaven and earth (*creatorem caeli et terrae*), who has spoken to humanity (*homines allocutum*), and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves wholeheartedly, just as (*sicut*) Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith (*fides islamica*) freely relates itself, submitted himself to God (*Deo se submitit*)," (from §3). We see here a predicate list that gives sense to a concept, the concept in question being that of God (*Deus*). An *ad litteram* reading suggests that there's substantial and significant overlap between the sense of the Islamic concept, and that of the Christian concept – some of the phraseology used is (for Christians) creedal, for instance. If that reading is followed, it's reasonable enough (though by no means required) to say that Muslims and Christians refer to, and worship, the same God, even though they do not identify that God identically or without disagreement. Brague would parse the predicate list finely, and show differences, more or less deep, in the understandings given to each – his third chapter, for instance, does this with *unicum*. He'd then conclude that difference in sense requires difference in reference. That conclusion isn't warranted. What would be warranted is that difference in sense might be taken, for particular local purposes (I wish Brague had been clearer about what his purposes are), to suggest difference in reference.

Brague's difficulties with sense and reference are intimate with another set of confusions that surfaces at many points in the book. These have to do with classification, or, we might say, with the proper application of sortals. Brague, as noted, doesn't like (for instance) the sortal 'Abrahamic religion' to be applied to Christianity, and Islam as a means of differentiating them – sorting them – from other religions. The principal reason he gives for not liking this is that Christianity and Islam understand Abraham/Ibrahim very differently: the sense they give to the name, Brague thinks, is not the same. Different narratives are used to identify him, and different concepts used to theorize his significance. Brague is, I expect, quite right about this. But it doesn't remotely follow from such differences that the sortal in question should be renounced. Everything depends on what the sortal is intended to do. If it's intended to indicate that Christianity and Islam have an identical understanding of Abraham, then that's a purpose difficult to sustain. But if the sortal is intended to indicate, by example, that Islam and Christianity are more closely intertwined than, say, Islam and dge lugs Buddhism, then it's entirely defensible to use it for that purpose. The presence of the name of Abraham in both traditions is among the many evidences of intertwining, just as its absence in, say, the scholastic works of Tsong kha pa is among the many evidences of a lack of historical connection between his work and anything Christian (or Islamic). The truth is that sortals like 'Abrahamic religion' don't pick out natural kinds (or if they do we can't easily tell that they do – or don't); they're heuristic devices, and should be deployed and analyzed as such. Brague seems not to think so.

Brague is, therefore, often confused about the fundamental and central questions of his book. Nonetheless, he is, as always, very much worth reading. The bulk of his book, if not its main purpose, indicates and emphasizes the distinctive character of Christian understandings of the LORD by contrasting them with incompatible Islamic understandings – for example, about knowing God, God's speech, God's oneness, and God's ethical demands. I'm not competent to comment on Brague's claims about the substance of Islamic understandings of these matters, but about the Christian side of things he is almost always right (so far as I can judge), and very often profoundly suggestive. His analysis of the idea that the Lord has nothing more to say to us than has been said in Jesus (chapter five), and of the idea that the LORD asks nothing of us (chapter six) in the same way that the LORD owes us nothing, is illuminating and, for this reviewer at least, productive of new thoughts. There's deep clarity, and much intellectual and spiritual nourishment, for example, in Brague's treatment of the idea that the LORD remits our sins (chapter seven). By the time he gets to that, he's almost forgotten the enterprise of distinguishing the God of the Christians from one or two others; and that's just as well.