What does it mean to believe in God?

‘Everyone has an idea of God’

These were the opening words of Anselm’s Ontological argument to explain the existence and nature of God. For Anselm, God was defined as:

‘A being, a greater than which, cannot be conceived, and which can not exist in the mind alone’.

So Anselm had idea of God, but:

Q. Does everyone have an idea of God?
A. Not necessarily

Q. Is Anselm’s idea of God the same as everyone else’s?
A. Not necessarily

This would appear to imply that there is a fundamental problem in talking about ‘God’. What does the term ‘God’ mean? This question is a key area of study in debates concerning the nature of God. Inevitably, there is no universally accepted concept of what ‘God’ means or refers to. The range of answers explaining God’s nature covers a whole spectrum of views from belief in an absolute, transcendent reality; belief in a suffering, personal God; belief in God as a form of life; belief that God is a dead concept and belief that ‘God’ is a meaningless term.

When discussing God’s nature Christian Theology has, over the last two millennia, developed a complex set of ideas concerning what Christians believe about ‘God.’ God’s nature is discussed by Philosophers and Theologians using complex language (e.g. impassability, immutability etc) and complex ideas (e.g. eternity etc). Quite clearly this academic approach to discussing God’s nature is rather different to the way in which, for example, a mystic, would talk about God.

Consider the following example:

‘Then the rest of my body began to die, and I could hardly feel a thing. As my breathing became shorter and shorter I knew for certain I was passing away. Suddenly all my pain was taken away, and I was as fit and well as I had ever been;… I was amazed at this sudden change, for I thought it must have been a special miracle of God, and not something natural. And thought I felt so much more comfortable, I still did not think that I was going to survive… And at once I saw the red blood trickle down from under the garland, hot, fresh and plentiful, just as it did at the time of his passion when the crown of thorns was pressed down onto the head of God-and-man, who suffered for me. And I had a strong deep conviction that he was himself and none other that showed me this vision. At the same time the Trinity filled me with heartfelt joy, and I knew that all eternity was like this for those who attain heaven. For the Trinity is God, and God the Trinity; the Trinity is our maker and keeper, our eternal lover, joy and bliss – all through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, ch. 3 &4)

Conclusion: It is fair to say that it is no easy matter to talk about God’s nature.
Exercise: How can I ‘talk about ‘God’?

Imagine that you are talking to someone who has been brought up in a family who have agnostic beliefs. This person’s family did not consciously choose to reject belief in God, a religion or the Christian faith. Rather, the parents of this person were without knowledge about belief in God. This person also lacks any concept of what it means to believe in God. This person is not hostile to Christianity, Theists or religious believers in general. This person is just unaware what it means to have any sort of religious beliefs. This person is an intelligent, inquisitive, intellectually curious, articulate, adult.

Q.1 How would you explain what it means to believe in:
   A God?
   B Jesus, the Son of God?

Q.2 What terminology would you use to explain your belief?

Q.3 Is traditional terminology, such as God’s impassability useful language to use?
   Explain your answer.

Imagine that you are a thirty-two years old, practising Roman Catholic. You have a five year old child. Your child is a typical young child; curious, inquisitive, questioning, keen to know more about the world and how it works. As a parent you are keen to do your best for your child: love it, care for it; teach it all you can. You yourself, are very keen to communicate your own values and religious beliefs to your child.

Q.4 How would you explain what it means to believe in:
   A God?
   B Jesus, the Son of God?

Q.5 What terminology would you use to explain your belief?

Q.6 Is traditional terminology, such as God’s impassability useful language to use?
   Explain your answer

Q.7 Finally, do you think a case can be made for saying that a new Theological language to talk about what it means to believe in God is required in the modern world?
The Traditional Christian concept of God:

Since the beginning of the Christian Church in the late first century CE Christians have thought about, argued over, and discussed the nature of God. The dominant understanding of the nature of God which emerged from the time of St Augustine onwards, was of a God who is:

- Transcendent
- Eternal & Timeless
- Immutable
- Impassable
- Necessary
- Infinite
- Omniscient
- Omnipotent
- Omnibenevolent

The following quotations may help you come to an understanding of the nature of God, as traditionally understood in Catholic Christianity:

Thomas Aquinas speaking of eternity in Summa Theologica 1a, 10, 1:
‘First, anything existing in eternity is unending, that is to say lacks both beginning and end (for both may be regarded as ends). Secondly, eternity exists all at once, lacking successiveness’

Thomas Aquinas speaking of God’s simplicity in Summa Theologica 1a, 3, 3:
‘God… is identical with his own Godhead, with his own life and with whatever else similarly is said of him’

Anselm, speaking of God’s compassion in the Proslogion:
‘Therefore, you are not compassionate in that you save the miserable and spare those who sin against you; and you are not compassionate, in that you are affected by sympathy for the world’

Boethius, speaking about God’s omniscience in In Peri Hermenias 1, 14, 195:
‘God is altogether outside the sequence of time, being as it were a great citadel of eternity which is altogether at once, and beneath which lies the whole course of time in one simple vision; hence in one vision he sees everything which will happen in the course of time, and each thing in itself, not as though future to him and his vision, as though he simply saw them in their causes (though he does also see that order of causes) but he sees eternally each thing which happens at whatever time’

Is the traditional Christian terminology helpful to a trained theologian?
Would this terminology be helpful to the Christian believer with no formal theological and philosophical training?

What do you think?
The rejection of the traditional Christian notion of God:

The traditional understanding of the nature of God has, during the course of the last two hundred years, been strongly criticised on a wide number of grounds, principally as follows:

⇒ The notion of God’s eternity does not make sense
⇒ God exists in time
⇒ God is an acting ‘person’
⇒ A God who cannot suffer and respond to suffering in the world is not worthy of worship
⇒ If a good, omniscient, omnipotent God exists, why is there evil in the world?
⇒ The idea of God does not make sense

The following quotations may help you come to an understanding of why some modern day Christian have rejected the nature of God, as traditionally understood in Western Christianity:

Grace Jantzen on God’s immutability:

‘A living God cannot be static: life implies change and temporality. This means that the doctrine of immutability cannot be interpreted as absolute changelessness, which would preclude divine responsiveness and [immutability] must rather be taken as steadfastness of character’

Jon Sobrino talking of God’s suffering in Christology at the Crossroads, p197:

‘For St John, God is love... Is that a real statement?... We must insist that love has to be credible to human beings in an unredeemed world. That forces us to ask ourselves whether God can really describe himself as love if historical suffering does not affect him... We must say what Moltmann says: “We find suffering that is not wished, suffering which is accepted, and the suffering of love. If God were incapable of suffering in all those ways, and hence in an absolute sense, then God would be incapable of loving.”

Anthony Kenny speaking of the ‘incoherence’ of the concept of God’s eternity in God of the Philosophers, p. 38:

‘The whole concept of timeless eternity appears to be radically incoherent. On St Thomas’ view, my typing of this paper is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Again, on this view, the great fire of Rome is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Therefore, while I type these words, Nero fiddles heartlessly on’

Dostoevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov in rebellion against God because of the suffering of the innocent in the world (extract taken from The Brothers Karamzov):

‘I renounce the higher harmony altogether... Too high a price has been placed on harmony... It’s not God that I do not accept, Alyosha. I merely, most respectfully, return him the ticket’

Nietzsche on the death of God in The Joyful Wisdom:

‘The most important of more recent events – that God is dead, that the belief in the Christian God has become unworthy of belief – already begins to cast its first shadow over Europe... In fact we philosophers and “free spirits” feel ourselves irradiated as by a new dawn y the report that the “old God is dead”’; our hearts overflow with gratitude, astonishment, presentment and expectation. At last the horizon seems open once more’

Concluding note:

The discussions concerning the traditional understanding of the nature of God, have led many Christians to suggest that a new language is needed to talk about God. The most significant of these new interpretations of God’s nature are: Process Theology and Suffering God Theology.
Outline of work:

1. How would you explain God to an atheist — exercise

2. Traditional concept of God:
   ♦ Anselm
   ♦ Aquinas
   ♦ Is it meaningful?
   ♦ Is the terminology helpful to a trained theologian? Is it helpful to the Christian believer with no formal theological and philosophical training?

3. A rejection of the traditional notion of God:
   ♦ Diesel
   ♦ Ivan Karamazov

4. Why belief in a suffering God emerged (handout)

5. The suffering God belief
   ♦ Moltmann
   ♦ Process Theology

6. Why bother believing in God?
   ♦ What is the value of belief in God to people?
   ♦ Student’s ideas
   ♦ Quotations from Marx etc.

7. Richard Dawkins and religion as a ‘meme’

8. Nietzsche on the death of God
   ♦ God’s wrath and response to human sinfulness

Bibliography:
1. Thinking about God
   Brian Davies
2. A Beginner’s Guide to ideas
   W Raeper & L Smith

Handouts:
1. Extract from Thinking about God
   Brian Davies
2. Extract from Puzzle of God (Second edition)
   Peter Vardy
3. Extract from An Introduction to Theology (Second edition)
   A McGrath