Religious Language:
A New Look at an Old Problem

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IN WHAT FOLLOWS, I WILL BE PROPOSING A VIEW of religious language which, so far as I know, has not been advocated in any of the recent discussions of that topic. The view I shall be defending is that talk about God as exemplified in Scripture, the traditional confessions, and even theology, should be regarded as quite ordinary language. It should not, in my view, be seen as requiring some sort of extended analogy, or special symbolism unique to itself, in order to understand the possibility of its truth. This should not be taken to mean that religious language is always to be taken literally so far as its meaning is concerned. Like all other ordinary language, it employs many styles and figures of speech, and occurs in many literary forms and types. Determining the intent of its author on linguistic and historical grounds is paramount for ascertaining the correct interpretation of , such talk. But I will contend that neither its meaning nor the possibility of its truth require that it be treated as systematically different from other ordinary language universes of discourse.

The background inspiration for this view is found in the reformers of the 16th century. Luther, Calvin, and their associates laid great stress on the distinction between Creator and creature. I believe the evidence is that they regarded this distinction as exhaustive,[1] and placed it against the prevailing trend of medieval theology which they regarded as semi-pantheistic.

Now at first glance it may not appear that the Creator-Creature distinction has much, if anything, to do with that of religious language—especially with whether that language is, to be regarded as analogical or ordinary. But I believe the position we take on the Creator-Creature distinction is in fact decisive for how we approach the religious language problem. Accordingly, the first task of this paper will be to investigate whether there is biblical warrant for regarding

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[1] Luther: "God is he for whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule or standard; *oir nothing is on a level with it or above it.* But it is itself the rule for all things." J. Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther (New* York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), p. 196.

Calvin: "... the Divine will ... is itself ... the cause of all that exists". *Institutes,* III, XXIII, 2.

everything but God as dependent on God. Then we will proceed to consider the problem of religious language, which is to say how terms drawn from human experience can apply to God.

I. Universal Creationism

There cannot be much doubt that the biblical writers assert God's creatorship of the world of everyday experience. The visible heavens and earth, the sun, moon, stars, the life forms on earth these are all explicitly said to have been brought into existence by God. Moreover, the biblical writers teach that this creating was not, at first, the mere forming of something already there. It was a matter of bringing into existence out of nothing, rather than cosmic interior decorating. Gen. 1: 1 teaches this, and a host of other biblical passages echo it: God is the one who has created "all things."

But just how far does the expression. "all things" extend? It obviously seems to include middle-sized and large objects of the universe clearly enough. But what of properties, propositions, laws, and the so-called host of abstract animals in the great corral of Plato's Other World? Assuming they exist, would a believer in the biblical Creator have to say God created them, too? Or could they exist independently from the God of Abraham as easily as they did from the God of Plato? More especially, are there any *biblical* grounds for answering such a question?

It is pretty clear that no biblical writer *specifically* answers such a question, any more than he specifically mentions the big bang or super novae among the stellar creations, viruses or spiny anteaters among the created life forms, or molecules and quarks among the tiny .creatures. The reason is simple. No biblical writer ever raised questions about such entities. So if we are going to find their attitude on this issue we will have to look at how they use such expressions as "all thing!?' and how they talk about God's creatorship in general. Then we will have to extrapolate from that talk mi order to apply their attitude to those abstract animals—putative or real—whose separate existence neither Abraham nor Moses nor St. Paul seems to have suspected. Doing this can hardly take the form of a detailed hermeneutical analysis of each pertinent text, however; that would take a book all by itself. So what follows is a brief annotated index of several passages I think pertinent to the issue. Anyone who thinks my understanding of these passages to be seriously faulty will, no doubt, disagree with my conclusions. But we can, hardly be wrong in starting with the biblical evidence, even if we do not end up agreeing on its meaning in every case.

1. Gen 8:22, I believe this passage applies a general doctrine to a few specific examples, without *confining* the doctrine to those examples. Accordingly, this passage teaches that the law-

like order of things is God's creation. The laws of nature depend on God since it is by God's guarantee that the regularities we observe and rely on will continue as long as the earth exists. There is nothing here to suggest that these regularities are self-existent or eternal, and that God is merely informing us of their inherent stability and reliability. On the contrary, it is God who is said to be stable and reliable and the laws are viewed as dependent on him; our reliance on natural laws is justified by God's promise, not anything in the laws themselves. In Ps. 119:89-91 and Jer. 33:25, natural laws are also spoken of as the means by which he rules creation, and they are termed his creations and his servants.

2. Gen. 22:16 and Heb. 6:13. These texts minimally teach that there is nothing greater than God. They do not go so far as to say nothing else is uncreated or that nothing else is on a par with God. But they do rule out anything to which he could be subjected in any sense, or else it would not be true that there is no greater reality by which he could secure his promise.

3. Isa. 44:24ff. God's sovereignty over all sorts of entities is asserted here, as is his uniqueness; he is the sole deity. Just what that entails is not spelled out, but it is significant that included among the "all things" which God is said to create are not just ordinary middle-sized and large visible objects, but also "darkness," events in the course of history, peace, evil, and human decisions.

4. Eph. 1:3-2:2 Again God is sovereign over "all things" where this expression includes the course of history and the election of those who believe. Eph. 3:9 and 10 extends "all things' to cover "principalities and powers," as does Rom. 8:38 and 39, which explicitly calls life, death, angels, principalities, and powers, "things present," and ".things to come," *creations.* It is important to note how "height' and "depth" are also covered here as creations.

I say "important" because it is obvious by now that "all things" and "creatures" are used in Scripture in a very wide sense indeed. Powers, principalities, spatial extensions, human decisions, darkness, .:and the course of history are quite different sorts of entities.

5. Phil. 3:21 extends "all things' to the future, renovations of believers` resurrected bodies, and Col. 1:16-20 emphasizes that immaterial and invisible realities are also to be understood under the rubric of "all things." These latter again include "dominions, principalities, and powers."

6. I Cor. 4:7 on any natural reading, seems to say quite clearly that any characteristic or talent which humans possess is given by God. I realize my critics may reply that God could see to it that people receive just the characteristics they do without his being the creator of those properties. But in the context of the biblical teachings so far, that is not the general drift or attitude we have found. In each case so far, God's sovereign control is linked to his creatorship;

there are no exceptions. Unless some sort of hermeneutical special pleading,is inserted here, the passage would appear to teach that the properties and dispositions of every human are Go&s creations. There is still some room to wriggle a bit, I admit. But to deny this general import to the passage seems strongly implausible at this point.

7. Compare what has been said so far with the treatment of wisdom in Prov. 8:22-31. There, in a personification, wisdom is represented as saying of herself:

> Yahweh formed me as the beginning of his way, the first of his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth was.

Here wisdom is spoken of as an abstract entity: a something existing before the earth or anything else; a something which is everlasting! This is perhaps as close as any Bible passage ever comes to saying that something has the status Plato ascribed to abstract properties, yet even here wisdom is declared to be God's creation! Even if everlasting, then, it is everlastingly dependent on God.

8. Finally, it is significant that in drawing the fundamental religious contrast between believers and unbelievers, St. Paul says the only options humans have are: (1) the service of God or (2) the service of something God created which is wrongfully accorded God's status (Rom. 1:25). It is hard to see such a remark as anything less than an explicit confirmation of what we have found so far everywhere else: everything whatsoever is either God or a creation of God's. There are no other alternatives.

St. Paul speaks this same way in other places as well. In Rom. 9:5 he says God is "over all" as though it means "all else. " And he shows that this is the way he uses "all" and "all things" by some even more explicit remarks in I Cor. 15:24-28. There Paul says that at the second coming of Christ, God will turn his kingdom over to Christ to rule it. At that time all other powers and authorities in the world will be abolished, including the power of death. At that point "all things" will be in subjection to Christ *except for God himself* (v. 27): clearly, this is an all-inclusive comment. The qualifier covers everything but God, who is explicitly stated to be the only exception.

Now it might be replied that even if "all things" means everything but God, in the latter passage Paul only says that God rules all, not that all else creatively *depends* on him. But this reply will not do. For in Col. 1: 17 Paul speaks of this same topic, uses the same expressions, and explicitly adds that the "all things" were created by God and are sustained by Christ.[2] Again, the

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[2] Paul's express stipulation there that "all things" includes whatever is "visible or invisible" also quite literally covers everything whatever, leaving no exception (comp. also Eph. 1:21-23, and II Cor. 4:18).

language here gives every impression of *trying* to say that God created everything but himself. There is even a basis for suggesting the New Testament teaches that God created time (Titus 1:2, II Tim. 1:9, Rev. 10:5-7)[3]

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, I conclude it is a biblical teaching that the Creator-Creature distinction is exhaustive; all reality is either God or something that depends on God. So if there exist propositions, numbers, universals, relations, or any other abstract animals from Plato's great barnyard in the sky, they must be regarded, in the biblical scheme of things, as dependent on Yahweh the Creator.

If this is correct, it becomes totally unacceptable to regard anything else as uncreated. To do so is to regard it as being every bit as divine as Yahweh. The issue here is not only *whether there* exists something over which God would not have *control.* That is part of what is at stake, yes. But the additional issue at stake is nothing less than monotheism. For given the biblical position, the admission that anything besides Yahweh exists independently of him accords divine (uncreated) status to it, and is equivalent to a crypto-polytheism.

II. Analogy Theory

Now it is precisely this unbridgeable difference between the Creator and all creatures which gives rise to the problem of religious language. The problem which traditionally goes* by that title in philosophy is the puzzlement as to how terms of any human language can be truly predicated of God. And the problem arises because the terms used of God connote and/or denote properties and relations which are known from our experience of creation. And this means that what is ascribed to God must also—in some sense—be true of creatures. So it appears we are driven to say either that something in (or 'about) the universe is uncreated, or something about God is created!

The traditional solution to this dilemma has long been some form of the analogy theory. In fact, the analogy theory has enjoyed such popularity for so long that recently its advocates have been claiming it is the only possible answer; that it has no conceivable alternative![4]

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[3] The theme of God's secret plan for the course of history is common to three of these texts. The Titus and II Tim. passages assert that plan to have existed "before time everlasting." The Rev. text picks up the same theme and comments that at the point when the present world is destroyed (and prior to the creation of the new heavens and earth) "time shall be no more." More recent translations have rendered this "let there be no more delay" (ουκ εστι χρονον). But I can find no precedent in the Greek language for using the verb "to be" with χρονον to mean delay, and the common theme supports the presumption that the comments about time likewise have a similar thrust—God's creative sovereignty over time (comp. I Cor. 2:7).
Since I understand the creation of the new heavens and earth to include the re-creation of time, my sticking with the older reading of the text does not entail that the everlasting life promised to believers will be timeless.
Compare Vos' remarks in *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 288-291.

Essentially, the analogy theory attempts to resolve the issue by claiming that God does not really have exactly the same properties as creatures at all. Our words, to be sure, do connote and denote properties, relations, etc., in creation. But those are not univocally true of God. What God really has are super degrees of those properties, degrees not found in creation. In this way our language comes as close to the truth about God as is possible. It does not lead us to falsehood since God really does have, say, love or wisdom. But the level of love or wisdom he has (or as Aquinas put it: the *mode* in which he possesses these properties) is utterly different from anything created. In this way our language succeeds in stating something *like* what is true about God, but not exactly the truth, since God and creatures share no property exactly in common.

Now it seems to me that this move, for all its surface plausibility, simply fails to do an end-run around the problem. The failure as I see it lies in the *likeness* which is supposed to hold between what is true of God and what we can say. This likeness is essential to any notion of analogy, so it will not matter whether we are discussing Thomas Aquinas' version, Cajetan's version, Suarez' version, or Newman's version of the theory. The reason this theory fails is that "likeness" requires that something be univocally true of any two things which are alike. Let me elaborate.

For one thing, A, to be like another thing, B, they must have some element in common which is exactly the same for each. (And I do not merely mean that they have in common the property of being like one another.) There must be some respect in which they are alike. If A is red and B is green they are alike in being colors; neither is more truly a color than the other. If A is small and B is large, they are alike in having size; neither is more fully a size, or possesses the quality of size in a better way, than the other. It is simply impossible to conceive of two things being like one another, if it is supposed to be true that they have no property in common univocally. For that to be true, two things would have to be "alike' although there is no respect in which they are the "same." And, in fact, the analogy theory does not accomplish such a trick either.

Suppose we are talking of the love of God. In the analogy theory "love' has for its meaning the various senses of the word which are true of creatures. God is supposed to have something like what we know as love, while at the same time his mode or degree of love is one which does not occur in the universe.

But even if it is true that the divine mode of love is not possessed by any creature, in order for that mode of love to be *like* any creaturely mode of love there must be some respect in which

[4] Ross, J. F. "Analogy as a Rule of Meaning for Religious Language," *International Philosophical Quarierly,* vol. 1*, no. 3, Sept. 1971, p. 470. Also John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribners and Sons, 1977), p. 138; and Paul Tillich *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), vol. I, part 2, p. 235.

they are really the same. There must be some element common to both in order for both to be cases of love. And whatever that element is, it will have to be univocally true of each: of divine love and creaturely love. In that case there must be a quality which is exactly the same in God's love and creaturely love. But this would mean that the original problem to be solved now recurs at another level. For the quality shared by divine and creaturely love cannot at the same time be uncreated (in God) and created (in the world). The problem is not resolved; it still appears we are driven to admit that either there is something about God which is created or something about the universe which is uncreated. The analogy theory takes the latter tack, and regards certain qualities of things in the universe as uncreated properties.

III. A New Proposal

Since the biblical teaching seems to be dead set against the latter of the two options, why not try the former? Is it really unbiblical to say of the properties and relations ascribed to God by Bible writers that they are entities he has created? I wish to suggest that there is not only nothing against this option in biblical teaching but much in favor of it.

Consider, for example, the biblical doctrine of creation. This doctrine entails that once there was only God and then God brought the universe into existence out of nothing. But that would further entail that prior to creating the universe, God did not have the property of being Creator. He did not stand toward anything in the relation "being-the-creator-of," because there was only himself. However, simultaneously with creating the universe, God also created the relation "being-the-creator-of" and the property of standing in that relation; namely, the property of being the Creator. That property itself, then, is a created property, given the biblical account.

Why, then, cannot God's other properties be equally created? If God can take on one created property, stand in one created relation, then why not many? Why not, in fact, construe all of the personality properties of God this way? Terms such as "loving," "forgiving," ."angry," "just," "merciful," "judgmental," "wise," "good," "powerful," etc., will all refer to created properties God has taken on in relation to creatures. And since these properties are the same as those which exist in the universe, we can know them as they are, not merely "something like' them. They can be just the characteristics we mean by the terms of our language as we ordinarily use them!

This is not to say that God possesses these characteristics with the same incompleteness, inconsistency, or other faults that people do. His love and wisdom are complete and faultless. But they are still what we mean by love and wisdom in ordinary language. We would not say

that God's love is unlike what we ordinarily mean by "love" because his mode of loving is so extraordinary we cannot imagine it.

Even if it were granted that much God-talk could be construed in this way, it is fair to ask whether this interpretation is capable of being applied to *all* the talk about God. I must say that I think not. God's divine being (his non-dependence) and his ability to bring everything else into existence are not themselves created properties. They are not characteristics God has created. But I would contend they are not properties at all.

This is, of course, a complex and controversial issue which cannot be fully treated here. But in the ontology I am presupposing, properties fall into a number of basic kinds, and always correspond to the laws of their respective kind. Properties and laws exist in correlation; there are no properties which exist aside from every sort of order, nor does there exist a sort of orderliness which fails to govern anything.[5] In this view of properties they do not correspond to predicables in every case. Not everything which can be said of something denotes a property of that something. For example, we can speak of the individuality of an entity. But individuality is not one more property of a thing alongside its other properties.

In addition to arguing that individuality is not a property, I would contend that we have no *concept* of individuality. It is a fact encountered in our direct experience and approximated in a limiting *idea.* But a limiting idea is the best we can manage.

Now this situation holds also for talk about the uncreated Being of God. Speaking of his Being is not attributing to God a property which God possesses alongside, and in addition to, his other (created) properties. It is not a property at all. Neither is the fact he can bring all else into existence a created fact or a property—although it is a created property of all things in the world that they depend on God. As in the case of created individuality, we have only a limiting idea of God's divinity and creativity. God as he was prior to creating, and as he now is aside from the created properties he assumes, cannot be thought of as a thing with properties at all. For if God created all laws, and if properties are the ways things function under laws, then God prior to. creating was not a thing with properties; and as the Creator of all laws, he is not subjected to any of them.[6]

So far as God's Divine Being is concerned, then, there is nothing in the World that is even like it. So there is no way in which this position requires any property to be univocally predicated

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[5] See H. Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1955), esp. vol. II.

[6] Comp. Calvin: "Not that God should be (regarded as) subjected to the' law, unless insofar as He is a law to HiniseX' *(De Aeternal Praedestinatione* C.R. 36, 361). "... And therefore He is above the laws because He is a law to Himself and everything' *(Comm. in Mosis Libros* V C.R. 52, 49, 131). "... We do not imagine God to be arbitrary (exlex). He is a law to Himself. The will of God is ... the law of all laws" *(Inst.* III, XXIII, 2). "…it is perverse to measure (the) Divine by the standard of human justice' *(Inst.* III, XXIV, 17).

of God (as he was prior to creating) and creatures. At the same time, however, this position entails that God now shares many properties in common with creatures. Indeed, all God's personal characteristics, and all our knowledge of him which is truly conceptual, consists in the knowledge of these properties. And since these properties are created they are subject to the same (created) laws which govern them in creatures. Thus they can be known and our language can carry its ordinary meaning for the terms used of them.[7]

As for the talk expressing the limiting idea of the Divine Being of that on which all else depends, this is also ordinary language. It is not a usual or common employment of language, to be sure. Especially the terms representing limiting ideas are a use which points to the limits of our thought and language and indicates a reality beyond them. But the language employed does not constitute a unique symbol-system, nor have a unique logic of its own, nor require an extensive analogy theory to understand its meaning.

As was remarked earlier, there appear to be grounds for thinking that the basis for this proposal (that religious language be regarded as ordinary language) was outlined by certain remarks Luther and Calvin made on the topic. While neither reformer makes quite the proposal I have made here, they do seem to have drawn a distinction between God's uncreated Being and the properties and relations God .has assumed toward us. Luther said, for example:

> Now God in his own Nature and Majesty is to be left alone, in this regard we have nothing to do with him nor does he wish us to deal with him. We have to do with him as clothed and displayed by this word, by which he presents himself to us. That is his glory and beauty in which the Psalmist proclaims him to be clothed.[8]

Calvin also comments that in many passages of Scripture, God Clothes himself with human affections and descends beneath his proper majesty" (Inst. III,XXIV, 17). Elsewhere he expands this idea:

> ... in the enurnerations of his perfections (God) is described (in Scripture) not as he is in himself, but in relation to us, in order that our acknowledgment of him may be a more vivid actual impression than empty visionary speculation ... *every perfection* set down

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[7] It may be objected that in at least two places biblical writers speak ofGod as having thought and having planned the course of history prior to creating time (Titus 1:2, II Tim. 1:9). Those texts are not at odds with this theory, and need not be construed as attributing to God properties knowable by us which he cannot help but have. God could have created and assumed to himself those properties prior to creating the spatio-temporal universe in. which creatures have them.

[8] *Martin Luther, op.* cit., p. 191.

(in Scripture) may be found in creation; and hence such as we feel him to be when experience is our guide, such as he declares himself to be in his word.[9]

These attitudes agree with my suggestion insofar as they seem to recognize that what Scripture reveals about God is not accomplished by prying into his uncreated Being. After asserting the truth of the Divine Being, Scripture is mainly concerned with clarifying the ways God relates to us.

However, there is a danger in putting this point in just this way. For when stated this way, it can sound as though we are saying that although God has taken on various created relations and properties and revealed them in his Word, in reality he is something quite different behind a mantle of assumed characteristics.

But that is not what I am suggesting at all, and it is clearly not what Luther or Calvin held. In the view of almost any, Jewish or Christian theologian, there is certainly more to God than he has revealed, more than we can know. My position that the truths about God are all (with the exception noted) *created* truths does not make them any the less true of God. Remember, God's standing in the relation of being Creator and sustainer of the world is itself a created fact about him. But the fact that this relation is itself created does not make them any less true of God. Although he created that relation, he now *really* stands in it. It is not true that this relation is a ruse behind which he is really not the Creator! I suggest that this is so for the other relations and personal characteristics God has revealed of himself. The fact that he has created them does not mean that behind those relations and properties which he has taken on he really has other properties or is another sort of personality altogether. For "behind" what God has revealed, our concepts simply do not apply at all!

Perhaps it should be added at this point that nothing said so far is intended to prove that the biblical view of God is the true religion. Nor does my position offer a guarantee that God has not in fact misled us about his characteristics, even if he did cause Scripture to be written. But then I do not believe that any theory or argument is capable of ruling out such a fear as, for example, Descartes tried to when he attempted to prove that "God *cannot* deceive us." The fact that Scripture is God's revelation rests squarely and solely on the believer's experience of its truth, not on arguments or inferences. In the face of that experience, running a theoretical credit cheek on God is not only unnecessary but sacrilegious!

To sum up, my suggestion about religious language is that it be purported to give univocal truth about God. It should not be seen as giving us something *like* what is true of God, while it is

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[9] *Institutes,* I, XIII, 1. (I,X, 2.)

all really "beyond our comprehension, as the analogy theorists maintain. Nor should it be understood as merely our resolve to talk about God as if he had such characteristics, as Kantians and pragmatists have maintained.[10] Rather it should be seen as quite ordinary language purporting to ascribe to God properties which he really has and relations in which he really stands. And although God may possess those properties more completely than creatures generally do, or stand in those relations more faithfully than sinful humans do, nevertheless it is the creaturely mode of those properties and relations which are true of him. Thus we are supposed to know those properties and relations as they are, not just know something vaguely like a superior property existing in a mode unknowable to us. Nor is such talk merely a matter of what we might hope for.

IV. Replies to Objections

But is the teaching that God created everything other than himself still plausible? Or does it lead to absurd consequences which should force us to reconsider whether that can really be the correct interpretation of the biblical writers? Several thinkers have suggested that all sorts of absurdities are generated by this position, and at least one defender of this position has admitted as much!

Most of these objections center on the contention that along with the other features of creation, God also created all the laws operative in the universe. The criticisms are intended to show that if this contention is taken to include logical and mathematical laws as well as, say, physical and biological laws, then absurdities do result. On the other hand if logical and mathematical laws are not included, then it is simply not the case that God alone is uncreated. (Logical and mathematical laws will then be accorded divine status as they were by Aristotle or Pythagoras respectively.) Since the criticisms I have encountered are mostly examples of alleged logical rather than mathematical absurdity, the discussion to follow will concentrate on the logical issues.

A. Logical Objections

The nub of all the examples of logical absurdity supposed to be generated by the creationist position is that it requires God himself not to be subject to the laws he has created. As we noticed earlier, Calvin drew that inference in a number of places, as did Luther. Later, Descartes also held

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[10] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Liberal Arts Press, 1956), pp. 105-106; and James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 185-186,192-193.

that since everything but God was created by God, all logical and mathematical laws and, truths were also created:

> The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him.[11]

Or as he puts it in his *Reply to Objections to Meditation VI..*

> ... it is clear that nothing at all can exist which does not depend on Him. This is true not only of everything that subsists, but of all order, of every law, and of every reason of truth and goodness ... [12]

But while I believe these remarks of Descartes to be expressing the position which Scripture supports, there is reason to object to e way he expresses this position at other points. For example, he says this position holds that God was free to "make it not be true that three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could be true together." And again, he says in another place that "God could from all eternity bring it about that it should be untrue that twice four is eight. . . ." Descartes then recognizes that this means all sorts of absurdities are possible, and advises "we should not put these thoughts before our minds."[13]

Remarks such as these have led such critics as Alvin Plantinga to describe Descartes' position as "universal possibilism," and to understand that " . . Descartes does not intend to say that for God, the logically impossible is possible; he means to say instead that nothing is logically impossible."[14]

Now it is not my intention to determine whether this is or is not a correct interpretation of Descartes. It seems to me Descartes does make remarks which warrant this interpretation while at the same time making others which would rule it out. But I am more concerned here with establishing that this cannot be the right interpretation of the claim that God has created

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[11] Letter from Descartes to Mersenne, Apr. 15, 1630, in *Descartes Philosophical Letters,* tr. and ed. by A. Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970),p. 11.

[12] *The Philosophical Works of Descartes,* tr. E. Haldane and G. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), vol. II, p. 250.

[13] *Ibid.,* p. 251.

[14] *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 116.

everything other than himself. That claim, I contend, does not entail that nothing is logically impossible or logically necessary. Neither does it require that "God could bring it about" that contradictories be true together.

The error in such an missunderstanding is subtle but important. It involves a shift of levels in the discussion which results in the assumption, at a meta-level, of precisely what is being denied at the initial level of the discussion. Let me first illustrate this point with another sort of case altogether, and then apply it to the issue of God and creation.

My sample case is a teaching found in scores of undergraduate logic textbooks.[15] It concerns the claim that where the premises of an argument are logically inconsistent with each other, the argument will validly yield any conclusion whatever. This is regarded by some authors as "paradoxical." It has even been termed the "paradox of strict implication": that when it is logically impossible for all premises to be true, then everything validly follows.[16]

But there is more going on here than an isolated paradox. And it is not innocuous![17] For in every case of determining validity, we are always engaged in seeing what else would be true if the premises were true. It is not necessary that we believe the premises to be true in order to determine that an argument is valid; we need only see what would follow from them in case they were true.

If, however, the premises of an argument containing assertions of the form P and ~ P were both true, the law of non-contradiction would be false and there would be no such thing as logical entailment at all! In other words, nothing logically follows from the truth of p.~ p, because the truth of p .~ p would vitiate all "logical following" whatever.

Thus the paradox that Copi and other writers feel uneasy about is neither mere allegation nor trivial. It arises because although advocates of this point are trying to see what would be true if p.~ p were true at the initial level of dealing with an inference, as soon as the contradiction becomes explicit they shift their thought and speech to a meta-level where they retain belief in the logical laws. They then proceed to apply the laws to the argument by employing logical rules which presuppose those laws. At this meta-level, then, the fact is that they are no longer seeing what would be true if the premises were true. For if the treatment of the argument remained at that level, the rules of logic would cease to apply since the law of non-contradiction would be denied.

What really happens here is therefore an unconscious shift to a meta-level where the premises are assumed to be false, while the truth and applicability of logical rules and the logical

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[15] Eg., I. Copi, *Introduction to Logic,* 5th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1978), pp. 332-335.

[16] *Ibid.,* p. 335.

[17] Lemmon, *Beginning Logic* (Camden, N.J.: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), p. ix.

laws are insisted on. It is this shift from initial level to meta-level, and the inconsistency between the two, which produces the feeling of paradox surrounding the (illusory) demonstration that if premises are impossible everything validly follows.

$$P$$
$$\sim P$$
$$\underline{P \vee} \text{ anything (rule of addition)}$$
$$\text{anything (disjunctive syllogism)'}$$

Please do not misunderstand my point here. I am not for a moment attempting to defend the view that we should seriously maintain p .~p and give up the logical laws. What I am trying to point out is the tacit shift in the levels of thought and discussion which are introduced by the supposed demonstration that p .~ p entails everything. But I do mean to maintain that this shift of levels needs to be acknowledged, and that when it is acknowledged it highlights two very important factors. First, we cannot consider the truth or falsity of a statement, or of the state of affairs it asserts, in isolation from the laws which we assume to govern it. And second, we cannot pretend not to be begging the question against the hypothetical truth of a claim at one level, while at the same time passing judgment oil it from another level where what it denies is already assumed to be true.

Thus Descartes should not think that the dependency of things on God entails that God can make it true that p. ~ p while *the laws of logic remain what they are*! This is what he appears to say at points, and what Plantinga takes him to assert. This, of course, results in absurdity. To hold that all things are (logically) possible, including those things the laws of logical possibility exclude, is absurd.

But there is no absurdity in holding that although there really is necessity, impossibility, and possibility for creation, the laws which determine those conditions also depend on God. In that case the correct way of stating the consequences of a universal creationism is not to call it "universal possibilism"; it is not that anything is possible for God. Rather it is that God created all the senses of possibility.

To interpret universal creationism as "universal possibilism" is to think about and discuss the creationist claim by tacitly shifting to a meta-level of thought and discourse; there it is assumed that logical necessity and possibility are conditions which govern God as well as creatures. It is to argue at a meta-level which assumes that the laws of logic form an "environment" for all things, God included. And it is to assume, at the same time, that the claim of God's exemption from

those laws must somehow entail that God can make some creatures exempt from the laws while the laws remain universal laws for creation.

But universal creationism need hold no such things. It can very well hold instead that God has created the laws which obtain in the universe, and the things which are governed by them, as *correlates*. To create an exception would mean that what was formerly a law would no longer be a law. Thus universal creationism does pot hold that "God can make $2 \times 4 = 8$ false." If the laws of mathematics and logic were different from what they now are, then "×" and "=" as well as '2," "4," and "8" would not mean what they now mean. If these laws were different, reality would differ in ways not now imaginable by us.

But this does not require that reality would differ by *violating* the laws which now do obtain. If the law of non-contradiction did not obtain, nothing would be self-contradictory or absurd as we now understand "self-contradictory" and "absurd." For anything to violate a law, the law must hold. Thus God's sovereignty over laws means that God was under no compulsion to make just the laws he did; it does not mean that creatures as we now know them could violate logical laws. For as we now know them, all creatures are subjected to logical (and non-logical) laws. And these laws govern not only what created entities can be, but how we can conceive of them.

The position that there could be entities not governed by logical laws therefore amounts to saying that there could be creatures we cannot conceive of. And that is true just because there are no logical constraints on God's creativity. (At any rate the denial that there could be such creatures is pure dogmatism: how can it be shown there could not be things which we *cannot* conceive of?)

Moreover, there is another objection to construing universal creationism as universal possibilism. It is that every example of alleged absurdity supposed to follow from universal possibilism requires that we speak of what is supposed to be possible for God to do. They all take the form: "God could have. . ." or "God can. . . ." But if all senses of possibility are God's creatures, possibility does not apply to God's own creativity! To apply logical possibility to God's creativity is to reintroduce at a meta-level just what the universal creationists claim denied. It is therefore to beg, the question against universal creationism.

This is why it is incorrect to interpret the position being maintained here as saying that God can violate the logical laws. Since "can" means "is logically possible," such a position would amount to holding that it is logically possible for God to do what is logically impossible! But that is not at all what is being maintained. For an entity to violate a law, the law must hold for that entity. And precisely what we are saying is that the laws do not hold for God. To interpret this position as saying God can violate the laws is therefore to beg the question against it. We would

be making a meta-level assumption of its falsity, analogous to the meta-level assumption which generates the paradox of material implication.

In sum, God's sovereignty over laws means that they depend on him and that they are not to be applied to him except insofar as they apply to the created properties he has taken on.

Am I then suggesting that we cannot even say God could have made things differently? Surely that seems strange! How else can we express the import of declaring God's divine self-existence and creativity not to be bound by laws unless we do say this?

One way to reply to such a question is to point out that this sort of speech is much like another problematic case of God-talk noted by St. Augustine. In his commentary on Genesis, Augustine remarks that when we try to talk about the fact that God created time we have no adequate way to do it. The normal inclination is to say things like "before God created time …" or "God existed before creating time," etc. But, says Augustine, "before" is itself a temporal word; it implies a moment of time prior to some other moment. In this way the normal expressions cannot be taken to mean what they literally say; "before" cannot mean "temporally prior." Still, if we qualify such talk in this way, it does then convey something true when we use that mode of speech. It means that God existed outside time, that he existed although time did not.

This is another case where we have only a limiting idea of something rather than a concept. Our thought and speech is time-bound so we cannot conceive what non-temporal reality would be. The limiting idea of God-beyond-time points beyond what we can grasp conceptually, and reminds us that the limit to what we can conceive is not the same as the limit of what can be.

So, analogously, our counterfactual talk about what God could have done," or "could now be doing," or "could yet do," cannot carry the usual connotation of "could." None of the senses of possibility which exist in the universe are uncreated, including logical possibility; none applied to God prior to his creating. So none applies to his creating the law order that establishes the necessities and possibilities which hold for creatures and which supply the foundation for our "could" talk.

At the same time, it should be clear that these remarks recognize how the laws of creation—logical laws especially—are really limits on our ability to think, conceive, and imagine. As creatures, we are bound to recognize those laws and conform our thought to them as completely as we are able. Saying that God is the Creator of those laws and not himself subject to them does not in any way release humans from subjection to them. We may not assert or believe what is contradictory on the excuse that God is not limited by the logical limits which hold for us. The upshot of the matter is that while recognizing that our subjection to logical necessity and

possibility prevents us from excusing absurdity, at the same time it forces us to recognize that God's uncreated Being and God's creating of everything else exceed our ability to conceive. For talk of what God "could do" or "could have done!' would apply logical possibility to him when in fact he is the Creator of every sort of possibility.

B. Religious Objections

Even if the logical objections lodged against universal creationism can be answered, the theory of religious language based on it must pass yet another test. It must pass the test of comparison with biblical teachings to see whether it is compatible with them. Obviously, there is no room to do that extensively here. So I will restrict my comments to three major biblical doctrines: (1) the image of God in man, common to Jews, Christians, and Muslims; (2). the doctrine of the trinity, and (3) the doctrine of the incarnation. It should be stressed, however, that I do not see all the interpretive innovations about to be suggested as *entailed* by creationism. Rather, they presuppose it. They are permitted by creationism and by the freedom it makes possible from Greek metaphysical concepts such as "scale of being," "substance," "analogia entis," "hypostatic union," etc.

1. Trinity

Let us start with the doctrine of the trinity. The first thing to be borne in mind is that, from the universal creationist position, not only tri-unity but every other quantitative property ascribed to God must be regarded as a created property he assumes to himself. The laws and properties of quantity are characteristics of created things in the universe, and so are themselves also created. This point must be borne in mind, then, for the Jewish and Muslim doctrine that God is *one,* as much as for the Christian doctrine that God is one-in-three. In each case quantity is something created and assumed by God, and not intrinsic to God as he was prior to creating. The quantity should be understood, then, as true of the way(s) God relates to creation.[18]

In this view, Greek metaphysical concepts such as "substance" and "person" are not needed. At the same time this construal guards against all theological modalism and subordinationism in the trinity: no one of the trinitarian distinctions is any more truly God than any other, nor is the unity basic to the diversity or vice versa.

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[18] Augustine had a feel for this point when he recognized that although the tri-unity talk is true it still somehow falls short of God's own Being. He says that we speak of "trinity" and of "three persons" in theology "not because the phrases are adequate (to God)—they are the only alternatives to silence!" (*De Trinitate,* V. 9).

2. Incarnation

There are four classes of statements in the New Testament asserted of Jesus of Nazareth. The first are statements about him as a human being. These include reports of his birth, childhood, public ministry, teachings and death. They include startling accounts such as his walking on water and being resurrected, as well as very ordinary accounts of eating and sleeping. The second class of statements contains assertions pertaining to his office as Messiah. Among these are remarks of Jesus himself as well as others which are intended to explain his actions and teachings, and to demonstrate that he fulfilled the prophetic description of the role of Messiah. The third class of statements are those which speak of the special relation of God to Jesus in virtue of his office as Messiah. In this respect God is said to "indwell': Jesus (Jn. 14:10) as had been said of the prophets before him; that is, *God* has conferred on him special powers and authority (Luke 4:32, 36). By way of contrast with the prophets which preceded him; however, Jesus is said to be indwelt without limitation (Col. 2:9; In. 3:34) and so to have *all* God's power and authority conferred on him (Matt. 28:18; In. 3:34; I Cor. 15:24; Rev. 19:16).

Now whatever difficulties anyone may have with any of these classes of statements, it seems pretty clear that consistency with the biblical doctrine of God is not among them. But the fourth class of statements does raise the issue of consistency. It is the set whose members have traditionally—and, I think, correctly-been understood to assert the divinity of Jesus. Yet anyone who reads these statements in the light of the biblical doctrine of God's transcendence will have to sympathize with the Jews who accused the early Christians of idolatry. For how, given the radical biblical sense of God's transcendence, can God be identified with anything in the universe, even the Messiah?[19] However, a closer look at the statements which assert Jesus' divinity uncovers a remarkable consistency if they are construed along the lines of the universal creationist view of religious language.

Consider some of the most direct of this set of statements: Jn. 1:1-14 refers to Jesus as the "Word" of God, and boldly asserts "the Word was God"; Col 1:15, I Cor. 11:7, 11 Cor. 4:4 and Heb. 1:3 all call Jesus the "image of God"; and Phil. 2:6 says he was "in the form of God" so that it was not illegitimate for him to be regarded in some sense as "equal with God."[20] Now the expressions used in these passages appear almost as though designed to conform with the theory I have put forward! For in them the man Jesus is not said to be identical with the

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[19] Muslims also make this charge. In Islam the sin of identifying any part of creation with Allah is called "shirk."

[20] There are also indirect assertions of Jesus' divinity and equality with the God of Israel. I Cor. 2:8 and Jas. 2:1 call him the "Lord of glory," an obvious allusion to Ps. 24:7-10: "... the King of glory shall come in. Who is the King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory."

Divine Being as it was prior to creation, but to be the embodiment of God "as revealed" as "clothed in his Word." Jesus is said to be the "Word," the "form" and the "image of the invisible God"; that is, he is the very embodiment of the personal character God had taken on and had been revealing to Israel for centuries.

One of the bases for suggesting this interpretation is the attempt to take seriously what terms like "form," "Word," and "image" would mean to a pious Jew steeped in the Torah, Psalms, and prophets, rather than what they might mean to an educated pagan steeped in Plato, Aristotle, or Plotinus. Reflecting on this, I find no need for talk about different "natures" in a "hypostatic union" to explain the relation between Jesus' humanity and his divinity. For in my interpretation it is the very humanity of Jesus that *is* the embodiment of Yahweh as revealed. That is, Jesus really had (and has) the properties God had assumed to himself and revealed through the prophets; there is a real identity between the two sets of properties and therefore between the two personalities. The lovingness, faithfulness, compassion, goodness, etc., which were true of the ways God related to mankind (Israel in particular) prior to the incarnation, were the same as those possessed by Jesus during his earthly ministry and which he still possesses since his resurrection. Thus Jesus could appear to a pious believer to be *literally* the incarnation of the (created and revealed) personality of the second person of the trinity. The man Jesus is not, therefore, to be regarded as *identical* with God the Son. God the Son is eternal, while Jesus was born about 2000 years ago. But Jesus is the man whose personality is identical with that of God the Son; he is the incarnation of God the Son.

All the same, this is not the whole story on the doctrine of Jesus' divinity. To be seen in its proper perspective, the point made above must be taken in conjunction with that third class .of statements having to do with God indwelling Jesus and conferring power and authority on him. For, remarkably enough, there is precedent even in Judaism for the identification of a man with God-as-revealed in the sense of having God's power and authority. That precedent is the case of Moses. More than once the book of Exodus records that God told Moses that he, Moses, was to be regarded as God: he was to be God to Aaron, and God to the Pharaoh of Egypt (Ex. 4:16, 7:1).[21] In the contexts these remarks are grounded in the extent to which Moses was empowered to speak for God,[22] and to which God's authority rested on him. On this same basis it is also made abundantly clear that any and all criticism or disrespect, directed to Moses is disrespect to God himself.

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[21] Moses' father-in-law also speaks of Moses as God to the people of Israel (Ex. 18: 19).
[22] This, of course, is the literal meaning of "prophet" not "one who foretells the future," but "spokesman" or "deputy."

But there is even more to be said here than these two points, important as they are. For in addition to having all God's power and. authority conferred on him, and besides being the living embodiment of the revealed personality of Yahweh, there are grounds for saying that God now bears his relations to creation through Jesus', relations to creation! Such remarks as "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" certainly suggest strongly that Jesus now stands in those relations to the universe which only God had prior to the incarnation. Thus even God's present relations of sustaining the universe in existence is now exercised through Christ (Col. 1: 17).

It now becomes clear why the doctrine of Jesus' divinity does not contradict the doctrine of God's transcendence. If Moses could, in a sense, be identified with God because of the extent to which he carried God's authority, why not the Messiah who parries *all* God's authority? Moreover, if this Messiah is at the same time, in his human personality, the living embodiment of the personality of "God in relation to us," the completion of the revelation of this anthropomorphic character, *and also the creature through whom God actually bears his relations to the world,* there could be no more adequate way to express these facts other than to complete this sense of identification with God which Moses was said to have partially. In fact, this seems to be exactly the point which forms the background to the explicit contrast drawn between Moses and Jesus in Jn. 1: 17. In that passage Moses is, for all his greatness, said to be merely the instrument through which the law was given, while Jesus "creates grace and truth."

But should any doubt remain as to whether this understanding of Jesus' divinity is a proper interpretation of the New Testament, the real clincher, is that Jesus himself asserts it in just these terms! In replying to those who accused him of blasphemy for claiming to be divine, Jesus, according to Jn. 10:34-36, said:

> It is not written in your law that "I said, 'you are gods.'"[23] If he called them gods to whom the word of God came, and if scripture cannot be broken, why do you say of the one the Father has made, holy and sent into the world, "you blaspheme" because said I am the Son of God?[24]

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[23] Ps. 82.6.

[24] Of course, there is also the teaching of the supernatural character of Jesus' conception and birth. This, too, sets off his humanity as unique and calls attention to its ability to reveal God as he is towards us; in addition to speaking and being God's Word, in addition to having the personality and power of God the Son (the second person of the trinity), he is also uniquely the Son of God.

3. Image of God

By now it may be quite obvious how the universal creationist view of religious language will handle the doctrine of the image of God in man. Man will be understood to be in the image of, the created personality of God, not God as he 'was prior to creating. And this means that the anthropomorphic depiction of God is not only the revelation of God's character (in the sense of the created properties he assumed and the created relations he bears us), and not only the. revelation of the treatment we can expect from God. This depiction is also the revelation of the biblical idea of what it is to be fully human. It is because of this latter element in the doctrine that Jesus is said to he a perfect human (Heb. 4:15; Eph. 4:13) whom we should imitate (Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 15:49; 1 Pet. 2:21). It also makes sense of Jesus' statement that we should be "perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5.48).[25] Our interpretation is that in assuming to himself certain personal characteristics and relations, God has made these the model of what it is to be rightly human. He has taken on faithfulness, patience, kindness, goodness, justice, understanding, pity, mercy, righteous anger, etc. Thus he has not merely accommodated the language of revelation to us; he has accommodated *himself,* and taken on an anthropomorphic personality.

This interpretation of the image of God in man is a deliberate break with a long history of theologies which have identified the image with some faculty that humans are supposed to have in common with God (e.g., reason); or with some particular duty of life which humans supposedly share with God (e.g., to be loving or creative). Instead the imago Dei now turns out to mean the whole of what it is to be rightly human.

In summary, I think it has been shown that the universal creationist view of religious language is a genuine alternative to the traditional analogy theory. This view presupposes, and remains consistent with, the biblical doctrine of God's transcendence, while the analogy theory does neither. Moreover, this view is still able to maintain religious language as literally meaningful and religiously significant, thus avoiding the unrelieved agnosticism which the analogy theorist fears. And finally, it appears that the creationist view of religious language, when applied to several important biblical doctrines, turns out to be illuminating by the way it clarifies them and frees their interpretations from the distorting influence of pagan Greek philosophical theories.

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[25] Just what this could mean on the analogical theory is beyond me!