

Are God and Man One or Two?

Reflections on the Secular Temptation

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In a world progressively swept by the winds of secularization, the question becomes increasingly important for those who want to maintain their faith in God, to see him more and more clearly identified with the process of history and with the destiny of man.

In the West at least there are two basic paradigms of the God-world relation which represent the two poles of western thought. At one extreme is the Spinozan paradigm, where God's substance is the world, and the world is God. At the other stands the Augustinian-Kierkegaardian or Barthian tradition which makes God and world so 'totally other' mutually, that God shares in none of the characteristics of the world and is totally transcendent. Nothing in the world can in this view, be divine. The world is even not necessary to God, not to say that it cannot be his being or his body. The world, including man is *created, ex nihilo*; both concepts are meant to emphasize the generic difference between God and world or God and Man. God's being is necessary (essential), eternal, perfect, immutable, self-generating, while the world's being is contingent, temporal, imperfect, changing, other-generated.

In between these two poles there has developed the conception of the 'secondary autonomy of man', in this sense that while man or the human being remains always a creature (i. e. he does not have his being *a se* or from himself), he has it *in se* (in himself) and *per se* (by itself). This means that while he always owes his being to God as First Cause, he can now exist in himself and by himself, and can therefore become a secondary cause within the limits of his nature, generating effects in the outside world. Secondary causes can of course be suppressed, over-ridden, or kept in abeyance by the First Cause. In traditional western thought this is what constitutes a miracle. But nature has its own autonomy and we can discern the rules that govern its functionings under normal non-miraculous circumstances. That is in fact the realm of science and philosophy, according to this line of thinking.

Modern western philosophy and science which exist in a mutually reinforcing relation to the process of secularization, have philosophical presuppositions which are basically Deist. They do not presume to deny the existence or being of God as First Cause. They are primarily interested, however, in the realm of secondary causes, which can be explained, by and large, in terms of themselves, without reference to a necessary First Cause.

The trend in the west today is to accommodate God himself within this concept of the autonomy of man and nature. This is the "secular meaning of the Gospel" (Paul van Buren), and in fact of "the Death of God" (Vahanian, Altizer, et al). But it is also in some ways the effort of some Catholic theologians like Schillebeeckx (*God, the Future of Man*) where the concept of God is accommodated into the secular time-frame of human history and human destiny in this world.

This option of bringing God into the realm of secondary causes and domesticating him there as a transcendent ideal for the 'future' of man and the world, seems attractive even to Euro-Communists or Communist renegades like Roger Garaudy. For Garaudy what Marxism lacks is a sufficient idea of transcendence which is necessary to forestall all totalitarian absolutism. No one should say the last word. All concepts and all social forms are to be transcended. No system should be final. So Garaudy claims that Marxism with God as a transcendent ideal for humanity, will be the open system we need.

These modern theological and ideological attempts to domesticate God within the time-frame of the history of man and nature are thus to be commended as noble efforts on the part of some theologians and thinkers to come to terms with, or at least to communicate with "modern secular man" who is supposed to be notoriously anti-metaphysical and hopelessly allergic to any notions of an absolutely transcendent God *a la* Barth or Kierkegaard.

In fact the 'Death of God' Theology of two decades ago insisted that God was dead and that humanity, come of age, (*mundig*) had inherited the universe, being responsible for it on its own. Humanity could no longer be a child, depending on God for decisions. This tragic-heroic stance of having replaced God and taken over from him, often led merely to an almost tragicomic sense of loneliness and despair on the part of humanity, if one did not have some kind of a Marxist hope about history. Western liberalism is today under the cloud of this hopelessness.

What kind of a notion of God can Christians still sustain, after having passed through the cathartic trauma of secularization? This

paper takes the position that the ancient Eastern Patristic God-apprehension remains still valid, with some minor changes, even after the western crisis of secularization and rationalism.

The restatement in modern terms of the ancient Eastern Patristic heritage requires the abandonment of concepts like *adequatio* which have played such a key role in scholastic and post-scholastic western thought.

Adequatio is often regarded as referring to "the relation of truth to being". Here there is already a verbalistic or propositional conception of truth which can hardly be defended philosophically or theologically. If truth is that which truly is and not merely a statement of things as they are, then our question is precisely: the relation of propositions to truth. St. Thomas obviously held the view that "affirmative propositions can be formed truly about God" (*Summa Theol: Prima Q: 13 art 12*). With that the Eastern Fathers would agree if pressed. But they would not agree with Aquinas that truth is primarily intellectual and therefore, propositional. For Aquinas as for Aristotle, "truth is squaring of thought and thing", which is of course an act of the mind. As St. Thomas says in *Prima: Ques 16: Art 5* "truth is found in the intellect according as it apprehends a thing as it is", and that (*art 7*) "the truth of enunciations is no other than the truth of the intellect". He would even go further to say that "Truth, properly speaking, is only in the intellect".

The Eastern Fathers, following the Semitic, especially Hebrew, tradition would hold that reality rather than proposition is truth. Therefore, the Eastern Fathers would be skeptical of the truth-content of their own statements. Whatever follows in the rest of this paper should also therefore be regarded, not as attempts to state the truth, but as propositions which may have some value in relating us to the truth. I make six of these propositions and make an effort to clarify them:

(1) God's is-ness is generically different from all other is-ness, and therefore it is dangerous even to say that "God is", because this may lead to the misunderstanding that God is, in the same way as things are.

Modern rational thought finds it difficult to affirm the "existence" of God, because it understands existence as a generic concept. Things exist in space and time and are open to our perception. If God truly exists, then he must also exist in the same way as things do (somewhere or everywhere, at some time or at all times, ie. in the whole or part of time and space). In

a world come of age¹, it is difficult to conceive a God who is in a part or in the whole of space-time, and therefore the notion of God as a real existent becomes untenable.

This is the central reality of the western movement of secularisation, unbelief and agnosticism. And it is a concept of God, which regards God as an existent like other existents, that has become untenable. Here I must disagree with Gordon Kaufman of Harvard who holds that "a naturalistic or secular world-view results when man's reflective activities are given a dominant role in determining the understanding of human existence in which it is found"². On the other hand, according to Kaufman "when *feeling* is given a dominant place in shaping the interpretation of reality or the world, a religious world view results."³ He then distinguishes between a "religious" world view which is based on the centrality of feeling or affection and a "theistic" world view which is rooted in the volitional or feeling side of the self. It is in this third or theistic world view that we find the great emphasis on discontinuity and dissimilarity between God and world.

"In its emphasis on the transcendent God, theism differs sharply both from secularism, contented simply with life in this world, and religion, which perceives unusual depths and values and meanings in experience, but is not essentially committed to an independent, transcendent God."⁴

But the modern theist is still averse to giving a proper conceptual delineation of the is-ness of God. He will tell us that the two orders (Creator and Creation) are generically different, the latter having no existence except by contingent dependence on the former, and the former existing by itself independent also of the latter. What they do not tell us is where and how this Creator God is. They just pre-suppose that the word "is" or "exists" is of self-evident meaning. They concentrate, as Gordon Kaufman does, on the difference in dependence. Creator and Creation are not inter-dependent. The dependence is one way. But they do not give enough attention to the two kinds of is-ness.

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1. For the Eastern Fathers it was difficult to conceive God as "somewhere" already in the 4th century. See the second theological oration of St. Gregory Nazianzen.
 2. Gordon D. Kaufman: *Cod the Problem*. Harvard U.P., 1972, p. 210, He goes on to say: "By a secular view, I mean to indicate any position that understands man's existence simply in terms of *this world* as it is given to our experience and especially as it is known in our science and philosophy."
 3. *ibid.* p. 214.
 4. *ibid.* p. 221.

Some things can be said of this is-ness of God. First, the Eastern Fathers emphasize the incomprehensibility of the is-ness or *ousia* of God. To comprehend, to understand, is usually to see a reality as sharing certain properties with a class or species of other things or beings, so that if we know one member of the species, the other members can be known as belonging to the same species. Or we understand a reality in relation to its inter-actions with other realities, which inter-actions are predictable to a large extent.

In the case of God, there is no species-category into which God can be put, which category we would know by knowing one or more members of it.⁵ Nor do we know how to predict God's behaviour just because we have seen how he acts in some cases in the past.

(2) The second of these propositions from Patristic thought that I would like to reiterate is this. While God's is-ness or *ousia* remains incomprehensible, his actions or operations do come down to us and we can experience and understand them. In fact, the fathers would say that these operations or *energeia* are the means through which we understand God at all.

The difficulty in this Eastern patristic distinction between the *ousia* and the *energeia* of God (or between his is-ness and his operations) shows up in the lack of clarity in seeing the relation between *ousia* and *energeia*. Does not most of our knowledge of the is-ness of existents come from our awareness of how they work? We know rain because we know how it works, not because we have a great penetration into the being of rain.

The *ousia* and the *energeia* cannot be two totally distinct realities. It is from the *ousia* that the *energeia* emerges and the latter is an expression of the former. This is what we mean when we say that God is love; it is because we have experienced God's loving actions or operations that we project love to the being of God.

But there is this difference—that in the case of existents both the *ousia* and the *energeia* are open to our senses, while in the case of God only some of the operations are.

And in fact we do have some difficulty in ascribing operations to an *ousia* that we do not behold. How do we know that a particular operation—say the up-rooting and falling of a tree on a particular house, killing a particular human being, is an act of God? We know that it was the wind which operated to uproot the tree; it was the falling tree which operated to kill the person. How then do we call that, or Jesus' healing of the man born blind, properly speaking an act of God?

5. If a Christian says that we know a member of the species in Jesus Christ one has to answer (a) Jesus Christ is not simply God, but God-Man, and (b) what was revealed in Jesus Christ was more the true nature of man as the image of God, and not God Himself.

The concept of God's operation is bound to remain vague in so far as God's *ousia* remains hidden to us. The patristic notion of God's *energeia* is only partly clear. We understand that the Creation itself is God's *energeia* operating. But if that is so, then we must call every disease and every tidal wave an act of God. Cancer and blindness would also then be God's operations. At this point I can only point to the difficulty, not sort it out.

We know about God's operations, and from these we do get but a faint glimmer of God's *ousia*. But that *ousia* can still not be conceptually comprehended. It can be apprehended, responded to, trusted in, but not intellectually understood or explained.

(3) The third proposition I want to reiterate here is that God and world cannot be ultimately two, and that at that point we modern Christians have not been sufficiently fair to the Indian Philosopher Sankara's thought.

Those who say that God and world are two realities have to answer the question whether God-plus-world would be greater than God-by-himself. If a and b are two positive entities then by simple mathematical logic.

$$a + b > a$$

Even if we regard b as contained in a (like water in a vessel or like air in a balloon?) still $a + b > a$, which means that a can be added to, and there is something, namely $a - b$ which is greater than a . If so then a cannot be God.

If we really mean what we say when we state that God is infinite, then we have to say how the world can be "outside" of God or "other than" God. How can infinity, which has no boundaries have an outside? Can something, like the world, be added to. Is there something called infinity plus X?

I therefore as a Christian am forced to agree with Sankara that God and World cannot be *ultimately* two. Not two, that means *advaita*. This is neither a simple monism nor pan-theism nor even a simple pan-en-theism. The not-two is a negative affirmation which I make on the basis both of logic and of intuition. I would like to work out this notion in greater detail and with more precision. I present it here in order to benefit from your wisdom in criticism.

(4) My fourth proposition is that the patristic notions of *diastema* and *metousia* as a pair of concepts can help us in overcoming in a very partial way the *aporia* connected with the God-World relationship. The concept of *diastema* comes from the old Arian-Eunomion controversy. The logic of the tradition of Arius, Aetius and Eunomius in the 4th century was clear. If Father and Son are two persons the latter having been born from the first, then the

Father must be logically as well as temporally prior to the Son, and that therefore there must have been a period when the Father existed and the Son did not; because the Father had to be there before the Son could be born. This Eunomian logic relentlessly argued that there was a then, when the Son was not—and therefore that there is a gap or *diastema* between the Father and Son. This gap is both temporal and spatial.

In facing this logic, St. Basil was the first to insist on the *adiastatic* or unextended nature of the God-head. His younger brother Gregory of Nyssa developed the concept philosophically. In the first place, if the Son had a beginning then certainly he is finite at one end of his existence, since it is bounded by a particular point in time when his existence began. This is what Eunomius claimed. He also claimed that there was a fixed interval or gap or lapse of time during which the Son was not, i. e. before his beginning. Now Gregory's clinching argument was as follows:

- (a) According to Eunomius, the Son had his beginning at a point in time A.
- (b) also according to him, there was a precise period of time when the Son was not, while the Father alone was—B.
- (c) if you go back the period of time B from the point in time A, you must get the time of origin of the Father.
- (d) therefore the Father had also a beginning in time, and therefore he is not *agennetos*, unoriginate which according to Eunomius, is the necessary quality of God. Thus the Father is not God.

This is not merely playing with words. Gregory drew from these reflections the dicta: (a) that there can be no *diastema* (i. e. gap, distension or extension) within the Godhead itself,

(b) that everything in the created order is characterized by *diastema* or extension in space and time; and

(c) that while there is a one-way *diastema* between World and God, there is no such the other way, i. e. between God and World.

These dicta continue to be useful conceptual tools in dealing with the Christian doctrine of Creation, and the Creator-Creation relationship. But in Gregory of Nyssa this *diastema* view is counter balanced by the *metousia* understanding, i. e. the being or existence of all existents is a participation or *metousia* in the *energeia* of God. While this participation applies to all existents in a general way, man participates in a preferred way, i. e. as icon or manifest presence, as mirror-image and as being-in-becoming.

And because of this distance-participation dialectic, the final vision of God is not of an objective "Uncreated light" as some exponents of Eastern Orthodox mysticism say, but rather as the reflection of the original in one's own perfected and growing being, as Gregory of Nyssa would insist.

While we thus affirm the discontinuity between God and World, in accordance with the Semitic tradition, we also affirm the continuity between them. The Christian doctrine is neither Spinozan nor Barthian. It holds continuity and discontinuity in dialectical tension

(5) My fifth point must sound quite ludicrous to some of my western Christian friends, who would perhaps seek to escape the problem by ascribing my peculiar view to my Indian cultural background.

But I do feel certain that we have in our conceptual grasp of reality over-emphasized the distinction between God and Man as two separate and totally other realities. The whole biblical tradition is redundant with affirmations to the contrary. If human beings (as well as 'angels') can be 'sons of God,' it takes a very flat mind to say that there is no generic (not numeral) identity between Father and Son. Nor does the concepts of image and likeness yield any meaning without something in common between original and image.

If I say that God and Man have become inseparably and permanently one in Jesus Christ, then still to insist that God and Man are totally other with nothing in common between them, seems somewhat perverse. If the old humanity has been condemned and overthrown and the new humanity of Jesus Christ as inseparably God-Man, has been established as Barth would say, then where is the ground for a secular humanity with secondary autonomy *in se* and *per se*? The humanity that seeks to exist apart from Jesus Christ is a condemned humanity. How then can we as Christians affirm something called 'secular' humanity?

The only humanity that can be affirmed as really existing is humanity inseparably united with God. I do not claim that only Christians have this united-with-God humanity. I regard the main specificity of the Christian not as the exclusive possession of this redeemed humanity which is now inseparably united to God in Christ; for me what makes me a Christian is my initiation into a community which *knows* the heart of this redeemed humanity and seeks to live by that knowledge and to impart it to all by life and love and word.

But my main point is not about the specificity of the Christian but about the dialectical, unconfused, inseparable unity between Man and God—not merely in the single individuality of the Nazarene, but in the whole of humanity which he assumed. The duality between God and Man should not be stressed to the point

where they become separated into two, for they have been indissolubly and inseparably united into One. True humanity does not exist except in that unity—irrespective of whether Man is conscious of that fact or not. God and Man are not totally other. They are totally united—so that humanity does not exist outside of union with God, and God does not ‘exist’ outside of the union with humanity.

(6) The sixth point has to do with the Incarnation of the Son of God and its trans-temporal effect upon all humanity in all space and time. I shall put forward as propositions the following for discussion:

- (a) *Truth manifest is God Incarnate.* Philosophy is not truth. It can only be ancillary to the quest for being grounded in the truth. Religion as a generic category does not exist. There are various traditions which show ways of being related to the one truth of the Son of God Incarnate.
- (b) The ultimate goal of all authentic religious quest is becoming consciously grounded in and nurtured by, the ultimate reality of the Son of God Incarnate, apprehended in different ways.
- (c) The Christian tradition offers us the way shown by the Son of God himself, but there are other ways of being related to the Son of God Incarnate. The Christian tradition itself is only imperfectly reflected and maintained in all existing Christian traditions, and sometimes elements of the Christian tradition are better maintained in other traditions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Liberalism, Marxism, etc. Christians have to learn from these.
- (d) Since the temporal event of the Incarnation is also an eternal event (the lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world), being grounded in and nurtured by the one comprehensive eternal-historical reality of Jesus Christ is possible in differing measures and degrees to peoples who lived temporally before, or geographically untouched by, the historical event of the Incarnation.
- (e) The *diastema* between God and Man remains a fact, but it has been ultimately overcome when God became Man and no *diastema* can in principle exist between God and Man since they are inseparably (though unconfusedly) united in Christ Jesus. This ultimate overcoming of the *diastema* means being united more and more closely with Him in whom there is no *diastema*.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this brief paper is merely to deflate all pretensions to finality in any propositional statement of truth about God. The secularization movement of the west, which is now being co-opted inside theology, is not capable of giving us a philosophically respectable notion of God as it claims to be able to do. If "modern man" cannot deal with the patristic concept of God because of his metaphysical reluctance to do so, then it is necessary for "modern man" to realize that he has no philosophically respectable concept of either God or of this world in his so-called secular philosophy either. He is being intellectually mediocre by evading the problem. The patristic notion remains so far the best conceptual grasp, provided it is held in an apophatic-kataphatic dialectic, and not as propositional truth which can be verified or falsified.