

AQUINAS, WALSH, AND EVANS ON THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

[a brief essay to be read in class for discussion]

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Religion 254B – The Doctrine of Creation

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[text originally double spaced]

St. Thomas Aquinas' Interpretation Of The Doctrine of Creation

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The Doctrine In Summary Form. The Church has insisted upon certain principles with regard to the doctrine of creation, namely these: that the only God is the Creator of the Universe, that Creation is a free act of God not out of any necessity, that creation is not eternal (though for Origen, created eternally), that matter is not the essence of its fabric - matter itself is created by God, and that Creation is not an essential extension of the Divine, but instead wholly distinct in essence from the Creator.

Thomas Aquinas interpreted the doctrine in harmony with these principles. God created the universe, including matter, *ex nihilo*; since God is the first cause, he must have caused both matter and form. Since he is pure spirit, incompatible with matter, the latter is not an emanated extension of his being; God creates *ex nihilo*.

On philosophical grounds Thomas is open to either the view that the world had a beginning in time or that it had no beginning. His understanding of creation *ex nihilo* is not so much to argue this issue, but rather to assert that the world is dependent upon God for its existence, that God is its necessary

cause. Through revelation, however, one learns that creation had a beginning in time, and that time began with Creation. Furthermore, in that God is responsible for the world's existence at every moment, the act of creation is continuous.

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Thomas' Use of Language

Language about God. Inasmuch as Aquinas maintains the Absoluteness of God as distinct from his creation, the problem of how literally one can speak of God remains an issue. Thomas taught that when a word is applied to God as well as creature, it is not used with the same meaning in both cases. To say that God is good, for example, is not to mean the same as when goodness is attributed to man. Furthermore, the meanings used are not incompatible; there is a relatedness between the goodness of God and the goodness of man. This assumption of the relatedness of meanings supported in Aquinas' interpretation of analogical language, which John Hick describes in this way:

We sometimes say of a pet dog that it is faithful, and we may also describe a man as faithful. We use the same word in each case because of a similarity between a certain quality exhibited in the behaviour of the dog and the steadfast voluntary adherence to a person or a cause which we call faithfulness in a human being. Because of this similarity we are not using the word "faithful" equivocally (with totally different senses). But, on the other hand, there is an immense difference in quality between a dog's attitudes and a man's. The one is indefinitely superior to the other in respect of responsible self-

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conscious deliberation and the relating of attitudes to moral purposes and ends. Because of this difference we are not using "faithful" univocally (in exactly the same sense). We are using it analogically, to indicate that at the level of the dog's consciousness there is a quality which corresponds to what at the human level we call faithfulness.¹

Thus, for Aquinas, analogy seems to be a way of talking about God, not in the sense of exploring the hidden, divine nature, but rather to point to a relation between words as they are applied to both God and man. Justification for such discourse is on the basis of revelation. Therefore, analogical talk provides an alternative to agnosticism and to a violation of the Divine, the mystery of true Being.

Critical Remarks Concerning Analogy. It would not do to leave this issue without some comment upon some problems left unsolved. The chief issues would seem to be the degree of meaningfulness of analogical predication; that is, given the otherness of God, how can analogical discourse be said to be meaningful in any sense? A related matter, how can one judge the worth or value, much less the truth or falsity, of one analogy as opposed to another? Blackstone illuminates the problems as follows:

¹John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 79 f.

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Our objections to analogical predication can also be stated in the following manner: Predicates, like "goodness," when applied to God have been so "eroded" (to use Antony Flew's notion) of their ordinary meaning that they appear no longer to have meaning at all. We are told that the goodness of God and the goodness of man differ in degree, and it is assumed that this gives theological statements an empirical grounding and some sort of cognitive meaning, such that one then knows what is being asserted. However, it is added that this difference in degree between the goodness of God and the goodness of man is *infinite*, whatever that means. The force of this qualification seems to make the statement "God is good" compatible with any possible occurrence, so that no evidence at all could possibly refute it. But, if this is the case, can we say that it means anything at all? The application of the predicate "good" (and others) to God will be compatible with God's being of any character whatsoever, and, consequently, nothing whatsoever will follow from the fact that the predicate "good" (and others) applies to God.²

Within the context of Blackstone's perspective, his criticisms make sense to this student. However, it must be remembered that his perspective excludes a metaphysical dualism, which sets the stage for the

use of analogy. For him, God's transcendence, in order to be symbolized meaningfully, would have to be compatible with that which words can more literally portray, namely the natural order. With the transcendence of God, thoroughly spiritual, as for Aquinas, it would seem that analogy is the vehicle of meaningful discourse.

Walsh and Aquinas' Language About Creation. Whether Walsh's understanding of "metaphysical description" has relevance for Thomas' understanding of creation will now

²William T. Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 67 f.

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be explored. For Walsh, metaphysical statements are not meaningful in terms of any claim to final truth. Instead their function is to describe tentatively within a given context certain categorical principles. These principles are what one takes to, not extracts from, experience; these assumptions are the guidelines by which one, consciously or otherwise, builds his world-view and perceives his reality. However, a qualifying condition is included: the metaphysician is not left free-wheeling; he must "give a connected account of the world as a whole ... it follows that one test which every metaphysical system must meet is that it should be able to cover all the facts of experience."³ However, Walsh admits that it is not without difficulty in establishing what indeed is a "fact." Actually, how one sees the world determines, within his own context, the nature of "facts." Thus, metaphysical assertions may be characterized "as illuminating or the reverse, or to describe them as authentic or spurious."⁴ For religious statements of experience, one interprets not literally as Final Truth, but as one metaphysical alternative among many. It would seem, therefore, that any metaphysical statement is a description of the way one sees reality, not in any final sense, but as a way of making things intelligible.

³W. H. Walsh, *Metaphysics* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1963), p. 177.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 183.

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It was noted above that Thomas' interpretation of creation falls within the limits of traditional principles of understanding. (His emphasis would seem to be in harmony with Augustine's thinking.) With reference to Walsh's categories, it would seem that to some extent Aquinas' doctrine of creation is "news from nowhere"; such an observation can be supported to the extent that God is supersensible (transcendent) and that the doctrine is independent from physically grounded facts. It would seem further that the wholly other Creator-God of Aquinas' theology, claiming even analogical truths from the beyond about the origin and process of creation, fits within Walsh's "news from nowhere."

Thomas' conception of analogy indeed presupposes the "wholly other." That words can only point to a *relation* between God and man, Creator and creature, supports this assertion that the doctrine of creation falls within Walsh's "news from nowhere" classification.

On the other hand, the descriptive intent of God's relation to the world in Thomas' thinking offers another side to the issue. In that revelation points to God's acts in history, that creation had a beginning in time, suggests an immanence of God that might be interpreted a bit less analogically. How literal Thomas wishes to be

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at this point is not clear to this student. However, it may be argued that the extent to which creation, at least the "immanent part," is sensible, to that extent one may label Thomas' doctrine "metaphysical

description.” Insofar as there is “in fact” a relationship between the immanent Creator and the world (even a relationship of intelligibility) the doctrine of Aquinas could be “illuminating,” offered on tentative grounds. Thus, to the extent that this doctrine involves both “metaphysical description” and “news from nowhere”, one could say that in Walsh’s terms, it falls within a ‘mixed system.’”

Evans and Thomas’ Language About Creation. For Donald D. Evans (*The Logic Of Self-Involvement*, SCM Press, 1963), not all religious discourse is descriptive or meaningless; instead it is self-involving (*i.e.*, performative); the discourse does something to the speaker. One understands by first adopting an attitude.

With reference to creation, Evans has said that when Christians say God is Creator, they are not describing God, the world, or even a relationship between God and the world. Rather, they are doing something to themselves - they are making a self-involving comment about one’s on-look, how they perceive (emotionally, intellectually, fully) their involvement with the world. Such a statement is not descriptive, but parabolic.

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This student would submit, however, that one cannot reject Aquinas from Evans’ camp on the grounds that he can be said to have a “mixed system” and that’s all! This might be very true, assuming analogical predication. But it seems to the writer that Thomas’ argument for, and use of, analogical predication, though leading to a “mixed system,” is self-involving. *Thomas’ adoption of analogical discourse is a confession of faith, of his attitude, of his on-look.* Though one might examine specific doctrines, such as creation, in Walsh’s categories, these fall within an on-look that is quite confessional. Our point is here that, in Evan’s sense, all of Thomas’ system is basically self-involving; it tells something of Thomas’ on-look. Even Walsh noted, “... whilst for Aquinas the search for metaphysical understanding was too closely bound up with religious practice for him to be willing to accept anything but an existential account of God.”⁵

CONCLUSION

It seems legitimate to apply Walsh’s understanding of “mixed systems” to Aquinas’ doctrine of Creation. His use of analogy indicates both “news from nowhere” and, in a less clear manner, “metaphysical description.” On

⁵Ibid., p. 164.

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the other hand, one need not, indeed one cannot, exclude his interpretation of creation from Evan’s understanding of performative utterance. As noted above, Thomas’ very assumption of analogy reveals an on0look. Might it be fair to write the equation Evans + Walsh = Aquinas ?

A post-script: at the heart of the doctrine of creation in Aquinas and others is the insistence in preserving the mystery of God’s nature. This has resulted in positing the Absoluteness of God in an ontologically wholly-other sense, while maintaining also God’s immanence. This student would raise the question whether the ontological assumption is necessary; in other words, whether God’s mystery needs to be preserved on the basis of his onto logical transcendence. Though the doctrine of creation might be no more certain in its formulation, what would happen if in a very “anthropomorphic” way, the emphasis on the mystery of God’s nature turned to the biblical notion of God’s capacity to say “hello” or to say nothing at all? Would a God that is compatible with space and time, in a sense “wholly hither” (but not in a pantheistic sense), be foreign to a biblical account of creation ?

2007 Addendum

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BOOKS

The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology, Yale Press, 1967.

The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology, Fortress Press, 1975.

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