

## IS GOD ETERNAL?

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years or more a number of theologians and philosophers of religion have denied that God is eternal in the sense of nontemporal.<sup>1</sup> In doing this they have taken a stand against the majority position in traditional Christian theology - a position held by the Greek Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth, to name but a few. While this dissent is now so well known that it is no longer surprising, it does come as something of a surprise to find a rather conservative Calvinist agreeing with them. That, however, is just what we find in the article "God Everlasting" by Nicholas Wolterstorff.<sup>2</sup> In that work Wolterstorff first maintains that there is no biblical warrant for the belief that God is eternal, suggesting that it has been smuggled into Christian theology from pagan Greek sources such as Plato's Timaeus. He then constructs three arguments to show that it just cannot be true that God is eternal.

Let me say right away that there is much about the spirit of this article that I admire and sympathize with. For example, its attempt to be as accurate as possible about what Scripture teaches and to free the reading of Scripture from the influences of Hellenistic philosophy are both emphases I find particularly appealing. Moreover, I find much in Wolterstorff's discussion of the issues insightful, even though I am forced to disagree with his main conclusion.

In what follows, I will argue in part 1 that there is in fact biblical warrant for thinking God created and transcends time. In part 2, I will show that each of Wolterstorff's arguments against God's eternality are enthymemes the missing premises of which beg the question. Finally, in part 3 I will point to a deeper issue which, though crucial to this debate, is not considered in "God Everlasting". If my treatment of this issue is correct, it results in a position I believe can reconcile Wolterstorff's concerns with the traditional view of God as eternal.

### IS THERE BIBLICAL WARRANT FOR GOD'S ETERNALITY?

I begin with two preliminary points of clarification. The first concerns how to speak of God's independence of time. One way would be to say God brought time into existence as a feature of the

created universe. The problem with phrasing it this way is that it easily leads to supposing that God's creatorship of time was an *act* by which he brought time into existence, although the ordinary understanding of performing an act requires that it take place in time. So it needs to be clear that in what follows I understand the idea of creation as Aquinas did (S.T. Q 46, a 2, 1; a 3, 1): to say that something is created by God means it depends on God for its existence, whether or not there was ever a *time* when it began to be. Indeed, no one who thinks temporality is a created feature of the universe could possibly take "create" to mean anything else. If time were brought into existence by God along with everything else in creation, then there would never have been a time when the universe didn't exist even though it would be utterly dependent; it is only subsequent to the initial creation *ex nihilo* that something's being created implies that there was a period of time prior to which that something didn't exist.

The second preliminary point has to do with an attitude I frequently find among other philosophers with whom I've discussed this issue. It amounts to an a priori prejudice that Scripture just couldn't be teaching anything so philosophical as whether God created time. I've often been told, for example, that Scripture says only that God created all *things*, leaving entirely open the question as to whether such abstractions as properties, laws, or time, are created or not.

Now I agree that Scripture is to be seen as the record of God's covenantal dealings with humans and should not be read as philosophy or science. But just as we should not read into Scripture teachings that are not there, neither should we decide in advance what they might or may not contain when expressing religious teachings such as the doctrine of creation. In fact, checking the Scriptural claims that God created "all things", reveals that they have more to say on the subject of abstractions in general and time in particular than most of the recent discussions have recognized - Wolterstorff's included. The fact is that the Hebrew and Greek terms translated "all things" in English are literally just the word "all" in the original languages; in keeping with ordinary English idiom translators appended "things". More importantly, Bible writers specifically mention among the "all" created by God items we would not ordinarily call "things". For example, in Genesis 8:22, Psalms 119:89-91, and Jeremiah 33:25, laws are referred to as God's creatures; and Romans 8 says life, death, powers, and space are creatures. These texts should be sufficient to warn us that "all things" is used by Bible writers in a very wide sense, a sense far wider than just the objects of ordinary perception.

Furthermore, comparing I Corinthians 15:24-28 with Colossians 1:15-17 makes clear that everything other than God himself is creation, while II Corinthians 4:18 and Ephesians 1:21-23 both

explicitly say that the "all" used of God's creation extends to everything in it "whether visible or invisible". That is such a strong claim that, taken at face value, it would all by itself require not only that every thing but also every property and law found in the universe is created. Of course, the prevailing tradition in theology has always exempted God's own properties and necessary truths from the sweeping inclusiveness of these statements. But even if that is right, there would need to be powerful reasons for supposing that time must also be seen as one of those exemptions.<sup>3</sup> Without such reasons, the texts just cited would strongly suggest time to be a creation of God. On this basis alone it seems to me the burden of proof lies with those who would deny God's eternity has Scriptural warrant. But there's more.

### More Scripture Texts About Time

Wolterstorff considers several texts, which various writers have taken to teach that God transcends time, and finds them unconvincing. Since I agree with him, those texts will not be rehashed here. There are, however, still other texts he seems not to have considered but which specifically mention time in a way important to the question of God's eternity.

1. In Romans 16:25, Paul speaks of God's plan of salvation as the "mystery of God" being revealed in Christ and which had been kept secret "from time everlasting" (*χρονοις αιωνις*). It is all the more striking, then, that II Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2 depart from this expression when speaking of God's election of believers and refer instead to God's purposes as "before time everlasting" (*προ χρονον αιωνων*). Since there is a deliberate shift in the mode of expression, and since the shift gives the impression of intending to convey that God's purposes were in some sense beyond time, these texts need to be explained (away) by anyone who maintains that God's eternity is neither taught nor suggested in Scripture.

2. Ephesians 1:4 also speaks of the election of believers by God but does so by using the expression "before the foundation of the world" which therefore appears to be a parallel construction to "before time everlasting". If it is, then time is being regarded as a created feature of the created universe.

3. Another text which suggests this same point is Revelation 10:6. On any ordinary reading, that text appears to assert God's creative sovereignty over time, and in the past virtually every major Bible commentator took it to do so. It states that at a certain point in the denouement of this age, and prior to the re-creation of the new heavenly order, "time shall be no more" (*οτι*

χρονος ουκει εσται). More recently this text has been translated in a number of versions to read, "let there be no more delay". But the grammatical grounds for this change are by no means clear. First of all, the usual expression for delay is χρονους εμποιειν, which literally means "to make time", and that is not used here. More seriously, there is no precedent in the entire Greek language for using χρονος with the verb εσται to mean "delay" rather than "time".<sup>4</sup> Besides, there is in Greek another word, καιρος, that means a time lapse or delay and which could have been used if that was what was intended, making it even more significant that χρονος was used instead. In view of all this, it appears that the versions translating the text to mean "delay" are based on insufficient lexical grounds and are actually proposing an *interpretation* of the text rather than a translation. No doubt there are very real interpretive difficulties if the text is taken as it literally reads, and a number of commentators have proposed that the passage should be understood to mean a delay.<sup>5</sup> But that is a matter for hermeneutical debate and not a reason for altering the translation of the text to favor a particular interpretation.

I conclude therefore that the texts cited above are enough to give prima facie warrant to the position that God transcends time which depends on him as a feature of creation. The Scriptural basis for it is not abundant, I admit, but it is not nonexistent either; there is no reason to think the whole idea comes only from Plato. Of course, the prima facie meaning of these texts is - like those for any other doctrine - subject to being rejected in favor of some other interpretation if that other interpretation also has textual warrant and is more consistent with the rest of Scriptural teaching. But that would have to be established by careful exegetical and theological argument. It cannot be done simply by asserting that Scripture just cannot be saying anything as abstract as whether God is outside time, and still less by the arbitrary re-translation of a text which seems to assert he is. This is why Wolterstorff's arguments are important. If sound, they would provide just the sort of reasons that are needed for setting aside the prima facie meaning of these texts in favor of another interpretation.

#### THE ARGUMENTS THAT GOD IS NOT ETERNAL

A. Because the issues involved in Wolterstorff's first argument are more closely connected to what I want to say in section 3, I will hold that argument for last. Thus I will be taking his three arguments in the reverse order from that in which they appear in "God Everlasting". In that case the first argument to be considered is the one which occurs on pp. 95-96:

The event consisting of my referring to x is a temporal event... And this event is an aspect of both x and me. Thus if God were eternal, no human being could ever refer to him - or perform any other temporal act with respect to him... In particular, one could not know that he was eternal or even believe that he was. Indeed, if God were eternal, one could not predicate of him that he is eternal. For predicating is also a temporal act. So this is the calamitous consequence of claiming of God that he is eternal: if one predicates of him that he is eternal, then he is not.

This argument explicitly makes the claim that if an act of referring is temporal then its referent must also be temporal, and the claim is couched in terms that make clear it is supposed to be a necessary truth ("could not"). Thus it needs to be a specific instance of a more general claim which is not made explicit in the argument. The more general claim would be: necessarily the relation of referring, R, when it holds between any person, x, and any referent, y, is such that if x is temporal then y must also be temporal.

But if this claim is true of temporality, it should be true for other kinds of properties as well. Why think, for example, that it applies to the temporality of referring but not its spatiality? Wouldn't we have to say that God must be spatial since referring always takes place at some location so that God acquires the property of being-referred-to-at-this-location?<sup>6</sup> Moreover, if occupying space is part of what it means to be physical, and if an act of referring takes energy, then the suppressed premise also requires that God be physical. My point is that the further implications of this premise need to be carefully spelled out and clarified. If the claim doesn't also cancel God's transcendence and creatorship of space and matter, we need to be shown why it doesn't. Or if it does, we need to hear how such a view of God can be reconciled with the Biblical teaching of God as creator.

A second point about this premise is that Wolterstorff takes the argument that presupposes it to show that God is essentially temporal. He explicitly makes that claim a number of times, believing each of his arguments demonstrates that time is part of "the very life of God". But how would that follow? Even supposing the suppressed premise to be true, it shows only that IF there are temporal creatures who perform temporal acts of reference with respect to God, THEN necessarily God acquires temporal properties. That, however, is a horse of a different paint job from the claim that if temporal creatures refer to God then God must be temporal

necessarily. For if the whole of temporal reality is the free creation of God and might never have existed, then no property God possesses as a result of relating to it would be necessary to God. (God could be essentially eternal, but acquire inessential temporal properties, e.g.) In short, part of the conclusion drawn from this argument, even if its suppressed premise is correct, simply does not follow. We cannot draw a necessary conclusion from an argument containing a contingent premise.

But even more importantly, it seems that there are good reasons to suppose that the suppressed premise is not a necessary truth. Take the case of my saying of Julius Caesar that he was a great general. Does it follow that if I say this today, that Caesar acquires the property being-spoken-of-by-me-today? Or if I say that tomorrow is payday, does tomorrow acquire that same property? Isn't it far more plausible to think that neither Caesar nor tomorrow acquire any properties because neither presently exist when the predications are asserted? But if God exists nontemporally, God is not in the present either and would be exempted from acquiring that property for the same reasons that Caesar and tomorrow are.<sup>7</sup> Therefore it appears that the suppressed premise assumes God exists temporally and thus begs the question.

B. Wolterstorff's second argument has to do with God's knowing temporal events rather than with our referring to God:

No one can know about some temporal event *e* that it is occurring except when it is occurring. Before *e* has begun to occur one cannot know that it is occurring, for it is not... Then *P*'s knowing about *e* that it is occurring cannot occur until *e* begins... Hence the act of knowing about *e* that it is occurring is infected by the temporality of *e*. So also the act of knowing about *e* that it was occurring, and the act of knowing about *e* that it *will be* occurring, are infected by the temporality of *e*.

But God, as the biblical writers describe him, performs all three of these acts, and performs them on temporal events... Accordingly, God is fundamentally noneternal. (p.93)

In this argument the (stated) premise about temporal relations differs from the one in the argument previously considered by saying that where the relation of knowing holds between God as subject and a temporal event as object, if the object is temporal then the one performing the act must also be temporal. So whereas the first argument premised that if the subject of the relation is temporal then the object must be too, the second asserts that if the object

is temporal the subject must be too. This appears to further confirm that these arguments do indeed presuppose some broader (suppressed) claim of necessary homogeneity in property-kinds among the members of these relations, namely, that for any things standing in the relations of referring or knowing, if one of them has a temporal property the other must have at least one property of that same kind.

At first, the suppressed claim sounds more plausible when made of the terms of the knowing relation than it did of the relation of referring. But that is because Wolterstorff takes God's knowing to be an act. If that were true, then surely this makes sense. But this way of talking about God's knowing is just the sort of mistake I tried to avoid at the outset concerning God's creating as an act. As I noted then, temporality is part of our very concept of an act. So if God is assumed to know by performing acts of thought *just as humans do*, then elaborate arguments for his temporality are unnecessary; it follows from the concept of an act alone that if God performs acts in the ways we do, these acts would be temporal and God would have some temporal property. (Of course, it still wouldn't follow that God is necessarily temporal, but only that necessarily he acquired some temporal property). But if acts are necessarily temporal, then assuming God knows by performing acts of thought just as humans do begs the question against the eternity of God. That is precisely why the thinkers holding to God's eternity have always denied it. To cite only Thomas Aquinas:

[God's] being and understanding is eternal and changeless; yet he can understand what is temporal and changing...<sup>8</sup>

...the assumption that the divine mind [is] like ours is a mistaken assumption...temporal events stand in a different relation to a mind that is inside the time series than to a mind that is entirely outside... Now God is wholly outside any system measured by time.<sup>9</sup>

C. The last of Wolterstorff's arguments to be considered can be extrapolated from p. 78 as follows:

1. Ontologically, God cannot be a redeeming God without there being changeful variation in his states.
2. Any being which changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession.  
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3. Therefore God the redeemer cannot be God eternal.

I have chosen to treat this argument last because it not only clearly exhibits the suppressed assumption discussed above, but also because it brings to the fore what I believe is the most basic issue of all, namely: whether God can be eternal but still freely relate to creation by taking on temporal and other kinds of (created) properties and relations nonessentially. Wolterstorff's arguments simply assume the answer is that he cannot, but many thinkers in the God eternal tradition say the answer is that he did. In other words, many of those in the God eternal tradition are compatibilists with respect to God's eternality and his acting in time, whereas Wolterstorff assumes the two are not compatible. To cite only a few of the thinkers who have held this compatibilism, consider the following:

#### Luther

What will you assume to have been outside time or before time?...Let us rid ourselves of such ideas and realize that God was incomprehensible in his eternal rest before the creation of the world, but that now, after the creation, he is within, without, and above all creatures...

God also does not manifest himself except through his works and the Word, because the meaning of these is understood in some measure. Whatever else belongs to the Divinity cannot be grasped and understood, such as being outside time...<sup>10</sup>

#### Barth

When God creates and therefore gives reality to another alongside and outside himself, time begins as the form of existence of this other... it is true that in this sense, in his pure, divine form of existence, God is not in time but before, above, and after all time...The creature, however, is not eternal but temporal, i.e., in time, in that succession and separation, on the way from the once through the now to the then. To be a creature means to be in this way. But how can there be any possibility or actuality of the intercourse between God and the creature... if not by God's graciousness to his creature, his condescension to it, *by his entrance into its form of existence*...if he does not accept it in such a way that he gives himself to its level, entering into its form of existence,

there cannot be any intercourse at all between  
Creator and creature. (Italics mine)<sup>11</sup>

Here, then, is the fundamental difference between the God-eternal tradition and Wolterstorff: the tradition teaches that God is eternal but took on temporal (and other created) properties inessentially. Thus it is compatibilist with respect to God's eternality and his acting in time. By contrast Wolterstorff is an incompatibilist; he holds that if God is essentially atemporal, God can't "enter into the form of existence" of temporal creatures. But the arguments given in "God Everlasting" do not defend incompatibilism, they presuppose it. Thus they beg the question.

The crucial question for this issue is therefore whether compatibilism makes sense. Is there a way of thinking of it that can both avoid inconsistency and make sense of what Scripture teaches about God? The answer to this will depend in large measure on how we understand both the extent of God's creatorship and how God possesses the attributes Scripture predicates of Him. And those, needless to say, are topics requiring more space than I have here. All I can do for now is sketch a brief comparison of the two main Christian theological traditions that have resulted in the incompatibilist and compatibilist positions respectively. One of these is the prevailing theology of the Western Church under the influence of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. The other is the theology of the Orthodox tradition under the influence of the Cappadocian Fathers: Sts. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, whose position was revived by Luther and Calvin in the 16th century and been closely shadowed by Barth in our own century. The sketch will find that the prevailing Western theology does indeed seem to require an incompatibilist conclusion. In this respect Wolterstorff has put his finger on a genuine and important difficulty for it: it has taught both that God is eternal and that God's nature is such that God cannot both be eternal and "enter into the form of existence" of temporal creatures. In other words, his arguments are correct in so far as they are lodged against the prevailing Western view of God's attributes, while they beg the question relative to the Cappadocian and Reformational view.

## COMPATIBILISM

### A. Are God's Attributes Necessary?

The prevailing view, especially since Anselm, has been that the attributes comprising God's nature are as uncreated, eternal, and necessary as God is. They are either necessarily possessed by God (Anselm), or God simply *is* the unity of them (Aquinas); either way, God must have those attributes to be God. Therefore a very serious

problem for this view is the question of how God could then be the creator of everything "visible or invisible"? For, *prima facie*, this view of God's attributes requires that every property possessed by God and shared by creatures would have to be as uncreated in creatures as in God. It will not help to reply here that creatures don't possess the same degree of any property God possesses, since the quality common to all the degrees of a property (what Aquinas called the *res significata*) would still have to be uncreated in creatures if it is uncreated in God. Thus either large swaths of the properties and laws occurring in creation are in fact uncreated, or this idea of how God possesses his attributes is wrong.

This is why, as I already mentioned, the prevailing Western theology denies that God created *ex nihilo* the properties he shares with creatures. Aquinas, for example, says that these perfections "flow from God to creatures" (S.Th. VI, 2, a, 1.) This position is then also extended to the necessary truths, which are also taken to be uncreated and to govern God as well as creatures. So Aquinas held that God is identical with his attributes and also with many necessary truths: (S.Th.I, a, 3&4; S.C.G. I, 38.)

On this view, then, the laws of necessity are outside God's control; they can be neither created nor destroyed by God. Ditto for God's attributes, which are all and only perfections. Thus God is changeless. God's nature is locked in by necessities over which he has no control, and for God to be able to change would itself be a defect because change could only be change for the worse.<sup>12</sup> On this view, then, it does indeed seem to follow that God could not take on the form of existence of the creature; it would be problematic to admit that God could even relate to creatures who are temporal, since it would be impossible for God to be temporal in any sense. Aquinas deals with this difficulty by saying that relations between God and creatures are really in creatures but not really in God (S.Th vi, 2, b, 1), but this doesn't seem to make any sense and is - rightly - just what Wolterstorff attacks: his arguments are intended to show that God couldn't relate to temporal creatures without being "infected" by their temporality. Nevertheless he continues to agree with Aquinas on the point that God couldn't have inessential attributes (S.Th. VI, 3, a, 1). Thus Wolterstorff concludes that God must be essentially temporal.

Now this tradition about God's nature is not the only game in town even if it's the one with the most players. Even prior to Augustine, the Cappadocians had already denied that God's attributes are uncreated and necessary, and held instead that God created the attributes he reveals himself to possess. They held that God's own being is "incomprehensible to human reason" and "all that is rational belongs to creation".<sup>13</sup> They denied that God is identical with his attributes (p.55), and insisted that the being of God prior to creation was "free from qualities altogether" (p.242). To that

they added the qualification that when negative terms are applied to God they signify "the absence of non-inherent qualities rather than the presence of inherent qualities" as they do when used of creatures (pp. 40-42). The importance of this is that it denies the being of God is necessarily fixed with specific attributes each of which rule out their contraries. On this view God is free to create and take on the attributes he reveals himself to possess and to enter fully into relations with creatures which are as really true of him as of those creatures.

Thus the Divine being of God is not identical with his attributes. We can know the attributes of God, but "the Divine has its being precisely where thought does not reach" (p.216). Even the doctrine of the Trinity, they said, reveals God as-he-is-toward-us and does not tell us what God's uncreated being is (pp.233-234, 240-241). It is against this background that St Basil's oft-quoted statement must be understood: "We do not know what God is, but what God is not and how he relates to creatures." From this they drew the conclusion that God can be known only from his revelation, so that neither theology nor philosophy should speculate about the being of God (p. 201). As Pelikan points out, this is a more radical view of God's transcendence than that of Aquinas (pp. 68-69). The Cappadocians regarded *everything* about the universe as created, refusing to exempt even the necessary truths and laws as Aquinas did; necessary truths are necessary *for creatures*, they said, not for God; they are created necessities (pp. 105, 256).

I find that the Reformers of the 16th century revived the Cappadocian position in opposition to the prevailing theological tradition of their day. Listen to how much like it Luther sounds when he says:

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 by His Word, but which he presents Himself to us.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise Calvin:

For how can the human mind...penetrate to a knowledge of the substance of God while unable to understand its own? (Inst. I, xiii, 21)

In fact, Calvin sounds even more like the Cappadocians than Luther when he says that all we can know of God's transcendent being is negative, namely, that it is atemporal and nondependent:

...there is nothing more peculiar to God than

eternity and αυτουσια...(Inst. I, xiv, 3)

Moreover, God's being is not to be identified with the nature God reveals, Calvin says, since that nature is comprised of created attributes God manifests to humans in the covenant:

every perfection [ascribed to God in Scripture] may be contemplated in creation" (Inst. I, x, 2).

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...in the enumeration of his perfections, [God] is revealed not as he is in himself, but in relation to us...(Inst., I, x, 2)

This is why Calvin calls the nature of God as revealed in Scripture "the nature in which he is pleased to manifest himself" - thereby emphasizing God's creative control over what that nature is. So for the Greek Fathers and Reformers alike, the otherwise unknowable God has made himself knowable to humans by taking on the (created) properties and relations he reveals himself to have. Had God not "taken on the form of existence" of the creature, he would have remained unknowable by us. But that, thank God, is a counterfactual statement. The uncreated, transcendent, atemporal Creator has entered into created, knowable, temporal covenant relations with humans, and so really has the attributes he reveals himself to have.

That is, in brief, the Cappadocian and Reformed position on God's nature. Clearly, it is compatibilist: the only thing essential to God's Being is its unconditional reality, and that Being is what has created and transcends every property and law found in creation. For that very reason God is free to take on created properties and abide by created laws inessentially. So the question is whether it's coherent to hold that God's attributes are not necessary to God. Can God, contra Aquinas, have inessential properties? I believe the answer is yes, but - as I've had occasion to say once already - there is not the room here to offer an adequate defense of this position. All I can do here is clarify it further and close with a rebuttal of some of the most salient objections to it.

#### B. Did God Create His Own Revealed Nature?

Suppose we construe the position of the Cappadocians, Luther, Calvin, and Barth in the way I've been suggesting. Suppose we take it that along with bringing into existence the whole of temporal reality with all its kinds of properties and laws, God assumed to himself just those which constitute the nature he wished to bear in relation to humans through his covenant. This will be our understanding of God's "entering into creation" which Barth spoke of in

the earlier quote. God's attributes would not then be uncreated necessities (they would depend on God), nor would they be outside God's control, even though there would never have been a *time* when God didn't have them. Another way to put this is to say that God everlastingly *accommodated* himself to humans where "accommodate" means more than simply that the language of revelation is adjusted for human consumption. It means God really took on the attributes revealed in Scripture; he has had them for all time and, per his promises, always will. So revelation speaks of him as he really is and ever will be. The following points will serve to clarify this basic proposal:

1. Such a position does not leave us with the unrelieved agnosticism of only a *via negativa*. But at the same time, it also entails that nothing which is the product of God's self-accommodation would have to be true for God to exist. God really has the attributes he has revealed, but he did not *have* to have them. They are the products of his freely creating and taking them on. So God is not to be *defined* as the being who has the attributes he reveals himself to have as Anselm did since doing that would (as was pointed out in note 11) make God's existence depend on there being such attributes. The proposal I'm making here avoids making God depend on his attributes and makes the attributes depend on God.

2. It should be clear that on this position we can say nothing about *how* God takes on temporal and other created characteristics. This is precisely because his atemporal self-existent being is outside time, not subject to laws, and thus beyond our ability to conceive. The question as to how God takes on attributes and relations to creation is no different from the question as to how he creates, and neither can be explained in terms of anything created. That is why the Cappadocians, Luther, and Calvin all warned against trying to investigate the bare Divinity of God in any way. As Luther put it:

We know no other God than the God clothed with his promises...when he is clothed with the voice of a man, when he accommodates himself to our capacity to understand, I can approach him.

It is folly to argue much about God outside and before time...[it is] in his Word and his works God shows himself to us.<sup>15</sup>

And Calvin says:

As for those who proudly soar above the world to seek God in his unveiled essence, it is impossible but that at length they entangle themselves in a multitude of absurd figments.

For God - [otherwise] invisible...clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation.<sup>16</sup>

3. On this view it is literally true that God has temporal and spatial properties as well as physical power, sensory perception and emotion, thought, will, and all the other characteristics Bible writers so freely ascribe to him. The terms used to ascribed properties to God in Scripture are - aside from figurative language - univocal; the language is ordinary language. Its heightened significance is not because it is analogical to some unknown infinite degree of the property predicated, but because it is *God* who has the property.<sup>17</sup>

4. This proposal allows God to be free not only with respect to which properties he wishes to bear toward us, but also with respect to his manner of possessing them. It allows (what we actually find in Scripture) that he often possesses them in ways creatures can't duplicate. For instance, God is father-like without being male, and king-like without ever having been crowned.

A similar freedom extends to the degree of each property God assumes to himself. For example, while Scripture speaks of the great goodness of God it nowhere so much as suggests that God must possess the highest possible degree of goodness. God is the creator of the norms of justice and love and so is above them and cannot be judged by them as creatures can. God's goodness does not consist in his perfectly obeying those norms, but rather in the ways he's promised to be good towards us as specified in his covenant. In so far as he has entered into those promises, he has bound himself to the norms of goodness - but only to the extent of the promises. So while God was under no prior constraint either from norms of goodness or his own nature to make such covenant promises at all, he made them anyway and having made them is now bound to them by his promissory word. Thus the greatness of God's goodness does not consist in its being a necessary perfection he possesses necessarily, but in the fact that he freely adopted a loving attitude toward humans to whom he owed nothing whatever.

This explains why, as marvelous as those promises are, and as great as God's goodness is towards us, that goodness doesn't require God to do things the norms of goodness would require of humans. For example, God has not promised to prevent all unjust suffering and so is not bound to do so. Nor does Scripture portray him as doing so. On the contrary, God allows Job to suffer. If you or I did that when we could have prevented it we'd be have done evil. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son. If we did that we'd be evil. God sends a "strong delusion" to those who oppose him so that "they believe what is false" (2 Thess. 2:11). A human who did that would be guilty

of deception. These and other examples show how far Scripture is from subjecting God to the rules that bind humans, and from teaching God to be the Being with all and only perfections!

5. The property of God's being creator can only be understood in terms of this proposal or something very close to it. Prior to creating God wasn't the creator. In virtue of creating a world other than himself he became the creator. His property of being-the-creator is therefore a property he created and took on. Yet his being the creator of all else is an essential part of his revealed nature; it's the heart of his sacred name revealed to Moses. On the accommodation view, that makes sense. God's being creator is essential to our understanding of him, but not to his existence. Just so all the other attributes constituting his revealed nature.

6. This position makes good sense of the incarnation in a way the prevailing view does not. In fact, the entire idea of accommodation could justly be called incarnational in that it says of God's revealed nature what the Athanasian Creed says about the doctrine of the incarnation: in the incarnation, it says, it is not that "our humanity was transformed into deity, but that the Divine took our humanity into itself". My suggestion is that all of the knowable, revealed characteristics of God are true of him for that same reason. Thus the created personality God had been revealing to Israel over the centuries was one he could confer on the human Christ and yet never lose because he at the same time assumed to himself the whole human nature of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

7. Finally, I want to point to the fact that there is actually Scriptural ground for the accommodation idea with respect to at least one of God's attributes, his wisdom. In Proverbs 8:22-31 wisdom, speaking in a personification, says of herself:

Yahweh possessed me from 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. When there were no depths, I was brought forth. While as yet he had not made the earth...nor the beginning of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens I was there...and I was with the sons of men.<sup>19</sup>

Here God is explicitly said to be the creator of one of his own attributes, one which is nevertheless also said to be "from everlasting"! This text not only sounds as if it was written to support the very proposal I am making; more than that, it is not anything an Anselmian could have written roaring drunk let alone cold sober.

Please don't misunderstand this appeal to Scripture. I'm not

suggesting that the accommodation view is proven by this one text. Since it doesn't say that all the other attributes constituting God's revealed nature are to be understood in the same way it speaks of God's wisdom, it can't do that. What I am saying is that the text is evidence there's something wrong with the Anselmian view. So although my proposal goes beyond what is explicitly taught in the text, at least it can be said to be based on the text and compatible with it - which is more than can be said for the Anselmian theology.

### Replies to Objections

Objection 1: God can't possess even inessentially a property that is contrary to what he is essentially. So if God is essentially nontemporal, he can't take on temporal properties.

On the view of God's transcendence taken by the Cappadocians and Reformers, it is indeed true that every property, property-kind, and law found in creation is dependent on God. None are properties that existed aside from God creating them and so none are properties God had to have to exist. But the objection seems to assume that whatever property God didn't have prior to creating, he therefore had the complement of. So if God didn't have the property of, say, being wise prior to his creating wisdom, then God must have had the property of being not-wise. And if it was essential to God to be not-wise, then how could he ever have become wise?

This is the sort of objection the Cappadocians attempted to head off by saying that God's uncreated being is essentially "entirely free of properties". It is not the case that by lacking every kind of property found in creation God thereby has the complement of each; rather it's that God just doesn't have any. (And it won't do to reply that not having properties is itself a property since that would be self-contradictory!)

What is at stake here is whether the logical law of excluded middle applies to God. That law requires that either a property or its denial has to be true of anything, so if any property  $p$  is not true of God then  $\text{not-}p$  is true of God. Thus the real issue is whether God created and transcends even the laws of logic, as the Cappadocians also insisted. If that claim is incoherent, then so is this position. But if that claim has a coherent interpretation, then the view that God transcends the law of excluded middle will make sense. That issue will be treated below separately when I reply to the objection that it makes no sense to say God created necessary truths.

Meanwhile, however, we can notice that if there is no incoherence in saying God created and transcends the laws of logic,

then there is no inconsistency in his lacking every property found in creation but taking on certain created attributes and relations. Consider the following analogy. Suppose there is a sort of wood the chemistry of which requires it to be brown in color. It is essential to the wood to have that chemistry, and thus essential that it be brown. Does that prevent it from being painted blue? Does it cease to be that sort of wood when painted blue? Surely not. Nor would it fail to be true that it is now really blue. It would make no sense for anyone to say it isn't *really* blue because it wasn't blue prior to being painted. It took on that property and so really has it. It could be said, of course, that the wood isn't naturally or essentially that color so that - painting aside - it wouldn't be blue. That's surely right. And it's just what the accommodation view says about God.

There are limits to this analogy since the wood had a color prior to being painted, whereas we know by revelation that God created every kind of property and law found in creation so that none existed prior to his creating them. Thus we have no concept of the unaccommodated being of God as we had of the unpainted wood. We have only the barest limiting idea of what is essential to God: unconditional, nondependent existence; existence which is not a property, has no properties, and is subject to no laws.

Objection 2: This view amounts to saying there are two natures of God, and so entails there are two different Gods!

Not at all. We are not saying that God has two natures in the sense of two *characters*: one created and revealed the other uncreated and secret. When Luther or Calvin speak of God's own proper nature they use it to mean only God's unconditional existence. But when "nature" is used to mean the character of God, then all that we can possibly mean by it consists of properties governed by laws. So since God transcends every property possessed by creatures and all the laws that govern creation, he has no other nature than the one he has taken on, truthfully revealed, and in which he promises to relate to us unfailingly and forever.

If it's replied that unconditional existence is one nature and all the rest of what is revealed of God is the other, then the conclusion of the objection doesn't follow. If God's transcendence consists of his having created all properties and thus lacking them prior to assuming them, then why could he not assume some to himself without ceasing to be identical with himself? Why would that have to be true of God when it's not true of brown wood painted blue?

This point is important because it's relevant to an argument offered recently by some defenders of the Anselmian conception of God's nature against a view of the incarnation which is very like the Cappadocian and Reformational position on God's nature. In his

article "Incarnation and Timelessness"<sup>20</sup>, Thomas Senor contends that if Christ was the incarnation of God then anything true of Christ must be true of God. So since Christ was temporal, God must be too. (Senor says nothing of what this would require for God's having to be created, having a body, being limited, depending on food and air to live, and a host of other properties that would also seem to have to be true of God on this position, but I will let that pass.) In support of this he uses an argument drawn from Thomas Morris' The Logic of God Incarnate.<sup>21</sup> The argument is supposed to show that it will not help to appeal to the two natures of Christ to avoid contradiction in the doctrine of the incarnation; i.e., it will do no good to say that as God Christ was nontemporal but as a human he was temporal. The argument runs as follows:

Consider any conjunctive reduplicative proposition of the form  $x$  as  $A$  is  $N$  and  $x$  as  $B$  is not  $N$ . If the subjects of both conjuncts are the same and the substituents of  $N$  are univocal across the conjunction, then as long as (1) the reduplication predicates being  $A$  of  $x$  and being  $B$  of  $x$ , and (2) being  $N$  is entailed by being  $A$ , and not being  $N$  is entailed by being  $B$ , then the reduplicative form of predication accomplishes nothing except for muddying the waters, since in the end the contradiction stands of  $x$  being characterized as both  $N$  and not  $N$ .

Does this argument really show that God cannot be uncreated but take on temporal properties contingently? I think not. Thought of as unpainted the wood is brown; thought of as painted it's blue. But surely brown is not-blue. Or again, what of a judge who is also a private citizen. Is it really contradictory to say that when he acts as a judge he has the rightful authority to sentence some one to prison but when he acts as a private citizen he does not? Are the two statements contradictory in each example? Is the only way to avoid contradiction to say they are not about the same piece of wood or the same person? Surely not. Far from muddying the waters, this is possible just because the wood or the judge possess exclusionary properties *in different respects*. And the same is true of God's being essentially nontemporal but taking on temporal and other created properties to constitute the revealed nature in which he clothes himself so as to be known by us. If pieces of wood and humans can have a property and its denial in different respects, why can't God? If a piece of wood can take on being blue inessentially, why can't God take on personality, tri-unity, and the whole person of Jesus inessentially without generating contradiction?

Objection 3: It makes no sense to say God created the laws of logic and other necessary truths.

The core of this objection is the claim that if God is not

subject to the laws of logic, then God can violate those laws. This is what, e.g., Plantinga takes Descartes to have said, and to be more than enough reason to reject the position. If God can violate logical laws, says Plantinga, then

"...God could have brought it about that he was powerless, without knowledge, and wicked. Indeed he could have brought it about that he was powerless, without knowledge, and wicked but at the same time omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect...that he has a nature and furthermore doesn't have a nature."<sup>22</sup>

Let it be clear straight off that if this is the only thing that could be meant by God's creating and transcending the laws of logic, then I would indeed be joining Plantinga in holding the Thomistic view of God's relation to necessary truths. I, too, would hold that they are not created but part of God's being, since the alternative would lead to all the absurdities that Aquinas and Plantinga want to avoid.

It is important to notice, however, that Plantinga is also forthright in admitting that his position has real difficulties for the aseity of God. It requires not only that necessary truths are as equally a se as God and govern God, but that in an important sense God depends on them. God has to be consistent to exist, e.g., but that seems incompatible with the doctrine that only God has self-existence and that all else depends on God. So Plantinga ends his discussion with the hope there may be some sense in which the necessary truths can also be said to depend on God. Having already numbered the proposition " $7 + 5 = 12$ " as (70) and the proposition "It is part of God's nature to believe that  $7 + 5 = 12$ " as (71), Plantinga asks:

Can we ever say of a pair of necessary propositions A and B that A makes B true or that A is the explanation of the truth of B? Could we say, perhaps, that (70) is grounded in (71)? If so, what are the relevant senses of "explains" and "grounded in"? These are good questions, and good topics for further study. If we can answer them affirmatively, then perhaps we can point to an important dependence of abstract objects upon God, even though necessary truths about these objects are not within his control. (p. 146)

But are the only possible positions? Must we say that if God created necessary truths then God can violate on them? Must we end

with no more than the hope that we needn't choose between saying that nothing is really necessary and saying that God alone is self-existent while all else depends on God?

I believe there's a genuine *tertium quid* to this false dilemma provided by the way the Cappadocians spoke of God's transcendence when they said that the being of God is entirely free of qualities. In that case God's transcendence of the laws of logic doesn't mean he *violates* those laws, but that *those laws don't apply to him at all*. For a thing to violate the law of noncontradiction it would have to both possess and lack the same property in the same sense at the same time. Is that what the Cappadocians and Reformers said about God? Surely not. They held the being of God aside from his accommodation to us lacks every property, transcends time and is above all laws. Thus the laws of logic just don't apply. So saying God's unaccommodated being transcends those laws does not leave open the possibility that God can both exist and not-exist. Rather, it means God's existence is the ground of the law of non-contradiction, not the other way round. God doesn't exist because the law of noncontradiction permits or requires it; God's existence is utterly unconditional.<sup>23</sup> So the reason God can't violate the necessary truths is not that they bind him as they do creatures, but because they just don't apply to his divine existence and they would have to apply for his existence to violate them.

Consider the following analogy. Supposing there are laws about good health, would it make sense to say that the rocks in my garden violate them? They don't, after all, get proper nutrition, enough sleep, and breathe clean air. Does it then follow from those facts that if they don't exhibit deteriorating health and die that they have violated the laws of good health? No. The laws didn't apply to them in the first place so that their not conforming to them was not equivalent to their violating them. That is what I take the Cappadocian and Reformational position to be on God's relation to the necessary truths he has created.

But notice that while God's having created the laws of logic means that his being transcends (rather than violates) them, those laws do apply to the revealed nature he has taken on. Since that is created and the laws of logic are laws for all creation, we have every right to expect that nature to be self-consistent. Besides, the very reason God has taken on that revealed nature is in order to be known by humans who, as creatures, are also subject to those laws and can't understand anything which violates them.

Sometimes it is replied that even if this position isn't contradictory at the level of God's attributes, it becomes so when pressed further. For example, it has been suggested that there is an incoherency in this position since it would require that God be able to create an entire world that lacked the laws of necessity which

hold for this world. What, it is then asked, would such a world be like? Can we even conceive of such a world? And if we can't, what sense does it make to hold the position that God could create it?

Perhaps the alleged incoherence in this position is supposed to be that we are using the concept of such a world to discuss it while denying any concept of it is possible. But that is simply mistaken. We do indeed say that, yes, God could make any sort of world including one without the laws that govern this one.<sup>24</sup> And we admit we can't conceive of what sort of world that would be. Since our abilities to conceive are governed by the laws God has in fact set over this creation of which we are a part, we can't form a concept of anything not conforming to them. But what we can do is form the limiting idea that there may be a reality we can't conceive of for the reason that it's a reality for which the laws of this creation don't hold. Is it impossible to form such an idea? Why? (It seems to me I just did it!) Why think it's impossible for there to be a reality which is inconceivable by us - that what our net can't catch isn't fish?

At any rate, simply to assume unfavorable answers to these questions is to beg the question against the Cappadocian and Reformational view of God.

#### CONCLUSION

Needless to say, I do not regard this brief sketch as adequate to settle the issue as to whether on the one hand God's attributes exist necessarily or whether on the other hand he has created and taken them on. The most this has done is give a brief indication of some of the difficulties in the prevailing view and why I think the Cappadocian and Reformational view does better.

For the purposes of assessing "God Everlasting", however, the sketch is sufficient to make clear that Wolterstorff's arguments rest not only on a suppressed premise about property homogeneity, but also on two more assumptions. One is that any properties that are part of God's nature must be essential to him and the other is that the only way to deny a property to be true of something entails that the something possesses the complement of that property. These appear to be why he thinks that if temporality is part of God's (revealed) nature he must be temporal essentially, and that if God were essentially atemporal he couldn't take on temporality. But those assumptions may all be denied without incoherence by the God-eternal tradition. Thus merely noticing that God can be spoken of by us, knows us, and redeems us, never phased the Cappadocians, Luther, Calvin, or Barth - and need not phase those of us who agree with them now. They all believed God to have temporal properties and

relations which are really part of God's revealed nature but are not essential to God's existence.

This is the deeper reason why the arguments offered by Wolterstorff do not succeed. What needs to be debated in detail is the theology behind the compatibilism of the God-eternal tradition versus the incompatibilism Wolterstorff has rightly noticed follows from the Anselmian/Thomist idea of God's nature. "God Everlasting" merely assumes the latter.

Roy Clouser  
The College of New Jersey

## End Notes

1. For example: Wm Kneale's "Time and Eternity", in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 61, 1960 - 61, pp. 87 - 108; A.N. Prior's "The Formalities of Omniscience" in Time and Tense (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968); J.R. Lucas' A Treatise on Time and Space (Methuen Co., 1973); R. Swinburne's The Coherence of Theism (Clarendon Press, 1977); and J. Moltmann's The Trinity and The Kingdom of God (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1981).

2. The piece first appeared in God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob, Orlebeke & Smedes, eds. (Eerdmans Pub Co, Grand Rapids, 1975) pp. 181 - 203. It has since been reprinted in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, S. Cahn & D. Shatz eds. (Oxford University Press, 1982) pp. 77 - 98. All quotes are from the reprint.

3. Paul Helm has argued against temporality being such an exemption on the ground that no philosophical problems are avoided by regarding God as temporal or made worse by holding God is eternal. See: Eternal God (Clarendon Press, 1988).

4. See H. Liddell & R. Scott's A Greek - English Lexicon. Clarendon Press, London, 1958, p. 2008.

5. Cmp. the comments of G. Vos in The Pauline Eschatology (Eerdmans Pub Co, Grand Rapids, 1961) pp. 288 ff. Vos admits that the translation is the result of hermeneutical pressure rather than the literal meaning of the Greek. He also stresses that the expression is connected with the destruction and renovation of the universe on a grand scale.

But if time is an aspect of the created universe, and if the universe undergoes such an extended transformation at the Day of the Lord that time is suspended, and if we then understand time to be reinstated with the re-creation of the new heavens and earth, the interpretive difficulties would be overcome and the meaning of the text preserved.

6. Paul Helm has also noticed this point in connection with the next of Wolterstorff's arguments, the one concerning God's knowing rather than our referring (op. cit. pp. 41 ff.).

<sup>7</sup> I'm not suggesting that in fact God is never spoken of, but am only pointing to the petitio in Wolterstorff's argument. How God can be eternal and also the subject of temporal predication will be discussed later.

8. St Thomas Aquinas Theological Texts, Trans. T. Gilby (Oxford

University Press, 1955) # 137 p. 77.

9. Ibid., sect # 182, p. 97.

10. From "Lectures on Genesis" in Luther's Works, vol. I, ed. J. Pelikan. (Concordia Pub House, St Louis, 1958) p. 11.

11. Church Dogmatics, vol. III, part 1, sect. 41. (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1964).

12. A serious difficulty for this view is that there have to be such perfections and God has to possess them for God to be God; thus God is not only not the creator of these necessarily existing perfections and laws, but in a very important way depends on them! Thus it is not God who is a se, but the necessary perfections and laws - which is the very reverse of the biblical doctrine of creation.

Plantinga worries about this point in Does God Have A Nature? (Marquette University Press, 1980) p. 126 ff. He argues that Aquinas' attempt to solve the difficulty by identifying God with the perfections fails. But finding Descartes' account of necessary truths as created to be incoherent, he concludes that they and God's attributes are uncreated and ends by appending the hope that there may be a way to construe them so than God is at least equally a se as they are. We will return to this in the last section of the article.

13. Christianity and Classical Culture, Jaroslav Pelikan. (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993) p.84. All page future page references will be given in the text.

14. From The Bondage of the Will as quoted by John Dillenberger in Martin Luther (Anchor Books, Garden City, 1961) p. 191.

15. The "works" Luther refers to are the historical encounters of God with humans in the course of establishing the covenant. Both quotes are from The Theology of Martin Luther, Paul Althaus. (Fortress Press, Phila, 1966) p. 20.

16. Commentary on the First Book of Moses. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, 1948, vol. I, p. 60. Elsewhere he called attempts to pry into the being of God "prurient curiosity".

17. I have developed this view in greater detail in "Religious Language: A New Look at an Old Problem" in Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition, Ed. Hart, Vander Hoeven, & Wolterstorff (University Press of American, Lanham, 1983) pp. 384 - 407.

18. This proposal also provides a way to understand the language of the creed when it insists that the second person of the Trinity, incarnate in Christ, was "begotten not made". The terms "begotten" and "made" both connote dependence. But on the accommodation view of God's nature the difference would be that "begotten" is whatever depends on God but remains true of God, while what is "made" is dependent on God but true of some creature whose existence is distinct from God.

19. My translation here closely follows the Hebrew text rather than the LXX.

20. Faith and Philosophy, vol. 7, no.2, April 1990, p. 149 - 164.

21. Cornell University Press, 1986. The quote that follows is from p. 49.

22. Ibid. p. 127.

23. For more detail about this position, see James Ross' excellent article: "God Creator of Kinds and Possibilities: Requiescant universalia ante res" in Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment, Ed R. Audi & W. Wainwright (Cornell University Press, Ithica, 1986) pp. 315 - 334.

24. The "could" in this sentence must not be taken to mean logical or any other created kind of possibility. God has created all the kinds of necessity and possibility which hold for creation, rather than created only what is contingent by actualizing from among the possibilities allowed by logical laws. The "could" therefore has an unspecifiable sense and is (also) a limiting idea, not a concept.