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THE PAGAN DOGMA OF THE ABSOLUTE UNCHANGEABLENESS OF GOD

In his *Edifying Discourses*, Soren Kierkegaard published a sermon entitled 'The Unchangeableness of God' in which he reiterated the dogma which dominated Catholic, Protestant and even Jewish expressions of classical supernaturalist theology from the first century A.D. until the advent of process theology in the twentieth century. The dogma that as a perfect being, God must be totally unchanging in every conceivable respect was expressed by Kierkegaard in such ways as:

He changes all, Himself unchanged. When everything seems stable (for it is only in appearance that the external world is for a time unchanged, in reality it is always in flux) and in the overturn of all things, He remains equally unchanged; no change touches Him, not even the shadow of a change; in unaltered clearness He, the father of lights, remained eternally unchanged.¹

No, in a manner eternally unchanged, everything is for God eternally present, always equally before Him... For the unchangeable clearness of God is the reckoning, complete to the last detail, preserved by Him who is eternally unchangeable, and who has forgotten nothing of the things that I have forgotten, and who does not, as I do, remember some things otherwise than they really were.²

The doctrine of the utter unchangeableness of God set severe limits upon the understanding of other divine attributes such as God's activity, omniscience and eternity in classical supernaturalism. God was required to know a changing world in an utterly unchanging way, to act upon a temporally developing world of nature and human history in a totally atemporal way, and to be so far removed from time that he contained the entire past, present and future of the universe within himself simultaneously rather than successively. What I wish to point out in this article is that all of these variations on the theme of the unchangeableness of God originated in Greek philosophy. None of them originated in Biblical religion, though they have been read into the Bible for so long that we still suffer from the delusion that they originated in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Classical supernaturalism is not identical with Biblical religion. It resulted from the fusion of selected Biblical motifs with Greek notions of divine perfection by Philo and the early church fathers who followed his lead. Biblical religion presented God as interacting with nature and human history as they develop

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses* (New York, Harper & Row, 1958), p. 256.

² *Ibid.* p. 262.

in time and it nowhere suggests that this is only a misleading human view to be dismissed as metaphorical once we realize that from God's own point of view the entire drama of the world takes place simultaneously and timelessly rather than successively. The Biblical understanding of the eternity of God is that of one who self-sufficiently exists from everlasting to everlasting, without beginning and without end;¹ but nowhere in the Bible is it stated or suggested that God's eternity consists in the simultaneity of the past, present and future all at once in God. True, this can be read into the Bible, but it cannot be extracted from it. In the Bible, even God's knowledge and will are modified in response to human decisions which are made in time, though when we read the Bible with the preconceptions of classical supernaturalism, we are not even able to recognize this when we are confronted with it. Later I shall illustrate this point.

The most obvious objection to the position outlined in the preceding paragraph will be that in both the Old and New Testaments it is clearly stated that God does not change. Kierkegaard's sermon on 'The Unchangeableness of God' took James 1: 17-21 as its text, though it is only verse 17 which speaks of 'the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change'. He just as easily could have taken Malachi 3: 6 as a text - 'For I am the Lord, and I change not', which is the text which Aquinas took when he discussed the immutability of God.² Classical theology has always read a meaning into these verses which cannot be extracted from them, however. There are really two logically independent views of the unchangeableness of God which should never be confused with one another, though classical theology has fused them for nearly two thousand years. There is an infinite conceptual difference between the claim that (1) God does not change *with respect to his goodness or righteousness* (which was the Biblical view of the perfection and unchangeableness of God) and the claim that (2) God does not change *in any conceivable respect whatsoever* (which was the Greek view of the nature of divine perfection). Taken in context, Malachi and James affirm only the first of these propositions; the former affirming merely that God is unchangeably a God of justice who will judge evildoers (2: 17 through 3: 6) and the latter affirming no more than that God can be relied upon totally not to tempt us to evil but to bestow good and perfect gifts (1: 13-17). True, proposition (2) above can be read into these verses in spite of the fact that the context provides no warrant whatsoever for doing so; yet to do so is to read into the Bible a pagan view of the perfection and unchangeableness of God.

Before discussing the Greek origins of the idea of the utter unchangeableness of God, it should be pointed out that those who claim to find the idea

¹ See for example Psalm 90: 1-4, Psalm 93: 2, Isaiah 40: 28.

² Anton C. Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York, Random House, 1945), 1, 70.

in the Bible must do so at the price of ignoring or somehow dismissing those many passages in which the Bible affirms the changeableness of God, not with respect to his righteousness of course¹ but with respect to his experience and his decisions. I concede that it is extremely difficult to find a clear example of anything in the Bible, but God's decision not to destroy Nineveh after the repentance of its inhabitants in spite of his instructions to Jonah to prophesy Nineveh's destruction in forty days seems to be as clear a case as one could want. Jonah was infuriated when God changed his mind, and that God did change his mind is clearly affirmed in Jonah 3: 10. 'When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.' Although I do not wish to vouch for its accuracy, the translation in the vulgar *Living Bible* (verses 3: 10 and 4: 1) makes it even plainer that God changed his plans in response to human decisions made in and learned about in time, not in eternity: 'And when God saw that they had put a stop to their evil ways, he abandoned his plan to destroy them, and didn't carry it through. This change of plans made Jonah very angry.'

Supernaturalists who affirm the utter unchangeability of God in every conceivable respect have acknowledged that the Bible normally speaks of God in terminology which attributes to him temporality, passivity, unactualized potentiality, complexity, and real compassion. To reconcile all this with their preconceptions, they have resorted to the device of dismissing all such speech (which is most of what the Bible says) as merely human and woefully inadequate and misleading figurative speech having no real application to God in himself. Typical of this effort to reconcile such passages of the Bible with Greek preconceptions was that of St Thomas Aquinas who wrote that 'As God, although incorporeal, is named in Scripture metaphorically by corporeal names, so eternity, though simultaneously whole, is called by names implying time and succession.'² He admitted that changeability *seemed* involved in James 4: 8 'Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you,' but he insisted that 'These things are said of God in Scripture metaphorically.'³ To preserve the Aristotelian (not the Biblical) idea of divine impassivity,⁴ St Anselm had to deny any real feelings of love and compassion in God himself, maintaining that although we experienced God as compassionate, there was no real compassion in God himself.

¹ Even here the Bible may not be entirely consistent. One might get a doctrine of the moral educability of God from Genesis 18: 22-33, and Kierkegaard got a doctrine of a divine teleological suspension of moral righteousness from the Abraham story in Genesis 22. I claim only that those Biblical writers who affirm God's unchangeableness do so only with respect to his righteousness or goodness.

² Pegis, 1, 75.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 71, 72.

⁴ Aristotle spoke of divine substances as 'impassive and unalterable'. Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York, Random House, 1941), p. 881.

How, then, art thou compassionate and not compassionate, O Lord, unless because thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of thy being.

Truly, thou art so in terms of our experience, but thou art not so in terms of thine own. For, when thou beholdest us in our wretchedness, we experience the effect of compassion, but thou dost not experience the feeling. Therefore, thou art both compassionate, because thou dost save the wretched, and spare those who sin against thee; and not compassionate, because thou art affected by no sympathy for wretchedness.¹

Theologians have a tendency to say strange things to one another when they retire to their seminaries and cloisters that they do not say to their parishioners on Sunday morning! Most clergymen leave their parishioners with the impression that God in himself really is 'all compassion, pure unbounded love'; but classical supernaturalism always must add the qualification that it really is not so in order to preserve intact the pagan dogma of the absolute unchangeability of God. Even the language of love must be dismissed as misleading figurative speech since such sensitivities imply passivities, unactualized potentialities and changes in God as he is affected by our woes.

The problem is, where did Anselm, Aquinas, and all the rest get the criterion by which they decide that the Scriptures are speaking literally when they deny change in God and merely figuratively or metaphorically when they attribute change, complexity and real compassion to God? The criterion certainly did not come from Scripture itself, for Biblical writers wrote just as confidently and as unselfconsciously about the changing experiences and decisions of God as he interacted with the world of his creating as they did of his unchanging goodness and righteousness. The truth of the matter is that the criterion was derived from Greek ideas of perfection which were superimposed upon the interpretation of Biblical religion first by Philo, the Jewish theologian in Alexandria in the first century A.D. who created the conceptually unstable supernaturalistic theology by fusing (or confusing) Greek with Hebraic notions of divine perfection, then by many early Church Fathers such as Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose, etc. who uncritically accepted Philo's position. By the time of Augustine, Philo's belief in the utter unchangeability of God had been crystallized into infallible, unquestioned dogma.

The Greek roots of the dogma of the absolute unchangeability of God are easy to trace. What agonies and confusions Western theology might have been spared if the earliest church fathers had not followed Philo in fusing and confusing two quite distinct and basically incompatible ideas of

¹ Sidney Norton Deane, tr., *St Anselm* (LaSalle, Open Court Publishing Co., 1954), pp. 13-14. See also St Thomas Aquinas' insistence that God 'loves without passion' (Pegis, I, 216, and that 'Mercy is especially to be attributed to God, provided it be considered in its effect, but not as an affection of passion... To sorrow, therefore, over the misery of others does not belong to God' (Pegis, I, 226).

perfection, one dynamic and Biblical, and the other static and Greek. The classical supernaturalistic belief in the pure unchanging simplicity of God was the triumph of the Parmenidean notion of the One as a pure undifferentiated and unchanging unity, and of his dismissal of becoming and plurality as illusions, over Biblical views of God as rich in real attributes and dynamic in his interaction with the created world. Other roots of the Greek view of perfection as static lie in the Pythagorean table of opposites with its association of 'one' with 'right', 'male', 'rest', 'straight', 'light', and 'good' on the one hand and of 'many' with 'left', 'female', 'motion', 'crooked', 'darkness', and 'bad' on the other.¹ Value judgments of 'right' and 'good' versus 'wrong' and 'bad' applied to all the items in this table of opposites, and such evaluations were pregnant with possibilities for the development of a theological notion of monistic and static perfection.

By the time of Plato, earlier Greek philosophical prejudices against passivity and change in ultimate perfection had developed to full fruition. In the second book of the *Republic*, Plato stated the Greek concept of the perfect as the utterly unchanging which has dominated classical supernaturalism through the centuries, despite the fact that it is nowhere to be found in Biblical religion. Plato maintained that the most perfect things are the most self-sufficient, thus ruling out the possibility that perfection could be changed by anything outside itself (and thus ruling out the possibility that a perfect being could be affected in any way by the world, though not that it could have effects upon the world). Further, God who is 'in every way perfect' could not be changed even from within by himself because:

If he change at all he can only change for the worse, for we cannot suppose him to be deficient either in virtue or beauty. . . It is impossible that God should ever be willing to change, being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is conceivable, every God remains absolutely and for ever in his own form.²

Aristotle accepted the same static view of divine perfection. His God was the ultimate mover of the world, but he was himself unmoved, the Unmoved Mover. And in his unchanging perfection he thought only about his own unchanging thinking in an unchanging way, but not about the changing world. Aristotle's Divine Thinker on Thinking 'thinks of that which is most divine and precious, and it does not change; for change would be change for the worse'.³

¹ See Milton C. Nahm, ed., *Selections from Early Greek Philosophy* (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), p. 55. Classical theology did not follow the Pythagoreans in associating 'good' with 'finite', and 'bad' with 'infinite', however. But their association of 'good' and other attributes above with 'male' and 'evil' with 'female' shows that male chauvinism has some of the same historical roots as does classical theology. As John Cobb, Jr. and David Griffin have pointed out, God in classical theology 'seems to be the archetype of the dominant, inflexible, unemotional, completely independent [read "strong"] male. Process theology denies the existence of this God.' John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Griffin, *Process Theology* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 10. See also pp. 61-2 and 133-5.

² B. Jowett, tr., *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York, Random House, 1937), I, 645.

³ McKeon, p. 885.

The notion that it would be a change for the worse if a perfectly moral, good and righteous God changes with respect to his moral character is perfectly well taken; and Biblical writers would have agreed wholeheartedly with this point. But Plato and Aristotle had *all* types of change in mind and wished to rule out changes in experiences and decisions as well as changes in goodness. In his own creation 'myth' in the *Timaeus*, Plato conceded that the creative activity of the Demiurge had been presented mythologically in a temporalistic form which included a succession of Divine experiences and decisions, but we are warned that all this is merely figurative speech and is not to be taken as properly applying to God at all. Plato stated the criterion of Biblical interpretation actually used by Judaeo-Christian supernaturalists near the end of his following famous discourse on the relation of time and eternity:

When the father and creator saw the creature which he had made moving and living, the created image of the eternal gods, he rejoiced, and in his joy determined to make the copy still more like the original; and as this was eternal, he sought to make the universe eternal, so far as might be. Now the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fulness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity; and this image we call time. For there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he created them also. They are all parts of time, and the past and future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to the external essence; for we say that he 'was', he 'is', he 'will be', but the truth is that 'is' alone is properly attributed to him, and that 'was' and 'will be' are only to be spoken of becoming in time, for they are motions, but that which is immovably the same cannot become older or younger by time, nor ever did or has become, or hereafter will be, older or younger, nor is subject at all to any of those states which affect moving and sensible things and of which generation is the cause.¹

Nowhere does the Bible itself state (a) that it speaks improperly when it speaks temporally of God. The supernaturalist criterion of biblical interpretation which requires that we say that temporal notions are 'wrongly' transferred to God is pagan, not Biblical in origin, here being clearly stated by Plato. Where in the Bible is there a counterpart for the claim (b) that 'is' *alone* is properly attributed to God? Supernaturalists have believed that they had a text for (b) in Exodus 3: 14 - 'I am who I am.' But even assuming that it is legitimate to find any ponderous metaphysics in this verse, it definitely does not say 'I *merely* am.' So to construe it is surely to read something into it that is not there. Furthermore, we now know that the words meaning 'to be' in this text can just as accurately be translated as 'to become',² and modern translations give 'I will be what I will be' in

¹ Jowett, II, 19.

² J. C. Rylaarsdam, 'Exodus, Introduction', *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), I, 838.

their margins as a perfectly accurate and acceptable rendition of the Hebrew words. Since becoming and the future tense do not apply to God in classical theology but do apply to him in process thought, this bulwark of supernaturalism is thus turned into a text to support process theology!

Centuries before Kierkegaard wrote his sermon on 'The Unchangeableness of God', Philo had written a treatise entitled 'On the Unchangeableness of God' (*Quod Deus Immutabilis Sit*)¹ in which he insisted that Biblical expressions seeming to attribute temporality, complexity, passion and passivity to God were at best only metaphorical and at worst were 'mythical fictions of the impious'.² Why did he regard temporalistic language as figurative? The answer is contained in his own rhetorical question: 'For what greater impiety could there be than to suppose that the Unchangeable changes?'³ Where did he get such a notion of perfection and piety? His deep and obvious indebtedness to Plato's *Timaeus* disclosed itself as he wrote:

But God is the maker of time also, for He is the father of time's father, that is of the universe, and has caused the movements of the one to be the source of the generation of the other. Thus time stands to God in the relation of a grandson. For this universe, since we perceive it by our senses, is the younger son of God. To the elder son, I mean the intelligible universe, He assigned the place of the first-born, and purposed that it should remain in His own keeping. So this younger son, the world of our senses, when set in motion, brought that entity we call time to the brightness of its rising. And thus with God there is no future, since He has made the boundaries of the ages subject to Himself. For God's life is not a time, but eternity, which is the archetype and pattern of time; and in eternity there is no past nor future, but only present existence.⁴

Though he refused to follow Plato in attributing everlasting becoming to the material world (as a moving image of eternity), regarding it as created out of nothing at some point in the finite past, he nevertheless did follow Plato precisely with respect to the crucial question of the absolute unchangeability of God. This comes out also in many of his other writings, as for example in his commentaries on Genesis where he dismissed the dimension of temporality in the story of the six days of creation with the admonition that 'we must think of God as doing all things simultaneously',⁵ and where he proclaimed that

For he that thinks either that God belongs to a type, or that He is not one, or that He is not unoriginate and incorruptible, or that He is not incapable of change, wrongs himself not God. . . for we must deem that He belongs to no type, and that He is One and incorruptible and unchangeable. He that does not so conceive infects his own soul with a false and godless opinion.⁶

The truly amazing thing is that even Tertullian, who among the early church fathers was most zealous in rejecting those Greek ideas which he

¹ F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, trans., *Philo* (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930), III, 11-101.

² *Ibid.* III, 41.

³ *Ibid.* p. 19.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 26-27.

⁵ *Ibid.* I, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 179.

believed to be incompatible with Scriptural religion, failed to escape entirely from the Greek concept of static perfection. Tertullian asked: 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?...Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!'¹ In Tertullian's defence, it should be said first that he *almost* made it! For example, he frequently defined God's eternity in the Biblical sense of everlasting, without beginning or end,² not in the Greek sense of the simultaneity of the past, present and future in God all at once. Further, he wrote of God's 'repentance' of his intentions to destroy Nineveh after its inhabitants turned from their wicked ways that 'it will have no other meaning than a simple change of a prior purpose'.³ Unfortunately, he *also* insisted with Philo, Plato, and the Greeks that there was no real change or temporality in God. He was not quite zealous enough in his resistance to Greek ideas, for he accepted the most crucial one of all, the idea of the perfect as the utterly simple, atemporal, and unchanging in every conceivable respect. To do this, even he had to dismiss all contrary Biblical suggestions as merely figurative speech having no real application to God in himself. Tertullian's superimposition of the Greek idea of perfection upon his interpretation of scriptural religion comes out in such passages as:

On the contrary, living and perfect Deity has its origin neither in novelty nor in antiquity, but in its own true nature. Eternity has no time. It is itself all time. It acts; it cannot then suffer. It cannot be born, therefore it lacks age. God, if old, forfeits the eternity that is to come; if new, the eternity which is past. The newness bears witness to a beginning; the oldness threatens an end. God, moreover, is as independent of beginning and end as He is of time, which is only the arbiter and measurer of a beginning and an end.⁴

Eternity, however, cannot be lost, because it cannot be eternity, except by reason of its immunity from loss. For the same reason also it is incapable of change, inasmuch as, since it is eternity, it can by no means be changed.⁵

For it is consistent with Deity to regard as accomplished facts whatever It has determined one, because there is no difference of time with that Being in whom eternity itself directs a uniform condition of seasons.⁶

If Tertullian and company had only asked 'What does Elea have to do with Jerusalem?'! It was Parmenides of Elea who *first* introduced the Greek notion of eternity as all time all at once when he wrote of his One that 'what it is uncreated and imperishable, for it is entire, immovable and without end. It was not in the past, nor shall it be, since it is now, all at once, one, continuous.'⁷ If only the early church fathers had been *sufficiently* on guard against Athens, they might actually have avoided producing a 'mottled

¹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), III, 246.

² *Ibid.* pp. 273, 276, 497.

³ *Ibid.* p. 316.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 276.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 484.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 324.

⁷ G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 273.

Christianity'. Unfortunately, they were seduced by the pagan dogma of the absolute unchangeableness of God. The resulting theology now must die, for the price which the western world has had to pay for it has been too high. The history of this pagan idea of God could easily be traced through Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and even Muslim theology up to the twentieth century; but enough has been said already to substantiate Nicolas Berdyaev's judgment that:

The static conception of God as *actus purus* having no potentiality and completely self-sufficient is a philosophical, Aristotelian, and not a biblical conception. The God of the Bible, the God of the revelation, is by no means an *actus purus*: He has affective and emotional states, dramatic developments in His inner life, inward movement — but all this is revealed exoterically. It is extraordinary how limited is the human conception of God. Men are afraid to ascribe to Him inner conflict and tragedy characteristic of all life, the longing for His 'other', for the birth of man, but have no hesitation in ascribing to Him anger, jealousy, vengeance and other affective states which, in man, are regarded as reprehensible. There is a profound gulf between the idea of perfection in man and in God. Self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, stony immobility, pride, the demand for continual submission are qualities which the Christian religion considers vicious and sinful, though it calmly ascribes them to God. It becomes impossible to follow the Gospel injunction, 'Be ye perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.' That which in God is regarded as a sign of perfection, in man is considered an imperfection, a sin.¹

It is important to notice what I have not claimed in this article. I have not claimed that *all* Greek ideas and ideals are unacceptable to reasonable persons in the twentieth century, merely that the *one* idea of the utter unchangeability of God is so. Other theological emphases drawn largely (though not entirely) from Greek philosophy, such as that man was made in the *rational* image of God I find most palatable, though even this depends on what we mean by 'rational.' Further, I have not claimed that the idea of God as changing in his decisions and experiences and unchanging with respect to his existence and righteousness is true merely because it is Biblical. My real reason for rejecting the classical idea of the absolute unchangeableness of God is that it is incoherent, inconsistent, and irreverent, not that it is Greek. However, I realize that there are and have been many cultured despisers of paganism such as Tertullian, Luther, Kierkegaard, Brunner and Barth who have believed that the pedigree of an idea has something to do with its truth or falsity and who nevertheless have fused and confused Greek with Biblical notions of Divine Perfection in spite of their own best insights. It is to these cultured despisers of paganism that the main body of this essay has been addressed.

¹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1954), p. 28.