

# How Not To Undermine Theology

Robin Attfield

The doctrine of creation is theologically central. If God is not our Creator, we humans are not his creatures, much less made in his image: and still less can we fall short of the divine glory or be re-created in accordance with it. It is therefore vital for theists, and for those theologians who are committed to any of these doctrines, not to commit themselves to positions which entail or presuppose the denial of the creation doctrine.

So far, I should imagine, Brian Davies, O.P. who recently contributed to *New Blackfriars* a review of my recent book *God and the Secular*, would agree.<sup>1</sup> The review was a generous one, which endorsed the need for natural theology, and indeed for maintaining the doctrine of creation. But Davies also contended that my own claim that God is an individual, and as such a member of a class, makes this doctrine collapse, and thus effectively undermines theology. My present purpose is to explain how, far from undermining theology, belief in God's individuality and membership of a class is indispensable for upholders of the creation doctrine. At the same time I shall take the opportunity to expound the state of a discussion about these matters in philosophical books and journals which may have escaped attention.

Theologians sometimes deny that human language is adequate in any way whatever to the divine reality, and that humans can understand what their own talk about God means. The alarming consequences of such denials were presented with striking clarity by my colleague Michael Durrant in 1969.<sup>2</sup> Mr Durrant was commenting on two influential contributions to the philosophy of religion, Frederick Ferré's *Language, Logic and God*<sup>3</sup> and I. M. Crombie's article 'The Possibility of Theological Statements'.<sup>4</sup> Professor Ferré had contended that words borrowed from ordinary speech can only be applied to God in a manner *unimaginable to us (sic)* which is permitted by the rules of talk about God: whereas Mr Crombie had committed himself to the view that we do not know what we are talking about when we talk about God's love, except that Christ's love is a faithful image of it. But, as Mr Durrant pointed out, all theories of the meaning of talk about God are rendered useless if the words used of God are acknowledged to be applied in a way which is unimaginable to us: for on this basis we could not know what any of the divine predicates meant. There again, unless we have some idea as to what kind of thing the image of Christ's love is an image of, we have no way of telling whether it *is* a faithful image, or even of understanding the claim that it is a faithful image at all; and therefore the admission that

we do not on any other basis know what God's love is like is an admission that we do not begin to understand what we mean by such talk. Indeed once it is held that the divine nature is incomprehensible, no talk about God can be rescued from sheer abject senselessness.

Now Mr Durrant believed at this stage that theistic language could in fact be rescued from senselessness. In his view, however, a precondition of progress was the recognition that the term 'God' and its equivalents cannot consistently be used either as a proper name or as a common name. For my part, however, much as I agreed with his critique of F erre and Crombie I was unable to accept that the grounds he supplied, either in his article or in his two subsequent books,<sup>5</sup> bore out this conclusion. The positive solution commended in his 1969 article (that 'God' can be taken as logically parallel to 'Man', 'Love' or 'Wisdom') was in fact discarded in the books, and it was there concluded that probably no intelligible and consistent account of talk about God could be given at all.

What was in fact at stake here was a good deal more than the status of the word 'God' and its synonyms. The issue concerned whether God could be conceived as an individual, and hence as able to act, create or reveal himself. For if the term 'God' was logically on a par with 'wisdom' or 'goodness', then no possibility remained that God had understanding or purposes, or could *do* anything whatever. Indeed Mr Durrant himself granted that the one imaginable solution to the problem of theological language involved conceiving God as a non-spatial and non-temporal individual: but he also believed that his own objections to talk of God undermined even this apparent possibility.

My own contribution has consisted in a reply to Mr Durrant's 'God and Analogy' entitled 'The Individuality of God',<sup>7</sup> and further replies to his books in the form of a paper called 'The Lord is God: There is No Other'<sup>8</sup> and of a passage in *God and the Secular*, the very one which, as it so happens, Brian Davies takes to task.<sup>9</sup> The case I have been putting is best introduced by quoting the beginning of my earlier article (by which, but for an error on page 22 about the meaning of proper names, and despite Mr Durrant's criticisms in *The Logical Status of 'God'*, I still stand).

"If God is an incomprehensible individual, no reference to God is possible and no talk about God is coherent, for we have no idea what kind of individual we are picking out or discussing . . . And, as he (sc. Michael Durrant) points out, the accounts of analogical language about God of Professor F erre and Mr Crombie collapse in view of their common view that God is indeed an incomprehensible individual.

Durrant's solution to this *impasse* is the denial that God is an individual of any sort at all . . . My view is rather that God is an

individual, but not incomprehensible in the sense that no account of his nature is possible. Indeed, only if God's nature is to some extent comprehensible, can predicates be intelligibly ascribed to God."

Now it might seem that there is a third alternative to the two views of Durrant and myself, that is, the distinctive view that God is certainly an individual, and as such able e.g. to create, but that he is nevertheless not an individual of any sort, or at least that he lacks a nature in any way comprehensible to humans. For, it might be held, we cannot on the one hand reject, as Michael Durrant does, all talk of God's individuality if we are to retain belief in divine creation and re-creation, or if we are to argue in the manner of natural theology from the creature to the Creator: yet at the same time we must avoid any suggestion that God is a "being among other beings". Can we not, then, as Aquinas would have it, know *that* God is, but not *what* he is?

To this question, however, a negative answer must be given. Certainly God must be an individual if he can create, but to claim that there exists an individual of no sort whatever is to claim something unintelligible to speaker and hearers alike. Here, indeed, I stand foursquare with Michael Durrant. For, as he points out in reply to Férré and Crombie, if we cannot tell what sort of individual a predicate is supposed to be applied to, we cannot begin to understand what it means. To be, as Aristotle held, entails being of a sort: and, conversely, to be of no sort is to be inconceivable. Further, to claim (or deny) the existence of something which is of no sort whatever is to make no claim (or no denial) whatever.

The issue can perhaps be conveyed better in another form. Férré was trying to make sense of the traditional analogy of proportionality, a theory of the meaning of ordinary terms (like 'wise' and 'good') when applied to God. On this theory, the meaning of the terms is suited (or "proportioned") to the nature of God just as the same terms, when applied in everyday use to humans, bear a meaning appropriate to the nature of humans. But the theory is altogether undermined, of course, if we have no idea of God's nature, and accordingly cannot tell to what the meaning of 'wise' (etc) is suited when these terms are applied to God. Yet, as another colleague of mine, Humphrey Palmer, has pointed out, if such terms have a meaning, it must be possible to devise some theory or explanation of the meaning which they have. As he says,<sup>10</sup> "It is the possibility of explaining, to oneself or another, that shows we have a meaning for the term". So, if no-one can supply such an explanation, predicates used of God turn out to have no particular meaning, and indeed to have been lacking in significance all along.

A number of writers supply the deficiency by eliciting some

thing which the other traditional theory of analogy, the analogy of attribution, supplies.<sup>11</sup> On this account, God's goodness consists in his causing good things, or bringing them into being. Now this is, of course, a good deal less than we mean by 'God's goodness', as Aquinas himself remarked. Yet it does draw to our attention what might otherwise be overlooked, and this is that predicates applied to God apply at the level of a Creator (or, so as to avoid begging the question against atheists, who also need words in which to talk about God, of a possible Creator). The point which needs eliciting, then, is that we cannot make sense of talk about God unless we remember that God, if he exists, can create, and hence has the essential qualities which creating would require.<sup>12</sup>

Hence my remarks in *God and the Secular* which remind Brian Davies of anthropomorphism and deism. "Indeed he (God) is necessarily of a sort, members of which are necessarily timeless, placeless and omnipotent." If we do not know this much about God, we do not, I contend, know what we mean in theology at all; and we certainly cannot believe in creation. Michael Durrant would doubtless hold that talk about God remains incoherent just the same: my reply cannot be presented here, but is to be found in 'The Lord is God: There is No Other'. Here I consider rather Davies' view, on which I claim to know not less than I need to claim but more than I am entitled to claim, and make too few concessions to "apophaticism" or to negative theology. My answer is to be found in the last sentence of my 1971 article, 'The Individuality of God': "Even the apophatic tradition requires some positive notion of the level at which its utterances apply, or there is nothing to negate or deny." A similar point is more engagingly presented in the chapter of Humphrey Palmer's book *Analogy* entitled 'What Elephants Aren't': being told that an elephant is not a pillar-box is wholly unilluminating to a child or a Martian who, up to this point, lacks any positive notion of what an elephant is.

At one point Davies pauses to ask how many members, on my account, belong to the sort God is of. One at most, he presumes me to reply. He presumes rightly, for my reply is available on the same page. "To be God is to be omnipotent, and there cannot be more than one omnipotent being, (though there could, of course, be less than one)." This also helps to answer Davies' question about how to recognise members of this sort: for whatever is related to any material object as its transcendent cause will thereby have been picked out as (the one and only) God. Indeed the passage to which Davies here draws attention is an explicit reply to Michael Durrant's corresponding difficulty about how to identify and re-identify God (and how to do so without being forced to regard him as somehow dependent on those things as the cause of

which he is recognised).

These, however, seem not to be Davies' central difficulties. His real problems concern the apparent facts that if God is a member of a sort, he is (just) "an invisible person, agent, benevolent intelligence, entity, object of being", and that if he belongs to a class "God himself requires a Creator".

But if any member of a class needs a Creator, what could possibly serve as the Creator in question? Not clearly an agent, since agents are (rightly) to be regarded as class-members. Not an abstraction (like Wisdom), for abstractions cannot create. A necessary being, then? My views on such a suggestion are presented in a section of *God and the Secular* on the Ontological Argument; but they can be set on one side for present purposes, for a necessary being is only intelligible as something unable not to exist *as a something or other*, and must accordingly be a member of a class. Thus, whether necessary or otherwise, the only being conceivable as the Creator would have to be an individual and a class-member. But if this is allowed, and if it is also granted that the Creator would necessarily be uncreatable, then it must also be allowed to be just untrue that whatever belongs to a class requires a Creator. For we now know of an exception.

Besides, how anthropomorphic is the conclusion that to be God is to be the one and only member of a class? Obviously the Creator is not to be regarded as an object among other objects: here Tillich and Aquinas are in harmony. But to recognise that all conceivable existence (including God's) is of some sort or other is not to regard God as subject to spatial or temporal limitations, as would be invisible persons (who would not be "necessarily timeless" or "placeless"), much less to regard him as an undifferentiated "entity, object or being", since it is to recognise that the very idea of an undifferentiated being is inconceivable. Much less still does the recognition that a Creator would have a certain nature require us to hold that the nature which he would have is in any way on a par with the natures of his creature.

For completeness sake I should perhaps indicate how I take the word 'God' actually to be used. Briefly, anyone who (like myself) construes 'God' as sometimes a proper name must have in mind a sort to which the individual thus named belongs; anyone who (like myself) acknowledges that 'God' is sometimes (as in "the one and only God") a common name must acknowledge also that to be God is to belong to a sort connoted by that name; and the view that the term 'God' has both these roles disarms the two-pronged objection that it does not (always) have the one role, and does not (always) have the other role either. But for a defence of these positions I can only refer the interested reader to the journal articles already cited.

It is, of course, not infrequent for theists to be accused either of anthropomorphism (as I have been by Brian Davies) or of talking metaphysical or mystical nonsense (as seems to be implied by Michael Durrant); though it is rarer to be accused of both simultaneously. The same dilemma has always beset the advocates of the traditional theories of analogy: and the same charges are frequently levelled by theological disputants at one another, as they were by Hume's characters Demea and Cleanthes. I remain convinced nevertheless that there exists a safe middle passage between the real hazards which these charges portray; that a viable theory of analogy can be devised which evades them,<sup>1,3</sup> and that claims about the divine qualities and the divine existence are not always unintelligible. But I hold this conviction only on the ground that it is possible to know something about the sort God is of, and to know something (not, of course, everything, but not nothing either) about God's nature. If this ground is withheld, theology is undermined: I have attempted to show that theologians can hold their ground, and that theology and the central theistic doctrines need not lack a foundation.

- 1 Brian Davies O.P. Review of *God and the Secular* by Robin Attfield, Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1978, pp 231 £9.50 at p 234 of *New Blackfriars*, Vol 60 No 709, May 1979.
- 2 Michael Durrant, 'God and Analogy', *Sophia*, Vol VIII No 3, October 1969, pp 11-24
- 3 Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God*, London. Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962.
- 4 I. M. Crombie, 'The Possibility of Theological Statements', in Basil Mitchell (ed), *Faith and Logic*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd 1957; also in Basil Mitchell (ed), *The Philosophy of Religion*, London, Oxford University Press 1971.
- 5 Michael Durrant *The Logical Status of 'God'*, London, Macmillan and New York, St Martin's Press, 1973; and *Theology and Intelligibility*, London and Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.
- 6 *The Logical Status of 'God'*, pp 109 f.
- 7 Robin Attfield, 'The Individuality of God', *Sophia*, Vol X No 1, April 1971, pp 20-27.
- 8 Robin Attfield, 'The Lord is God: There is No Other', *Religious Studies*, 13, pp 73-84.
- 9 *God and The Secular*, pp 164-66.
- 10 Humphrey Palmer, *Analogy*, London, Macmillan and New York, St Martin's Press, 1973 p 34.
- 11 Thus E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, London, Longmans, Green & Co 1949, pp 110-15. Mascall cites a parallel point from Fr Garrigou-Lagrange, *Dieu, son Existence et sa Nature*, Paris, Mm. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1919, pp 513-27; similar points are found in H. P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God*, London. The Athlone Press, 1969, pp 214f.
- 12 The case which is here presented is developed further in my paper 'Religious Symbols and the Voyage of Analogy', forthcoming in David Miall (ed.) *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, Hassocks, Sussex, Harvester Press, 1981.
- 13 See the paper mentioned in No 12.