

Thinking about God —

A response to Patrick McGrath

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In his article 'Professor Geach and the Future' (*New Blackfriars*, Vol. 54, No. 642, Nov. 1973), Patrick McGrath depicts what any non-academically inclined Christian must read as a bleak situation. He says that 'if God knows everything that will happen, there is no room for free will. If he does not, he cannot be infinite and unchanging'.¹ The upshot of this is that 'a great deal of hard thinking on the character of the divine attributes is required from theologians, philosophers and scripture scholars'.² What are the implications of this, and ought they to be accepted?

Clearly McGrath has his finger on some problems. To say that God is omniscient, and to maintain at the same time that he is changeless, looks on the face of it like a contradiction. It may, at least, appear to be something approaching one. To affirm that God comes to know things and to add that he is changeless seems likewise open to objection. Furthermore, it goes against the grain for thinking people, and, because of special reasons, for Catholics in particular, to deny the need for research, discussion and debate in religion. Unless we are prepared to refuse tolerantly to consider the fruits of experience and scholarship, or unless we are prepared to abandon the notion of an historical, teaching Church, so much seems a *sine qua non*. McGrath's article is, however, disturbing. For, assuming (as seems natural) that most Christians are committed to the belief that, on certain occasions at least, human actions can be free and that God is immutable and omniscient, it reflects a regrettable tendency which many must now recognize as perennial. The tendency in question leans towards the view that the average theist or Christian needs to wait on the findings of certain academics for the right to give his complete assent to certain beliefs about God. Theism seems to have sprung off the board of experience to an ethereal plane where an eternal seminar is carried on. If this is not so, then it appears that belief in God must fail to command the assent of the whole man. And whatever the merits of this may be, we are then left with a fideism so radical as to countenance plain blind trust or even flat contradiction. Needless to say, we may have to be content with such a state of affairs, for, there may be no way out of problems like those raised by McGrath. I wonder, however, whether he has himself shown this to be so.

¹p. 504.

²*ibid.*

One surprising thing about his article is its cavalier treatment of statements like 'X sees that A' or 'X knows that A'. I do not wish to dwell on the logic of such expressions (always supposing there is a consistent logic to be found), for that is a complex subject about which interested readers will find no dearth of literature. But in the context of McGrath's discussion one point must be made. This is that my seeing or knowing that something is the case has nothing necessarily to do with how the something in question came about in the first place. Thus if I see or know that you are the Archbishop of Canterbury, I need not have helped to make you so. In the case of God, we can add that if God knows that I will freely reject him, my rejecting him need not be brought about by him in any recognisable sense of 'brought about'. While Christians may be bound to admit that 'If God is omniscient, he knows every action we will perform for the rest of our lives',³ they must simply categorise as hypothetical McGrath's corollary that 'the course of our lives is already laid out in advance'.⁴ Such, at least, is the situation given that the corollary entails our being constrained to do what God decides, or if, in other ways, our freedom in key respects is denied. God's knowing that people do something freely depends on their doing it freely. It does not condition how people act on every occasion, though, admittedly, this is not to deny that God can condition much that people do. The important thing is that in the terms of McGrath's discussion we can say that 'God takes a risk in creating us, for our acceptance or rejection of him is logically posterior to our creation'.⁵

But all this is by way of introduction. The difficulty with McGrath's article seems to me to lie primarily in its approach to language used to speak of God. McGrath presents terms predicated of God, like 'omniscience' and 'immutability', and works on the assumption that they are reasonably clear. The suggestion then is that if 'omniscient' means 'know everything' and 'immutable' means 'does not change', there is no difficulty in producing the equation 'omniscient and immutable being + beings with free will = impossible situation'. Trying to deny this leaves us with 'an insoluble dilemma'.⁶ But this implies that if X is omniscient and immutable then it is utterly hopeless to speak of X knowing of people's free actions because of what 'immutable' and 'omniscient' mean. And why should we claim that in theology we ever *could* know exactly what they mean or that we should ever *want*, at present, to know this. Is not McGrath really telling us what the terms *should* mean? And who is the individual to say that?

Consider some of the things that Christians have said of God. Take, for example, the following six remarks:

³op. cit. p. 500.

⁴ibid.

⁵Iltyd Trethowan, 'Dr Hick and the Problem of Evil', *Journal of Theological Studies*, October 1967, p. 415.

⁶McGrath, op. cit. p. 504.

1. God is our father.
2. We should do what God requires of us.
3. God is distinct from the world or the universe.
4. God has no body.
5. God is transcendent.
6. God is 'like an eagle watching its nest, hovering over its young'.

Clearly these statements alone, when taken together, ought to be sufficient to make anyone realise that Christian discourse is rather special. Qualifications of various kinds need to be introduced here. I do not mean to suggest, as some have seemed to do, that there are two autonomous 'things' called 'Christian language' and 'ordinary language'. It need not be assumed that Christians necessarily use a kind of sealed-off stratum of discourse, a unique language game. As Professor D. Z. Phillips has remarked, 'So far from it being true that religion can be thought of as an isolated language game, cut off from all other forms of life, the fact is that religious beliefs cannot be understood at all unless their relation to other modes of life is taken into account'.⁷ The point is, however, that compared with the unimaginative discourse spoken by the majority of people during the day-time, there is something new in 'God-talk'. The 'something' in question is what is usually referred to when people speak of 'poetic language' or 'metaphorical language'. It does have an interesting characteristic though; it is used, apparently unselfconsciously, by many who might be surprised to think of themselves as going in for poetry or metaphor. My general point was made exactly by Austin Farrer when he wrote :

God is uniquely unique. There is not a class of Gods, but one alone. . . . But though we had the eyes of angels to see his work, though we enjoyed that vision of him face to face . . . our inability of speech would still remain. It is his uniqueness and not only his hiddenness, which prevents us saying anything perfectly exact about him, except that he is himself: that God is God alone; and the very hymn of the angels, scripture divines, is not an expression of what he is by himself, but an appeal to the various similitudes in which the creatures share and imitate his being: *pleni sunt caeli et terra maiestate gloriae tuae*.⁸

It seems, therefore, that talk of God is by nature necessarily imprecise, difficult to analyse with reference to paradigms, if you like, something which is used by those who see the point of 'hovering between images'.⁹ In short, we cannot expect to get God 'taped' when we concentrate on what is said about him.

There is nothing new in all this, but in the face of articles like

⁷D. Z. Phillips, 'Religious Beliefs and Language Games', reprinted in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. B. Mitchell, O.U.P., 1971, p. 134.

⁸Austin Farrer, 'Poetic Truth' in *Reflective Faith*.

⁹S. T. Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, London (Everyman), 1960, Vol. 2, p. 103.

McGrath's it must be repeated to emphasise that, as is the case with the best poetry, the charge of self-contradiction will always be something to which talk of God is remarkably impervious. Applied to the questions raised by McGrath, this means that God's immutability is not like that of the most unchanging thing we can imagine, e.g. a piece of igneous rock. This is not only because God is not something it makes sense to speak of as imaginable, but follows from the need we have to balance or qualify statements referring to God's immutability with others of a more dynamic nature, where activity, and therefore, change, are implied. Examples of these are the familiar biblical images: 'Vinedresser', 'Shepherd', 'King', 'Father', 'Lord', 'Husband'. And, of course, the balancing or qualification, so to speak, works both ways. God may be 'Father', but he is 'the *eternal* Father', 'the immutable Father'. Hence, quite naturally from the theistic point of view, in the Old Testament, Deutero-Isaiah makes Yahweh scream and gasp like a woman in childbirth yet produces passages that pull in an entirely different direction.

To whom then will you compare me,
That I should be like him? says The Holy One. . . .
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
The Creator of the ends of the Earth.

In all this it seems rather out of place to speak of contradiction. For, how do two vague, open-ended, equivocal or imaginative statements (justified or otherwise) contradict each other? 'This cat is black all over' and 'This cat is white all over', when applied simultaneously to one and the same cat, cannot both be accepted. But it is hard to see how 'God, the all-knowing, invisible, intangible father is changeless and knows our free acts' is internally self-contradictory unless, as I have denied, each part of the statement must be assumed to have a univocal meaning, derived from some use in a clinical and rather artificial system of communication. Ludwig Wittgenstein realised this, which is why he says that, in discussion, we often feel ourselves faced by certain problems because we have in mind a set of rules in accordance with which such problems must arise but which themselves, as rules, may be misapplied. He continues:

This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand (i.e. get a clear view of). It throws light on our concept of *meaning* something. For in these cases things turn out otherwise than we had meant, forseen. That is just what we say when, for example, a contradiction appears: 'I didn't mean it like that'.¹⁰

It would be foolish to suggest that there are no problems. It does not, for example, do to deny that religious people can make mistakes

¹⁰*Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1968, p. 50, para 125.

within religion. Often it is useful to root these errors out. So if, for example, we are to say that God is 'all knowing' there must be certain things that we deny of God. We cannot in this context add, for instance, the statement 'God is ignorant'. If it were obvious therefore that 'X knows that Y' implied 'Y is determined by X's knowing that Y', we should hesitate to say 'God knows of my free decisions and my decisions are not determined by God's knowing about them'. But, as I have indicated, we really are dealing with a hypothetical here, and, in all theological discussions we need to remember what is and is not appropriate to the context of our discussion. As Wittgenstein also says, 'One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look* at its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this'. It will still seem to some that my remarks sanction a blind obscurantism where nobody ever really lays their theological cards on the table for non-theists to scrutinise. Certainly, that is the drift of much ancient and contemporary criticism of theism. I should only wish to pull both religious and non-religious thinkers back to a proper appreciation of the contexts where talk of contradiction and talk of God are at home. And surely, one is entitled to ask why theists who are alive to the distinctions I have been making (and these constitute a pretty formidable body) ever began talking about God in the first place. With respect to a certain form of analysis, it was not by entertaining two or more propositions with the word 'God' in each, and then deciding whether or not they clashed. It was by discovering God as something to be reckoned with at close quarters. As the Psalmist has it :

O where can I go from your spirit,
 Or where can I flee from your face?
 If I climb the heavens you are there.
 If I lie in the grave you are there.

This introduces the question of non-inferential knowledge of God—a subject too vast to approach properly here. We certainly need to ask what it means to 'discover God', and for many this will seem a most profitable path for theology to follow. It is not a question of crying 'Encounter'! as if that were a magic wand able to sweep away all perplexities; but it does seem a question of taking experience and the variety of language seriously. You do not need to be a scholar to do this; and that is what religious people are really saying.