Book Review: Divine Nature And Human Language

Richard Swinburne
The point, as my wife Nancey Murphy and I have claimed in a preliminary way (see "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," in April, 1989, Modern Theology), is that relationality in the theory of language, wholism in epistemology, and a corporate metaphysics and ethics are together features that identify authentic postmodernism and distinguish it not only from premodernity, but also from the merely modern age now ending. That van Inwagen (and in varying degree other contributors to the Morris volume) should so naturally display some of these postmodern features is an impressive fact. This is not to deny that all of them retain, as noted above, many 'modern' features in their work, and that some retain premodern features as well. Perhaps most impressive is that almost to a man or woman they eschew one of the chief features of the modern age, its foundationalist appeals to one or another kind of unquestionable datum. Their attending instead to the particularities of Christian practice and its doctrines seems to me telling (though not decisive) evidence of this crucial shift. If so, that is good news for Christian faith in the world today and tomorrow.


RICHARD SWINBURNE, Oxford University.

This volume contains William Alston's main recent essays on the philosophy of religion, apart from those concerned with religious experience (the material of which later he plans to incorporate into a book on that subject). Five of the present essays are concerned with religious language, how we can use words whose meaning is given by their application to mundane contexts, for talking about God. Alston holds that a functionalist account of such mental concept words as "knowledge" and "purpose" allows us to apply these words literally to God in virtue of the effects of his activity. Just as talking about human beliefs and purposes is talking about the causes of our public behaviour, according to the functionalist, so, according to Alston, talking about God's knowledge and purposes is talking about the causes in him of the effects in the world which he produces. That is so even if what divine knowledge and purposes are in themselves is utterly different from what human knowledge and purposes are in themselves. Four further essays are concerned with God's nature. Alston espouses what I would regard as a basically classical doctrine of God, while denying some of the more extravagant backing which Aquinas provided for that doctrine—that God is not related to the world, is pure actuality, is identical with his properties, and is such that every
truth about him is necessarily true. Alston however adopts the doctrine for which all that was supposed to provide a backing—that God is omnipotent, not essentially corporeal, absolutely perfect, immutable and timeless. The last group of essays is entitled 'God and the World,' and includes an essay on 'The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit' and a defence of a divine command theory of moral obligation. It is good to have all the essays together in one volume. They exhibit a similar viewpoint and constitute a significant contribution to the subject.

An introduction by Alston makes some general comments on the flavour of the essays, comments which a reviewer can only repeat. They are essays by a Christian philosopher in the Anglo-American-tradition; and so, predictably, by "a Christian of a relatively conservative cast," using "much up-to-date philosophical equipment," with "heavy borrowings from medieval philosophical theology," who accepts "an uncompromisingly realistic interpretation of religious belief." The former editor of *Faith Philosophy* is in these respects very central to the tradition which his journal represents. He is however more tentative and moderate in his claims than some of us. He holds, for example, that we cannot know whether God ever acts outside the normal operation of the laws of nature or not; and in general Alston is concerned with "laying out possibilities rather than arguing for an unambiguous view as to how it is." The essays are "each devoted to one little piece of the total picture" and, while similar in their outlook to each other, are not put together into the form of a rigorous systematic theology. The reviewer must add to Alston's own comments on himself, that the essays are very clear, very readable, and often persuasive.

The most original and most moving of the essays is, I found, the one on "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit." Alston considers three models of how the Holy Spirit works in sanctifying people. On the "fiat model" God simply replaces our sinful dispositions with good dispositions. If that was how God worked, there would not be much point in his taking a long time over the process, nor would he be treating us as persons. On the "interpersonal model" God sanctifies us by interacting with us in the kind of way in which we interact with each other when seeking to form each other's dispositions to action. He rebukes, persuades, encourages, informs, inspires etc.—either by acting directly on our minds or by acting through the agency of other people and especially the Church. A trouble with this model, as also with the fiat model, is that it represents "God as relatively external to the believer." Hence Alston prefers a third model which he calls "the sharing model"; a human is sanctified by coming to share in the divine life. We become immediately cognitively aware not just of true beliefs about God, but of God's own true beliefs; we come to be influenced not just by inclinations to love, but by God's own inclinations to love. There is however, as with the interpersonal
model, still work for us to do in determining our response to the divine influence. This model alone, Alston rightly urges, does justice to Biblical talk of the Spirit "dwelling in" us, and us being "filled by" the Spirit.

Another important essay is the one on "Referring to God." Reference to God is not best analysed in terms of a descriptivist theory; for children may learn to worship God without knowing many of any set of true descriptions which adults might believe to be true of God, and by which on a descriptivist theory, reference would be fixed. A Kripkean account is to be preferred; the reference of God is secured directly by our experience of God as the object of worship and other religious practices; and references to "God" outside that context are references to the object of worship by a certain community, if the speaker intends to refer to whoever was the intended referent of another speaker from which he learnt the name...until we get back to that worshipping community. A consequence of this account, much to be welcomed, is that different people may worship the same God even if they have different beliefs about his essential nature. And since two religious communities may in fact worship the same God, even if they do not realize they do, Hindus and Christians and Muslims may well worship the same God.

Alston's appeal to functionalism to give meaning to talk about God's knowledge and purposes is however not welcome to those of us who think functionalism to be a highly erroneous theory of the human mind. Functionalism, as I understand it, is the doctrine that all there is to beliefs, purposes, desires, intentions etc. is whatever is caused by certain inputs, interacts with certain other events, and leads to certain behaviour. My belief that there is a desk in front of me just is that state of me normally caused by there being a desk in front of me, and which combines with a purpose to put down a tea cup on the nearest surface to my putting the tea cup on the desk, etc. etc.—I won't weary the reader with the well-known developments on the same lines. On this account there is nothing essentially private to which the subject alone has privileged conscious access, about beliefs, purposes etc. Unconscious robots can have them just as well as we can. That seems to me false; it is the very nature of beliefs to be things accessible to the subject in consciousness which guide his conduct in attaining the goals which he forms the conscious purpose of attaining. Robots don't have beliefs; they just sometimes behave as if they did. (My own reasons for all this are given elsewhere—see my Evolution of the Soul, Part I; but, thank goodness, I am not totally alone in holding this.) Now Alston is of course correct to say that functionalism does not rule out incorporeal beings from having beliefs; but it goes badly wrong, I suggest, in saying what their having beliefs would amount to. God's having beliefs (or knowledge) is not to be analysed as his being in a state which has certain kinds of causal relations; it is his being in a state which has certain kinds of causal relations and is experientially somewhat similar to
the states in which we are when we have beliefs (or knowledge). Of course
the "somewhat similar" needs further analysis in terms of a doctrine of anal­
ogy. But unless something on those lines is right, then I have no reason for
trusting God because he knows all about me, or thanking him because he has
the purpose of doing me good. Beings do not deserve trust or gratitude in
virtue of being in experientially empty causal states. Alston does not, I suspect,
hold that God's "mental" states are experientially empty, because he holds
that metaphorical talk about God (e.g. in the Bible) gives us further under­
standing beyond that provided by a functionalist analysis, of what God's
mental life is like. But he does not tell us in detail what further understanding
we can have. My point is that the very words "knowledge" and "purpose"
suffice to give us such understanding.

Alston tries to make some sense of the doctrine of God's timelessness and
to show its compatibility with the other properties traditionally ascribed to
God, especially in the interesting and initially plausible essay "Divine—
Human Dialogue and the Nature of God." He relies on "the standard way"
of showing how a timeless God can perform acts in time, viz. by the effects
of God's action being in time, whereas his bringing them about is not. But I
don't feel that he really deals with what I may call the "standard difficulty"
of that view, viz. of making sense of the notion of a cause which is not
temporally related to its effect; and the "standard difficulty" of the view
that God knows simultaneously in his eternal "now" what is happening at
each moment of time as it happens, viz. that it makes all the events on
Earth happening at different moments simultaneous with each other. He
attempts to avoid this latter difficulty by referring to authority, in the form
of Stump-and-Kretzmann, "for a special concept of simultaneity that is
designed for this application." But it needs argument to show that Stump-
and-Kretzmann's "special concept of simultaneity" is a concept of simul­
taneity at all.

The least successful essay, in a collection of essays some of which are very
successful, is the last one—"Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theo­
rists." The claim of the essay is modest, that it develops "a view of God,
morality, and value that leaves open the possibility that "divine commands
are constitutive of moral obligation." Alston claims that God commands us
to love our neighbours because "lovingness is good"; but the latter is not an
ultimate moral principle. Rather, he claims, lovingness is good because it is
a property of God. But he does not consider one obvious difficulty in that
view—that it has the consequence that if there were no God, lovingness
would not be good, a consequence which seems to me at any rate clearly
false. Some things are good, and other things are bad, whether or not there
is a God. And a similar point surely applies to the obligatory and the wrong—
torture is wrong, even if there is no God to forbid it. To make these points is
not to deny that God's nature and commands make some things good, bad, obligatory or wrong which would not be so otherwise; nor to deny that God's nature and commands make things more good, bad, obligatory, or wrong than they would be otherwise. My objections are old objections, but an essay in defence of divine command theory will not carry conviction unless the author has something to say about them.


THOMAS F. TRACY, Bates College.

Kathryn Tanner's subtle and historically rich study is centrally concerned with the relations between claims about God's creative sovereignty and creatures' powers of action. Traditionally, Christians have claimed both that 1) "a radically transcendent God exercises a universal and unconditional agency," and 2) creatures possess "their own power and efficacy," and in the case of human beings are "free and therefore responsible for the character of their lives" (pp. 1-2). Under modern conditions of thought, Tanner contends, it has become commonplace to assert that these two statements involve a contradiction. Contemporary theologians uncritically share the modern assumptions that lead to this appearance of inconsistency, and so they seek to solve the problem by weakening one (typically the first) or both of these claims. In doing so, they display a "curious forgetfulness about the rules for proper Christian talk" (p. 5), for there is an earlier and well-established tradition in theology that embodies rules of speech which, if carefully followed, make it possible to affirm both divine sovereignty and creaturely agency. Tanner's program, then, is to uncover these rules, display their mutual consistency, and show how they are distorted or forgotten under the influence of certain avoidable modern assumptions.

Tanner begins with a chapter on method in which she explains the linguistic turn of her approach. Statements about God, she contends, are best understood as instructions about how to talk about God. This move to second order discourse is not simply a useful device for analyzing theological utterances. Tanner makes the much stronger claim that this reflects the intrinsic limits of speech about God. She adopts an agnostic reading of Thomas' distinction between the res significata and the modus significandi:

Theologians simply assume that what they say about God is meaningful and true: they have no way of actually specifying what they are talking about (the res significata of their statements) apart from the meanings of the terms they