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JOHN CALVIN ON DIVINE ACCOMMODATION

Paul Helm

In this paper I wish to discuss some features of John Calvin's views as expressed in the following paragraph from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

What, therefore, does the word 'repentance' mean? Surely its meaning is like that of all other modes of speaking that describe God to us in human terms. For because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he testifies that he is angry towards sinners. Therefore whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience; because God, whenever he is exercising judgment, exhibits the appearance of one kindled and angered. So we ought not to understand anything else under the word 'repentance' than change of action, because men are wont by changing their action to testify that they are displeased with themselves. Therefore, since every change among men is a correction of what displeases them, but that correction arises out of repentance, then by the word 'repentance' is meant the fact that God changes with respect to his actions. Meanwhile neither God's plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered; but what he had from eternity foreseen, approved and decreed, he

pursues in uninterrupted tenor, however sudden the variation may appear in men's eyes.¹

This paragraph forms the conclusion of Calvin's answer to an objection to his account of divine providence. The objection is that his account is not consistent with the scriptural teaching about divine repentance. The language of "repentance" suggests that "the plan of God does not stand firm and sure, but is subject to change in response to the disposition of things below."² Calvin argues that when repentance is ascribed to God it does not imply ignorance or error or powerlessness, and that the fact that Scripture also says that God does not repent and is unchangeable shows that repentance can only be figuratively ascribed to God. Thus, for Calvin texts such as 1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19 take precedence over those such as Genesis 6:6 or 1 Samuel 15:11. Calvin then proceeds to provide what, in his view, is the *raison d'être* of such language, namely that through it God accommodates himself to us.

The theme of divine accommodation in Calvin, which is evident both in his sermons and in his theological writings, has been much discussed.³ Here I wish to consider Calvin's remarks, of which the paragraph cited above is a typical and central example, as contributions to theological language, though it ought to be noted that not all of Calvin's cases of accommodation concern language. Calvin distinguishes between God "as he is in himself" and "as he seems to us," a distinction which corresponds to the mediaeval distinction between God *in se* and *quoad nos*. According to Calvin, God, as he is in himself, has an unaltered and an unalterable plan formed in eternity. God, as he seems to us, changes with respect to his actions; most notably he "repents," though such repentance must be purged of its usual associations of displeasure, especially displeasure with the self, and of ignorance. It is repentance because God changes with respect to his actions, but he does not change his

¹ *Institutes* 1.17.13 [trans. Ford Lewis Battles in John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:227].

² *Institutes* 1.17.12 [*ibid.*, 1:225].

³ E.g. Ford Lewis Battles, "God was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity" in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 21-42.

mind. So that even when such language is ascribed to God it is not ascribed literally. In other words, the language of repentance when ascribed to God does not carry with it all the logical consequences that it has when ascribed to people. In God's case the meaning of such terms is controlled or modified by a core of metaphysical truths about God, such as his immutability and his omniscience.

1. *The Problem of Language about God*

A central issue in religious language concerns the degree to which human language about God is qualified, non-literal language. Some prominent theologians and philosophers have maintained what we might call literalism or univocalism, the view that while not all language about God is literal some may and must be. A good example is the eighteenth-century Anglican bishop, George Berkeley (1685-1753). In his study against deism, *Alciphron*, Berkeley held that "as God is infinitely above man, so is the knowledge of God infinitely above the knowledge of man";⁴ nevertheless it is literally true that God knows. Among contemporary philosophers of religion, William Alston is a stout defender of the view that some terms may be ascribed literally to God.⁵

Others have taken the view that human language about God is wholly analogical, that because such language is derived from human experience it must contain elements of comparison and contrast, hovering finely between equivocation and univocation. The classical example here is the mediaeval theologian, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274). Others hold the opposite thesis, not that language about God is derived from human experience, but that it is derived from God, that God is not metaphorically a king, but that human kings are. Thus human fatherhood is to be understood by analogy from divine

⁴ *Alciphron* IV. 21 in A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, eds., *The Works of George Berkeley* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1950), III, 170.

⁵ See the articles in Part One of *Divine Nature and Human Language. Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), and especially "How to Think About Divine Action" in Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson, eds., *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 51-70.

fatherhood.⁶ Others take the view that all language about God is metaphorical,⁷ while still others have held a thesis which does not seem to lie on the continuum of views just cited, namely, that all our language about God is negative. Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), the Jewish philosopher, is a good example of this.⁸

Few, if any, reflective theologians have maintained that all language used about God is used literally. It is usually reckoned that metaphor, analogy, simile and symbol each have an important place in any fully-developed account of theological language. Most theologians have maintained that some language about God is literal. Even Aquinas, who is usually cited as the classical source for the view that language about God is analogical, is at pains to point out that some language about God is literal.

Some words that signify what has come forth from God to creatures do so in such a way that part of the meaning of the word is the imperfect way in which the creature shares in the divine perfection. Thus, it is part of the meaning of "rock" that it has its being in a merely material way. Such words can be used of God only metaphorically. There are other words, however, that simply mean certain perfections without any indication of how these perfections are possessed — words, for example, like "being," "good," "living" and so on. These words can be used literally of God.⁹

⁶ See the remarks of Roger White in "Notes on Analogical Predication and Speaking about God" in Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland, eds., *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology. Essays presented to D. M. Mackinnon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 197-226.

⁷ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology. Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

⁸ Cited by Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 10.

⁹ *Summa Theologiae* IA.13.3.

The view that all language about God is non-literal courts self-refutation. For if all language about God is non-literal then that claim itself, being about God, is likewise non-literal. Perhaps such an unwelcome consequence could be avoided by distinguishing between first and second-order language about God, though it is not easy to see why, if some second-order language about God is literal, no first-order language can be.

The reasons given for what Alston refers to as “panmetaphoricism” are various. Sometimes it is that the human mind is necessarily limited in its knowledge of God; at other times it is that human language is essentially non-literal; and at still other times that literal language is religiously defective. Sallie McFague, for example, holds that all language about God ought to be, or be treated as, non-literal, because otherwise idolatry ensues.

Where, in all this welter of views, do Calvin’s remarks about divine accommodation, and his gloss on the biblical language about repentance, lie?

To begin with, it is clear, as we have already seen, that Calvin does not hold that all language about God is non-literal, for the accommodated language is controlled by literal truths about God’s essence. So in highlighting the place of divine accommodation Calvin is not claiming that we will not be able to speak of or understand God at all unless he accommodates himself to our understanding and refers to himself in human-like, activistic and inter-activistic ways. According to Calvin, some human language about God is exact. Unlike metaphorical or analogical expressions, such exact language does not require qualification.

There is much in Calvin to show that he held that much human language is unqualifiedly true of God. Thus, in the paragraph quoted at the beginning, Calvin refers to what God had from eternity foreseen, approved and decreed, and while this language is being used *in contrast* to the language of accommodation and to the language of repentance, there is no suggestion that we have difficulty in understanding it. Thus, according to Calvin, while we can understand that God literally knows, we cannot fully comprehend all aspects of God’s infinite knowledge. But this is hardly a surprising claim. The very fact that we can recognize certain expressions as divine accommodations to our human understanding implies that it is possible to think of God in unqualified or literal ways, though to say that we can do so does not mean that we can fully comprehend the meaning of such expressions when applied to God.

So it would be wrong to think of Calvin's remarks about accommodation as signalling a *reductionist* thesis, as if all expressions about God as he is in himself must be translated into anthropomorphic terms before they can be understood. (In any case would we not have to understand them in order for the translation to be made?) In other words, it would be inaccurate to read into Calvin's remarks the theological agnosticism of much post-Kantian Protestant theology. God is not, for Calvin, an unknowable *noumenon*. Indeed the reason that Calvin gives for the language of accommodation has little or nothing to do with the limitations of human knowledge.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the German eighteenth-century thinker, claimed that all human knowledge of the world around us, the objective world, takes place within the categories of space and time. The human mind is so structured that to suppose that we might have knowledge of whatever might exist beyond those boundaries is simply to generate antinomies, patterns of thought which are apparently contradictory. Thus, since God is outside space and time, Kant must be agnostic about his character and activities. God cannot be known, he is not an object of the theoretical reason, but morality requires that he must be postulated.

It is tempting to read Calvin's views about divine accommodation in these Kantian terms, but wrong to do so. Calvin's God as he is in himself is not the metaphysical or epistemological equivalent of Kant's thing-in-itself. The reason that Calvin is not an agnostic or a reductionist about the nature of God is that he believed that God has revealed much about himself in Scripture. For example, Calvin held that God has revealed that he does not (literally) repent. Believing this, Calvin could hardly be committed to the Kantian thesis that it is a necessary feature of the human mind that it cannot understand any of the features of what exists externally, beyond space and time. God cannot be fathomed by the human mind, he is unsearchable; therefore, though full or comprehensive knowledge of God is not possible, limited but accurate knowledge is.

Reductionism is one extreme to be avoided in the interpretation of Calvin's remarks. The other extreme is to think that for Calvin divine accommodation is a mere teaching tool, that it is pedagogically useful for us to have God represented to us in these human ways, and nothing more. Calvin does stress this pedagogical aspect: God, he says, lisps like a nurse; he speaks of himself in human terms to stir us from our natural torpor, for the language of

accommodation is vivid and immediate. But this is not all that Calvin has to say in defence of accommodation.

If each of these two extremes is to be avoided, what is Calvin saying? Calvin's position seems to be something like this: Given that God, the eternal God, has not only decreed the course of history but has himself acted in history, such actions can only be fully understood and, more particularly, can only be responded to, when they are taken to be the actions of a person who is himself in time and who therefore appears to change or vary in his action. More than this, if men and women, who are themselves in time, are to respond to God, then he must represent himself to them as one to whom response is possible, as one who acts and reacts in time. Only on such an understanding of divine activity is the divine-human interaction which is at the heart of biblical religion possible.

So at the centre of Calvin's remarks about divine accommodation is not so much a pragmatic or pedagogic as a logical point. It is a logically necessary condition of dialogue between people, or between God and mankind, that the partners in the dialogue should appear to act and react in time. If dialogue with God is to be real dialogue, then God's language about himself cannot be restricted to characterising himself as eternal and immutable, but he must accommodate himself to speak in ways which are characteristic of, and essential to, persons in dialogue with each other.

2. Implications of Calvin's View

In the remainder of this article I wish to consider in more detail some of the implications of this last paragraph. In particular, to consider whether, according to Calvin's doctrine of divine accommodation, God *really* engages in dialogue with humanity, or merely appears to do so. And if he merely appears to, does that matter?

It is clear from what Calvin says elsewhere¹⁰ that he holds that God exists in a timelessly eternal fashion. In this he follows Boethius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and a host of other Christian theologians. It follows from God's timeless eternity that he is immutable; he cannot change or be changed, since to change or be changed implies existence in time, and God is not in time. If God cannot change, then, though he may be able to act in time, it does not appear that he can react. He can timelessly decree an action, the

¹⁰ *Institutes* 3.21.5 [McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes*, 2:926-929].

effect of which occurs in time at a particular date. For instance, God can eternally decree that the sun rises at 7:47 on a particular morning and at a particular place. But he cannot react, since to react is to be in time. That is, he cannot respond to a prayer, since any response would have to occur after the prayer, and this would require God to be in time.

Or can he? In a recent article William Alston has pursued the question of whether a God who exists in timelessly eternal fashion can *respond*, which is essentially the same question.¹¹ It will be instructive to reflect upon Alston's argument.

Under normal circumstances conversational dialogue between people obviously entails the need to be able to reply to what has been said. But can a timeless God react by making a reply to what has been said to him? As we have seen, an obvious objection is that if God is timeless, he cannot believe anything that requires for its sense and appropriateness the occurrence of an event before the formation of the belief. If God literally replies to something that is uttered, his reply will have to occur after what it is a reply to. Or so it may seem. But Alston argues that the need for a reply to come after what is replied to is a contingent or accidental feature of replies. In his view something would be equally well a reply if it were contemporary with what it were a reply to.

If I could be so closely tied to you as to apprehend your cry while you are in the act of producing it, and if I were able to offer my consolation (or at least do the most immediate part of this, the volition) at that very same moment of apprehension, would I not still be responding to your cry?¹²

Perhaps Alston is correct in this, provided that we are warranted in thinking of the relation between a timeless God and his creation as

¹¹ "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God" in his *Divine Nature and Human Language*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 155.

one of simultaneity. Whether we are warranted in doing this is a large question, and thankfully we may let it pass here.¹³

Let us continue to follow Alston in his exposition. Supposing that there is nothing odd about a timeless reply, Alston then divides the question of whether a timeless deity could say something as a reply to a human utterance into two sub-questions.¹⁴ One question is, could an omnidetermining, timeless deity, a God who decides every detail of his creation, reply, for instance, to a question from Moses? What is of particular interest to us is that it is widely held that Calvin viewed God as omnidetermining; certainly Alston assumes this to be so, and though this is another large issue, we shall assume that Alston is correct. Alston's second sub-question is, could a timeless deity who is not omnidetermining do so? Clearly we have more interest in Alston's answer to the first question than that given to the second. :

To the first question Alston says — in a sense, yes. God's utterance could be performed as a reply to Moses, but not as a piece of genuine dialogue, for a genuine dialogue requires that the one replied to

'stands over against' God as something independent of His will, something introduced into the situation by the initiative of another, something to which He has to adjust His conduct, something that requires a special ad hoc 'response' on His part....Thus if the *uttered as a reply* condition is to be sufficient for genuine dialogue, we must specify that the X in question is, to some degree, independent of S's will.¹⁵

What of the second case? Could a timeless, omniscient God, one who does not determine every detail of his creation, enter into genuine dialogue? Alston claims that he could. Given that the divine response to a free human action could be simultaneous with that action "there

¹³ See, e.g., Paul Helm, *Eternal God. A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) and Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ "Divine-Human Dialogue and the Nature of God", 157.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

is no bar to the awareness of each and every free act, along with the responses thereto, occupying the one eternal now.”¹⁶

Let us for the moment concentrate our attention on the case of the God who is not omnidetermining, and suppose that Alston is correct in this claim. I shall, nevertheless, argue that such a God can no more nor less enter into dialogue than a timeless, omnidetermining God can, and that if the conditions for dialogue do not exist in the omnidetermining case they do not exist in the second case. In attempting to argue this, I shall make one assumption: that the human participant in this dialogue has some understanding of what it is for God to be timeless and omniscient, and believes that his divine interlocutor is both timeless and omniscient.

If what Alston says about timelessness and dialogue is correct, then, assuming divine omniscience, to every piece of human dialogue there timelessly exists a specification of the reply. The reply does not exist until it is uttered, but the specification of the reply exists timelessly. What the timeless deity does in entering into dialogue is not to formulate a new reply upon learning of the human utterance, but to utter in time what is timelessly true because timelessly known.

Let us turn our attention to the human partner in this dialogue. Either he is entitled to believe that a specification of the proposition that he is about to conceive and to utter, and the reply to it, exist timelessly, or he is not entitled to believe this. If he is not entitled to believe this, then a reason must be provided why a person may not believe what, given divine omniscience, is presumably true. But what could that reason be? And if the person is entitled to believe that there exists a specification of one proposition, then is he not entitled to believe that there is such a specification of every such proposition?

So suppose that the person does believe that such a specification exists. Of course he does not know what the specification is. Nevertheless, the fact that he believes that there is such a specification means that he believes something which is not a normal condition of inter-human dialogue. Let us suppose a conversation between Smith and Jones. It is a normal condition of such a conversation, of its “openness,” that Smith does not know what Jones will say until Jones forms and expresses his thought, and that Jones forms and expresses his thought believing that Smith does not possess a specification of it.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

Given these commonplace features of human conversation it follows that "dialogue" in the divine-human case has become somewhat stretched in meaning. For dialogue in the divine-human case contains the important feature that, in virtue of divine omniscience, the human partner in the dialogue may reasonably believe that God timelessly knows what has not yet come into his own mind. And this is sufficient to upset the mutuality which is a feature of human conversation and which Alston seeks to preserve in any acceptable account of divine-human dialogue.¹⁷

So we must conclude that dialogue or conversation between an omnidetermining God, the God of John Calvin (we suppose), and a human partner contains features that are absent from everyday conversation between men and women. But is this so surprising? Ought we not to expect that the conditions of divine-human dialogue could not exactly parallel dialogue between two people? And thus perhaps we ought to conclude that "dialogue" differs somewhat in meaning in the two cases. But does this mean that an omnidetermining God does not really engage in dialogue with men and women? Why does this follow?

If by the persuasiveness of some argument that we have not considered it does follow that an omnidetermining God cannot enter into genuine dialogue with his creatures, there would seem to be equally good reason to suppose that a timelessly eternal God who is not omnidetermining does not enter into genuine dialogue with men and women either. For what creates the difficulty is not whether or not God is omnidetermining, but the assumption that he is timelessly eternal.

The final matter that I wish to consider is the sense in which, according to Calvin, God may be said to change. Calvin says that the language of repentance when ascribed to God signifies change of action, though not correction, and that such a change carries with it no suggestion of remorse or compunction on God's part. At the same time neither God's plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered.

So Calvin wishes to claim both that God changes his action, and yet his plan and volition is unchanged. Is it possible to hold such a position consistently?

There are certain kinds of change that present no problem of consistency, and are required by any reasonably well-worked-out

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

account of providence. For example, if God decrees that the sun will rise, and decrees that it will set, has he changed? Well, the sun, in relation to planet earth, has changed, but has God changed? Clearly not; that the sun will rise at one time and set at another can be part of one eternal decree; otherwise God could not decree the course of anything. We must, as Augustine once put it, learn to distinguish changing a will from willing a change.

But what about God's commands? Suppose that at one time God permits polygamy, while at another time he forbids it. Has he changed? Has he changed his mind? Augustine also considers this kind of case:

I also did not know that true inward justice which judges not by custom but by the most righteous law of almighty God. By this law the moral customs of different regions and periods were adapted to their places and times, while that law itself remains unaltered everywhere and always.¹⁸

Augustine has in mind a situation where a father may at first forbid his child to do something, e.g. possess matches, and then permit the possession of matches. Has the father changed in his policy towards the child? Not necessarily. Not, that is, if what the father does at different times are different ways of carrying out the same policy. And perhaps "change" of this kind is necessary precisely in order to carry out one unchanging policy consistently over time, as the child grows and matures.

But what if God announces that he will do such and such a thing, and then shortly afterwards announces that he will not? He decrees the making of mankind, and then repents (Genesis 6:6); he establishes the kingship of Saul, and then repents, rejecting Saul (1 Samuel 15:26-8); he commands the overthrow of Nineveh, and then relents (Jonah 3:4); he decrees the death of Hezekiah, and then defers the death (Isaiah 38). Are these cases where God changes?

There seem to be at least two ways of arguing that they are not. In each of the examples we have cited there are significant changes between the time when God announces his first decree and his second. For example, between the time when God establishes Saul as

¹⁸ *Confessions* 3.7 [trans. Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 44].

king and rejects him, Saul disobeys. It is in the light of these changes that the second, countermanding decree is announced. Why is this any different from the case of the parent who, on judging that a child is sufficiently mature, permits what he had at an earlier time forbidden?

Of course, in the case of God we are able to suppose that he knew that Saul would deteriorate morally, or that Hezekiah would pray to him for a longer life. Thus, we might suppose that God has one eternal decree with respect to Saul, for example; to establish him as king and then, in the light of his foreknown deterioration, to reject him. Fortunately, perhaps, the question of why God should go to this trouble is not one that we can pursue here.

A second way of arguing that God does not change, even when he is said to repent, is to suppose that the first decree has a tacitly conditional form. In other words, God decrees the kingship of Saul on the understanding that he will be an honourable and obedient king. A parent may say to his child "Provided that you will not misuse them, you may have matches." Neither God nor the parent changes if Saul or the child are disobedient and (in Saul's case) he is deprived of the kingship and (in the child's case) of the matches. Such a defence of God's changelessness might find support from what the Bible represents as the covenantal character of his promises.¹⁹

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¹⁹ I have tried to develop this point more fully in "Omnipotence and Change", *Philosophy*, 51 (1976), 454-461.