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God, Eternity and Time—An Essay in Review of Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*

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It is a datum of Jewish and of Christian faith that God is unimaginable, not just because of his immensity or for quantitative reasons but in that he is not of a kind of which we can form a mental or physical image. He is also said to be incomprehensible: his being and nature beyond our grasp. So, Scripture has been thought of as presenting models about which critical thought has to be exercised as to how far they are to be taken literally, or with what qualifications they need to be used or understood.

This is the background within which we have to consider Padgett's instructive treatment of God's relationship to time (*God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, New York: St. Martin's Press, and London, Macmillan, 1992, xi + 173 pp. h.b. £35). This is a significant book because it is much more careful and precise both in its argument and in respectful presentation of reasons influencing the traditional views which he rejects than any other book I have met in this area. Secondly, this matter—of how we are to understand God's eternity—is of great importance to Christians and believers in God of any kind to get clear. For, if we understand eternity as mere everlastingness, then it seems that we are in danger of reducing him who is worshipped to the level of the creature.

Taken in the way which seems most immediately natural, the Scriptures present a view of God as existing at 'the beginning' when he created heaven and earth, as existing now and as existing at all intervening times and forever, and so as 'everlasting'. In this commonsense way, he 'endures' through or over all times. 'In his basic nature, character or perfections', God does not change, as Padgett observes (p. 124, here praising I. A. Dorner for his account of God's immutability)—nor, one must say, in his basic dispositions

and plan for creation—but God is spoken of in the Old Testament as if he changes his mind as to his future actions in particular cases and unsurprisingly Padgett insists that at least it must be that God allows his activity to change in relation to the changing world he sustains. And this he regards as a change in God.

But does this present an adequate view of the eternity and immutability of God? or a right exegesis of Scriptural teaching, taken in a rounded way?

Padgett's book argues that it does, in this way giving a carefully reasoned presentation of what has become the most fashionable view in Anglo-Saxon philosophical and theological circles.

In this he sets aside the longstanding orthodoxy to which Boethius gave the classical formulation: 'Eternity is the all-at-once [or 'all-in-one-act', *tota simul*] and perfect possession of life without beginning or end'. He gives a careful review of most of the biblical texts which might seem to attribute eternity in this sense of timelessness to God, showing that these texts can naturally bear a weaker interpretation (Chapter 2). Padgett's underlying motive for rejecting the traditional view is that he thinks (Chapter 4) that for God to be eternal in this sense of timeless or atemporal would imply what he calls the stasis view of time—the view that time is unreal, so that all things are in reality as it were contemporary with each other, the appearance of temporal relation arising from the forms of human experience and understanding. In Chapter 5, he considers all the arguments for such a stasis view of time from relativity theory and from philosophy which he can find and suggests refutations of all of them. He never disproves the stasis theory but takes the reasonable view that if there is no compelling reason either from theology or from philosophy for accepting it, then we ought to stay with the common sense of the process theory of time. Finally, in Chapter 6, he struggles to explain his own view of God's Lordship of time and the duration in God's own life, while giving reasons for rejecting Whitehead's process theology and the incoherences of Barth, considering each with respect and in detail.

The most valuable feature of Padgett's book lies in the care of its presentation of argument, and his respect for those with whom he disagrees, most especially as these appear in Chapter 3 in which he gives a careful review of the history of explicit discussion of eternity. He first traces the idea through the pagans, Parmenides, Plato, Plutarch and Plotinus; then distinguishes the different considerations which influenced Origen, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas in their shaping of explicit Christian orthodoxy; and then sets the subsequent questionings of Scotus and of Hegel and those influenced by him in the context of their failure to make any impact on what was considered orthodoxy until well into this century.

For the features I have already detailed, and for its evident concern for truth, the book is worth study and acquisition even just as a reference book.

Let me comment on Padgett's treatment of Scripture before passing on to what I believe to be the key defects in Padgett's book, namely the philosophical assumptions which he brings to his study.

It is, I believe, quite wrong to think of the idea of eternity as atemporal or timeless life as opposed to mere everlastingness as just a product of Parmenidean and Platonic rooted arguments. It has strong roots in scriptural passages which Padgett does not consider at all, in particular the I AM passages and the key announcements which begin 'In the beginning'.

The significance of the name of God in Exodus 3:14, commonly rendered 'I AM', is not a matter simply of the understanding of Jews in the 15th, 13th, 9th or 5th century B.C. Words carry resonances which have opened out theological understanding and development (this is very evident with O.T. messianic passages) both for Jews and Christians, and this development—often continuous between the period of the giving of Revelation and the period of the Fathers—is authoritative when signalled within the Scriptures themselves. In the case of the I AM passages we can see Isaiah 40–57, Psalm 90:2 and Wisdom 13:1 (whether regarded as canonical or deuterocanonical) as leading up to the I AM passages in St John and the Book of Revelation, of which the most dramatic is Jesus' saying 'Before Abraham was, I am'. In later Christian reflection, the title was often taken as marking his eternity as something of a different order from everlastingness just as much as his possession of existence in his own right often referred to as his self-existence or aseity (the intrinsicness of the necessity of his existence). This explains, for instance, why in Augustine's *De Trinitate* existence does not have the pre-eminence over all other attributes of God which it has in Aquinas.

The importance of the 'in the beginning' passages is yet plainer. Genesis leaves no place for a time before God made heaven and earth, and therefore no place for the idea of time as a vessel without beginning containing both God and creation. The Prologue of St John confirms this perspective, showing us that, at this beginning, the Word already was, implying that the begetting of the Son was not a temporal event, and here St John's Gospel is echoed in Hebrews 1. So Athanasius' insistence that there was no 'was' in which the Son was not is therefore thoroughly Scriptural, thereby making it clear that the 'before' in the 'before all ages (times, worlds)' in the Nicene Creed is not a temporal 'before'. God's existence in itself is not temporal, but causally before all things as something already complete.

Therefore, though the thought of St Augustine is later than this, there is nothing Platonic about his enquiry in the Confessions, Book XI, when he reflects on the stupidity of the question 'why didn't God create the world earlier than he did?' and opens the way to the conception of time as concreated with temporal things—time is constituted in the very act of initiating and continuing the existence of temporal things in their mutual relations. In this sense, Time itself is something created.

Here we are lighting upon the first of Padgett's key philosophical oversights, the fact that there are not just two views of the status of time, the stasis view making time unreal (a matter of how certain relations are experienced or understood by us), and the process view whereby time is real, but more than two. In particular, it is vital to distinguish two different views of the reality of time, one making time something absolute like a kind of place within which both God and creation are situated alongside each other, and the other still leaving time internal to a causal system, in particular the system of created things intended to relate to each other, not independent of it. (The latter view would make time correlative with temporal unfolding, but mark the reality of time in insisting that temporal relations do not consist in causal ones since, when pastness renders a thing incapable of being acted on causally, temporal relation has determined possible causal relation, not vice versa. The past is the will of God and other free agents as already declared, not in mind or word only, but in the act of having made it so.)

The difference in these views of the reality of time appears in the superficiality of Padgett's treatment of the problems raised by the Special Theory of Relativity. His discussion is well-marshalled and interesting, but it is difficult to see anything but a theological motive in the contortions and speculations involved in his final view (p. 94), of a cosmic time which might restore absolute simultaneity and with it an absolute time order. But, of course, he has to have an absolute time order between events since he has to have an absolute time order between acts of exercised choice inside God causing them and being simultaneous with them. But, as we shall see, one can regard this idea of acts of exercised choice inside God as a dualist mistake. And, if one regards the Universe as consisting in the things in it rather than vice versa, then God will sustain the Universe by sustaining the things in it, free in regard to each, so that the temporal relation of his acts of sustaining will not matter—the Universe is not a single big object.

But why does he feel compelled to reject the traditional view of eternity?

Here I come to the two key philosophical assumptions which he

shares uncritically with most other contemporary discussions and which distort the interpretation of earlier Christian tradition.

In the first place, of the key theologians mentioned, Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, *none* would envisage any idea of tenseless speech about God and *all* would reject the stasis theory of time. Padgett's view that their conception of eternity implies stasis in creation should therefore seem very surprising—how could they have missed seeing this? His principal argument is that, if all things, past, present and future, are to be present all at once (*simul*) to God, it follows that they must all be *simul* to each other. But this is an entire misconception. Neither the word 'present' nor the word '*simul*' is being used in a single sense, but only in different senses.

For past, present and future to be *simul* to each other would be for them all to be at the same mundane time as this is measured by continuous regular motions, but for them to be 'present to God' means only for them to be 'present as objects of knowledge or intentionally as objects of will'. The comparison of time to the circumference of a circle each point of which is present to God as the centre did not imply for Aquinas the contemporaneity of the different points of mundane time to each other—indeed the text Padgett cites (p. 50) excludes this since it states that the things which are present to God are still past or future in respect of other parts of time. Scotus (p. 51) made the same mistake as Padgett, taking 'present' to mean 'at the same instant of continuous time', as if the word was univocal—by a parallel argument God would have to be in one place and not at other places. God's presence in time is not by a localised point of his life being simultaneous and local to just one point in our 'space-time'.

Yet more crucial: for God's life to be possessed *simul* is not for it to be possessed in one instant of mundane time as this is measured by continuous regular motions, but for it to be possessed in one act. This is the significance of Aquinas' insistence that the 'now' of eternity is not the 'now' of time (S.Th. Ia, Q. 10, art. 1 ad 5, art. 4 ad 2). To understand this we have to realise that the notion of point is correlative with the notion of a continuous line, so that a point is a divide in a line, not a part of it, and the notion of point is thus a technical one—not the completely open general notion of 'place' as 'where' something is or happens. The notion of an instant of time is totally dependent upon the notion of spatial point, an instant being the time a thing in continuous motion is at a point for no period, and is therefore even more an entirely technical one—an instant is not a time within which or at which anything can happen, neither the thinking of the thought the post has gone nor seeing something as moving, by contrast with the informal notion of moment as the time

at which an act happens or an activity is complete. *Eternity is the now of a life, an act, an activity—but not a period, nor an instant in the technical sense of a divide in a continuous period.* (In axiom 3 on p. 121 Padgett's opposite univocal conception of the NOW figures in combination with his notion of a cosmic absolute simultaneity.)

Padgett's key mistake, I suggest, lies in considering that there are only two ways of being present in time, over a period or at an instant *as these are considered in the treatment of the continuous*—whereas the right thing is to consider the present and being present in the light of the use of the present tense so that, e.g. in one use of the present tense the present is the time of a process which takes time to complete, in another the time of an act which we speak of as if it were complete in itself, and so forth. A time is the 'when' of something (of which the 'while' is a determination), so that again we have an entirely open concept, not tied to the continuous.

Padgett's second reason for thinking that there must be temporal successiveness in the life of God lies in his dualist way of thinking of action whereby action involves what we may call an exercised choice in the will (a choice or intention, not as a standing state of mind which we might change, but as an intentional exercise to cause the intended effect) causing the intended bodily movement by means of directly causing certain brain states (the view he announces on p. 21). This dualist model requires distinct changes in God (from not exercising choice, to exercising it, to its exercise being over) correlative to any development in creation caused by him. But Aquinas rejects this imaginative model: in his conception, the action including the exercised choice internal to it is not in the agent as in virtue of being agent[1] but in the scene of the effect (acts of will are in his view real in the patient, not in the agent). But this dualist model of action is demonstrably incoherent even in regard to human action (I have brought together old and new arguments showing this in Chapter 4 of my book *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit*)—the primary act of will is not in an antecedent choice or intention which we might change, but in the intentional action itself, the act of will or exercised choice internal to it (this is why the time after which one does not pray that God grant something is the time of its happening or not happening, not the time of some eternal decree in God's will).

[1] Although they may be so for a secondary reason, e.g. human beings are locally in the world, and in this sense their souls are also in virtue of human unity. Moreover, when human beings act in the physical world there are changes in respect of our body, e.g. of our hands and brain, and these are in the scene of the effect, in virtue of their physical character. By contrast, God is not in the world locally, and when God acts in the physical world he works without either hands or brain so that there are no parallel changes required in him.

There exist other quite different reasons for saying God endures. Firstly, he existed at all past times, exists now and will exist at all future times, since whenever his creative or sustaining activity is present there he exists as an agent is immediate to his act. Secondly, one may say that he endures in order to deny that he exists for an instant only, conveying that (in a metaphor) his existence contains or is the room of a life, an act, an activity, which contains in itself an infinite richness, order without successiveness. It is this latter idea that Kretzmann and Stump seem to be struggling after (their incidental difficulties are well exposed in Padgett's pp. 66–68). But these other reasons do not make God change or make him co-eval with time or the temporal as one thing beside or within another.

Padgett makes (pp. 134ff.) kind reference to my book *The Reality of Time and the Existence of God*, which tussles with the difficult idea of 'incompositeness' (I had avoided the word 'simplicity' because of its Platonic overtones for modern readers), an idea to which he objects. This notion came into my book in an attempt to explain the implications of saying that the necessity of God's existence is intrinsic to him. I note that in Padgett this necessity seems only extrinsic, consisting in the absence of any causal background which might leave it open that God should not exist. I see simplicity as a secondary corollary of this intrinsicness whereby God's necessity of existence is not just a brute fact but rooted in his self-sufficiency, the fullness out of which other things come by his free act. I do not see this general perspective as primary proof of God's non-temporality, but as corroborative and setting its context. Rather, the starting point for thought should be the internality of time and temporal order to the causal system of created nature, something as evident to modern scientists as it was to Aristotle, and insisted on by Athanasius and Augustine for theological reasons: this makes the idea of a temporal order embracing both God and creation a fantasy resulting from trying make the unimaginable fit the human imagination.

However, Padgett does not discuss his main disagreement with me. My book centres on an argument that the reality of time precisely implies the timelessness of God, and precisely because only an atemporal or timeless God could sustain the world. His argument is the opposite: that the reality of time and God's sustaining activity imply temporality. The reason I say that a changing God cannot be the explanation of the world is not the one Padgett considers on p. 133 (that a changing thing requires an explanation of why it changes). *Rather the point is that if created things because of their temporality need sustaining in existence through time, then so would God if he were temporal.* A changing thing has different stages

or points in its existence, and its nature at a previous stage or point cannot be the explanation of its continuing existence through to the other stages, because in order for a thing's nature to be exercised at any later time the thing has to exist at that time—a thing's nature has no existence apart from the thing. A temporal thing cannot reach forward so as, from that earlier time, to act at a later time to cause its own existence at that later time; if it does not already exist at the later time, its nature cannot be exercised at that time; and, if it already exists at a time, that existence no longer needs a cause.

In brief, because the future does not yet exist, our future existence is contingent. If God had temporal existence, his future would be contingent. Only an atemporal or timeless God whose life is present immediately whole in its full power at every place and time, his life undivided bestraddling all times, can sustain things in existence through time, concreating time in the act of continuing the existence of temporal things in their ordered relations. And, contrary to what Padgett says (p. 136), *it is absolutely vital that God himself is present in our time*, presently interior to that which is innermost to each thing, its very existence. Agents are internal to their acts and therefore when their acts are present they are present: hence God is present, and exists now and here and neither of these in a secondary sense. *God with his eternity exists now*, this being in our ordinary present tense.

This is philosophy and theology in unity. Other things are known by revelation only, amongst them God's foreknowledge. It is strange that Padgett never discusses Boethius' argument that it is possible to explain God's foreknowledge without determinism only if God is timeless.

Therefore, this book does not do justice to traditional Scriptural, theological and philosophical considerations. Yet it does seem to be the most careful treatment of traditional views which those preferring a temporal God have yet given us, with considerable use for reference purposes.

Abstract

The reviewer commends Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, as an important reference book on its subject. He criticises the author for his rejection of the traditional view of eternity in favour of the view that there is temporal successiveness in the life of God, and enters into dialogue with his comments on the reviewer's own work.