

FAITH AND THE RHETORIC  
OF RELIGIOUS PARADOX:

an Essay

by

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## ABSTRACT

Within Judeo-Christian theism many of the initially-sounding paradoxical and counter-intuitive expressions—such as Martin Luther’s description of the Christian believer as *simul peccator et iustus*—seem oftentimes contradictory, or at least pointless, to the unbeliever. Yet, these expressions play an important role within the theistic context of faith. The present essay promotes the view that such expressions should not be *eliminatively* reduced to “equivalent” restatements of them in non-paradoxical language. For the paradoxical formulations are themselves instinct with a rhetorical force that makes their putative religious truth seem all the more penetrating and prepossessing.

## FAITH AND THE RHETORIC OF RELIGIOUS PARADOX

In developing his penetrating account of the Christian religion, Søren Kierkegaard accentuates the idea that Christianity is a religion of paradox. Indeed, he says, Christianity teaches the absolute paradox—the paradox that the eternal and immutable God entered into history as the Incarnate Christchild but did so without God Himself’s having become historical and temporal. Kierkegaard borders upon thinking that the absolute paradox expresses a contradiction—expresses, that is, not just a view that goes *beyond* human reason’s grasp but a view that runs diametrically *counter to* human reason’s dictates. Thus, in *Fear and Trembling* he can say that “faith begins where thinking leaves off.” In the history of Western philosophy Kierkegaard was not the first to draw attention to Christianity’s paradoxical theological doctrines. For the entire medieval Neoplatonic Christian tradition—taking its lead from Plotinus, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius—characterized God, paradoxically, as both all in all and nothing in nothing, as both maximal being and minimal being, as both the being of being and the not-being of not-being, as comprehensible only incomprehensibly, as nameable only unnameably, as partakeable only unpartakeably. Moreover, the Old Testament itself speaks of God as loving the Israelites with an everlasting love<sup>1</sup> but yet as blinding their eyes and hardening their hearts in order that they not see and not be converted.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the New Testament speaks paradoxically when it depicts Jesus as claiming “Before Abraham was, I am,”<sup>3</sup> and as asserting “I am in the Father and the Father is in me,”<sup>4</sup> for “I and the Father are one.”<sup>5</sup>

### I

In this paper I want to discuss the *rhetoric* of paradox. I will not be interested in paradox insofar as a paradox is taken to be something absolute in Kierkegaard’s sense—i.e., to be something whose articulation is either *intrinsically* contradictory (*per se contradictorium*) or contradictory as concerns our cognitive abilities (*quoad nos contradictorium*). Rather, I am interested in the many paradoxical religious utterances that can be more or less equivalently re-expressed (though with rhetorical loss) in terms that seem to be reasonable and discerning. And I am primarily interested in those paradoxical expressions that convey practical truths. I use the phrase “religious paradoxical utterance,” then, in an informal manner to indicate an utterance that although it immediately strikes one as counter-intuitive, given one’s background as a theist (and, particularly, one’s background as a Judeo-Christian theist), nevertheless is regarded by such theists as

portraying important truth. A pointed example of such an utterance is Martin Luther's command "*Pecca fortiter*": "Sin boldly."<sup>6</sup> Since religious believers rightly understand that they are to avoid sin, Luther's imperative strikes them immediately as counter-intuitive. Indeed, it appears to be urging them not only to sin but to do so with abandon.

Similarly, when Augustine enjoins "*Dilige, et quod vis fac*"<sup>7</sup> ("Love, and do what you please"), this command seems to be at odds with the principles of Christian theism; for, surely, doing things out of love does not guarantee that they are morally right, since even acts of compassion (such as acts of euthanasia) may be morally wrong. And, assuredly, the formula "Do what you please"—whether or not one's doing is out of love—sounds like a formula that opens the door to self-deception and to moral ruin. In another vein, what is one to say of St. Paul's exhortation to believers to give to God the Father thanks always for all things, in the name of Christ Jesus?<sup>8</sup> What moral or spiritual—or even conceptual—sense does it make to express gratitude to God for the disasters that beset one? If a believer's child is kidnapped, tortured, and murdered, shall the parent, nonetheless, give thanks to God? If a believer suffers a head-and-spinal-cord injury and becomes a quadriplegic, does it make moral or spiritual sense for a minister to exhort him to be grateful that he is still alive? Yet, Paul says that Christian believers are to give thanks for *all* things—and *always*. Now, the concept of *showing gratitude* or the concept of *being grateful* receives its ordinary meaning from contexts in which something good has happened to us or in which something bad has been avoided. In relation to such contexts we learn the meaning of "gratitude"; i.e., we learn both what it is to be grateful and how to express our gratefulness appropriately. The notion of gratitude, however, would seem to lose all meaning once it becomes stretched as far as to cover situations of horror and of repugnance.

Likewise, isn't there something morally perplexing, morally counter-intuitive, about St. Paul's claim that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose"?<sup>9</sup> One is asked to believe that since he loves God, all of his failures, all of the wrongs that he commits, all of the wrongs and ills that he suffers, work together not only for his own good but for the good of other Christian believers as well. Is not such a claim morally dubious, even morally and spiritually offensive? Wouldn't such a claim be something like claiming that good can come from evil but that evil cannot come

from good? And wouldn't this latter claim be untrue to experience? Or, better stated, wouldn't it, perhaps, be an example of an *analytic* truth?: its propounder is someone who defines "good" and "evil" in such a way that, necessarily, evils can be viewed as producing goods, but not vice versa. And this outcome will be reminiscent of Satan, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*—Satan, who apostrophizes: "Evil, be thou my good."

Though some kinds of utterance seem both morally and spiritually paradoxical, other kinds make perfectly good moral sense but, *mutatis mutandis*, are nonsense in a religious context. Suppose that years ago a father physically abused and sexually molested his small daughter. Suppose, furthermore, that she is now an adult and has confronted him about these childhood traumas. Suppose, finally, that the father, grievingly repentant, implores his daughter's forgiveness, which then is given, so that reconciliation follows. Were the man subsequently to lament, "I know that my daughter forgives me, but I cannot forgive myself," his utterance would reflect deep moral awareness. By contrast, how religiously counter-intuitive would be his uttering the sentiment, "I know that *God* forgives me, but I cannot forgive myself"!<sup>10</sup> For in a religious context, one's forgiving oneself is ordinarily taken to be a part of his practical knowledge that God has forgiven him, so that if he does not and cannot forgive himself, then he does not really believe that God has forgiven him.

Yet, the reverse is also sometimes true: namely, that what seems not to make sense in a moral context does make sense in a religious context. In some respects, for example, one's wife might know him better than he knows himself; in some instances she might know what he ought morally to do better than he himself knows what he ought to do. Accordingly, she is very close to him—so close that she might even be *dearer* to him than he is to himself. But only *God*, not his wife, can be *nearer* to him than he is to himself. But what exactly does it mean for God to be "nearer to me than I am to myself"?<sup>11</sup> What would it mean for me to be ontologically more distant from myself than is God? Can the explanation of God's nearness be such that it is comprehensible?<sup>12</sup> Or is such paradoxical discourse but an instance of nonsense?

Here a further consideration becomes relevant: namely, that some paradoxical religious utterances may seem nonsensical to unbelievers but not to believers, just as some utterances might be offensive to unbelievers but not to believers. Suppose a believer were to say: "In giving myself to God, I give Him

everything; and in giving myself to God, I give Him nothing.” If this spiritually redolent avowal were to seem bizarre to an unbeliever, it would not be because he regarded the statement as obviously incoherent but because he failed to detect its spiritual point and, thus, failed to see beyond the utterance’s supposed pointlessness. Were such an unbeliever presented with Simone Weil’s answer to her question “Why do we suffer?”—namely, the answer “in order to be taught that God is everything and that we are nothing”<sup>13</sup>—he might well be offended, even though a devout religious believer would find the answer deeply insightful.

## II

Paradoxical religious utterances of the kinds that I have been mentioning are utterances that contain deep religious disclosures and that have a powerful rhetorical appeal precisely because of their ostensible paradoxicality. This paradoxicality does not exclude their reasonableness; instead, it serves as an invitation to look for the deep-reasonableness that underlies the *prima facie* counter-intuitiveness. Though the utterances differ from proverbs, they share with proverbs the same power to awaken, to illumine, to call forth insight. Suppose we consider the Arabian proverb: “I complained because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.” This saying illuminatingly reminds us of our having cause to be grateful and uncomplaining even when matters seem not to be going well for us. “Be glad,” it tells us, “for the goods that you have.” And this message speaks to our tendency to grumble and (like the Israelites under Moses) to murmur. But we must not push the proverb too far, for then it will fail to disclose. “I complained because I had no feet until I met a man who had no legs” or “I complained because I had no legs until I met a man who had neither legs nor arms” conveys no special insight. Similarly, when the classical writer Horace stated “*invitum qui servat, idem facit occidenti*”<sup>14</sup> (“He who saves a man’s life against his will does the same thing as killing him”), he expresses a subtly deep insight. Yet, it is not an insight that applies to any and all contexts; the saying cannot be pushed too far without its expressing a belief that actually runs counter to reasonableness. For example, some individuals who against their will are saved from committing suicide express subsequent gratitude, once their depression is treated. Saving them against their momentary will is not the moral equivalent of killing them.

In a parallel way, St. Paul’s exhortation to the believers at Ephesus to give thanks *always* for *all* things is spiritually meaningful and theologically intelligible only if it is understood not to apply to all circumstances in one and the same way.

A parent whose child is kidnapped and sadistically killed cannot rightly be expected to, or rightly be exhorted to, give thanks therefor. However, the parent may rightly ask for, and receive, the grace not to despair; and for the gift of this grace the parent might well be grateful. Similarly, it is unreasonable to believe, unqualifiedly, that all things work together for good to those who love God. But though it is unreasonable to believe that *in this lifetime* all things work together for good, it may well be a sign of strong faith to believe that there will be recompense in the next life. After all, didn't the Apostle Paul also say elsewhere<sup>15</sup> that if a believer has hope in Christ only for this lifetime, then he is of all men most pitiable?

Luther's "Sin boldly" is, of course, not at all an invitation to sin. Instead, it is intended as a reassurance to believers that their sins, if confessed and repented of, will not cause the loss of their salvation. And the whole point of Augustine's "Love, and do what you please" is to urge believers to act out of love and to bring their desires into harmony with the commandments of love.<sup>16</sup> If taken too literally or if over-interpreted, Augustine's and Luther's utterances become either unreasonable dicta or, *ad extremum*, spiritual and moral nonsense.

What is the point of a religious community's making use of paradoxical expressions instead of simply spelling out explicitly that which the expressions intimate only implicitly? Isn't the point of the usage the following?: namely, that the paradoxical utterances have a rhetorical and revelatory force that would be lost if they were replaced by less pithy propositions? Job's lament "He will slay me, but I will trust in Him"<sup>17</sup> seems paradoxical precisely because a reader does not immediately understand why God would slay anyone if that person trusted in Him; and why would anyone continue to trust in God if he believed that God were going to slay him? Yet, Job's pithy and paradoxical lament succeeds in expressing the measure of Job's faith in much the same way as does the Kierkegaardian Abraham's "All is lost but God is love."<sup>18</sup> The intensity, poignancy, and steadfastness of this faith would not be captured by the use of less dramatic, less rhetorical, less contrapuntal forms of discourse. In this light, then, faith's practical—i.e., non-theoretical—paradoxical expressions become unintelligible only when one attempts to apply them to contexts over which they are not intended to range. The petition "O Lord, I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief"<sup>19</sup> does not express a contradiction. Yet, when one reads it for the first time, one is struck by the apparent opposition between believing and not-believing. But, as

one comes to see, the opposition expresses the religious truth that faith does not so much dispel all doubt as it does encompass and overwhelm doubt, which tends always to lurk within the sphere of faith. Likewise, St. Paul's self-admonition to comport himself as someone "having nothing but possessing all things"<sup>20</sup> makes perfectly good sense, as does also, in last analysis, Richard of St. Victor's exultation (with respect to Adam's first sin) "*O felix culpa!*" ("O blessed sin!"),<sup>21</sup> even though, on the surface, both expressions seem instinct with theological incoherence. But neither of them is oxymoronic, as is, say, Dr. Jack Kevorkian's paradoxical talk about "suicide by proxy."<sup>22</sup>

At times, the problem with paradoxical religious utterances of a practical sort is not that they cannot be sensibly unpacked but that the religious community is not certain just *how far* they are to be unpacked. For example, someone might unpack Richard of St. Victor's "*O felix culpa!*" by regarding it as licensing the claim "Just as it is true that there is falsehood, so it is good that there is evil." But we have no immediate understanding of the way or ways—of the sense or senses—in which it is *good* that there be evil. Or again: if someone were to announce that just as one can be blinded by light, so also he can be harmed by goodness, it would not immediately be clear (1) in what way goodness can be noxious and (2) why if it is noxious we continue to call it goodness.

Sometimes paradoxical religious expressions convey a message that cannot readily be satisfactorily unpacked. And yet, the implicit theology that they contain is essential to the religion. Kierkegaard thought of Christianity as the most paradoxical of all religions. And he believed that Christianity would not be Christianity in the absence of such paradoxes. Luther, too, viewed Christianity as essentially a paradoxical religion. In brooding over Matthew 27:46—where Jesus on the Cross cries out "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"—Luther is reputed to have sighed: "*Gott von Gott verlassen! Wer kann es fassen?*" ("God forsaken by God! Who can understand it?") Not only is this paradox *generated* by Orthodox Christian theology but a detailed exposition of that theology's Christology and Trinitarianism would be required in order even to begin to *make sense of the notion* that God could be forsaken by God. The grasping of such an exposition would require much scholarly background, so that it would be beyond the reach of most Christians. Yet, the very paradoxicality serves to goad the orthodox believer into thinking more profoundly about the orthodox view of the interrelationship between Christ's two natures as united in the one Divine



Person. In a similar way, as Luther recognized, the orthodox believer is constrained to ponder the doctrine of salvation when Matthew 16:25 is seen to present Jesus as saying, paradoxically: “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”

### III

But, to return to the paradoxical religious utterances of a practical sort: within Christian theism these are *prima facie* counter-intuitive utterances (1) of great rhetorical force, (2) whose contextually embedded quintessential moral or spiritual meaning comes to be understood through an insight, but (3) whose further connotations and implications, if not qualified, may prove to be unintelligible or false. The New Testament verse “The foolishness of God is wiser than men”<sup>23</sup> is a case in point. It initially strikes a religious believer as counter-intuitive, because believers do not regard there to be any folly with God. The utterance draws its rhetorical force from the juxtaposition of two sets of contrasting motifs: (a) the divine and the human and (b) wisdom and foolishness. Secondly, its quintessential meaning and its purported truth are discernible within the context of Christian theology. And, thirdly, if asserted unqualifiedly, it will become untenable, implausible, or incomprehensible—as would occur were one to suppose that God sometimes acts or thinks or wills in less than fully perfect ways.<sup>24</sup>

A general conclusion similar to the immediately foregoing one can be made about all the statements that I have previously mentioned and about numerous others—e.g., that the first shall be last and the last shall be first,<sup>25</sup> that the dead are to be left to bury their dead,<sup>26</sup> that the way to exaltation is through humility,<sup>27</sup> that when a Christian is weak, then he is strong,<sup>28</sup> that “the weakness of God is stronger than men,”<sup>29</sup> that “the power of sin is the law,”<sup>30</sup> that “I die daily,”<sup>31</sup> that “not by might nor by power but by my spirit” (saith the Lord),<sup>32</sup> that “Him who knew no sin God made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him,”<sup>33</sup> that “he who finds his life shall lose it but he who loses his life for Christ’s sake shall find it,”<sup>34</sup> and so on. Ordinarily, within Christianity, the paradoxical is not the nonsensical, is not the logically absurd. “My strength is made perfect in weakness” does not express an incoherence—any more than does Socrates’ claim to be wise on account of his recognition of his ignorance. Likewise, Paul’s stating “I die daily” is not like someone’s saying “I blink daily with my teeth”—an utterance that is nonsense. Instead, it is like someone’s saying “I see

daily with my fingers”—an utterance that is not nonsense but, rather, is readily clear in the proper context, namely, the context of reading by means of braille. If one dies daily to oneself—if one is crucified daily with Christ—then one must also arise daily in Christ. Language such as this constitutes an impediment to unbelievers, who may have no background enabling them to see any point to it.

#### IV

As for the *theoretical* domain, paradoxical religious utterances in that domain will also be intelligible only if the theological inferences that are elicitable from them are intelligible. Thus, for instance, when Nicholas of Cusa recurs to the Hermetic tradition’s declaration “God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere,”<sup>35</sup> this metaphorical declaration will be comprehensible only if the theological doctrine of divine omnipresence is comprehensible. Similarly, “In all things God is all things, and in nothing He is nothing” will be intelligible only if the theological doctrine that God both transcends the world and is immanent in it is intelligible.

Are the principal teachings (*doctrinae maiores*) of Christian theism reasonable, or are adherents asked to believe them *quia absurdae sunt?*—e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and the doctrine of the Incarnation. No matter how devotees of Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* may answer this question, and no matter how they may respond to the claim that at least the doctrine of the Incarnation constitutes an unconditional, or absolute, paradox: they still imply, through their very adherence to Christianity, that it is reasonable for them to accept such an unreasonable doctrine. They are forced to agree with Augustine’s blanket assertion:

Thus, if it is reasonable that faith precede reason with respect to certain profound issues which cannot yet be comprehended, then without doubt the reasonableness (no matter how slight) that persuades us of this precedence, itself precedes faith.<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, these Kierkegaardian devotees must also agree that moral and spiritual paradoxical utterances, as they are embedded in the discourse of Christian theistic practice, oftentimes have a putatively profound truth-content that only an unbeliever will find unreasonable or pointless. To the informed believer the rhetorical aspect of faith’s discourse will seem to render the putative inner rationale of faith all the more profound, all the more inviting, all the more inducive to further reflection and meditation.

## NOTES

1. Jeremiah 31:3.
2. Isaiah 6:10. John 12:39-40. Cf. also Mark 4:11-12 with II Peter 3:9.
3. John 8:58. Cf. Romans 11:8.
4. John 14:9-10.
5. John 10:30.
6. Martin Luther's letter to Philip Melanchthon from Wartburg, August 1, 1521.
7. Augustine, *In Epistolam Joannes ad Parthos* 7.4.8 (*PL* 35:2033).
8. Ephesians 5:20.
9. Romans 8:28.
10. This example, adapted somewhat, is borrowed from D. Z. Phillips.
11. Eckhart ascribes the saying to Augustine. See Meister Eckhart, *Predigt 10: In diebus suis*, pp. 161-162 lines 8f. in *Die deutschen Werke*, Vol. I, edited and translated by Josef Quint (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936). Note Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 74.9 (*Patrologia Latina* 36:953, line 2). See also *Predigt 68: Scitote, quia prope est regnum dei* [Luke 21:31], p. 142, line 2 in Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, Vol. III, edited and translated by Josef Quint (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1976).
12. For example, could the dictum be expressing not a metaphysical claim but only an epistemic claim?—to wit, that God *knows* me in every respect better than I *know* myself.
13. Cited from D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 54.
14. Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 467.
15. I Corinthians 15:19.
16. Matthew 22:36-39.
17. Job 13:15.
18. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.
19. Mark 9:24.
20. II Corinthians 6:10.
21. See his *De Verbo Incarnato*, Chap. 8 (*Patrologia Latina* 196:1003B).
22. Jack Kevorkian, *Prescription: Medicide* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 200.
23. I Corinthians 1:25.
24. Cf. Matthew 5:48.

25. Mark 10:31.
26. Luke 9:60.
27. Matthew 18:4 and 23:12.
28. II Corinthians 12:10.
29. I Corinthians 1:25.
30. I Corinthians 15:56.
31. I Corinthians 15:31.
32. Zechariah 4:6.
33. II Corinthians 5:21.
34. Matthew 10:39.
35. Cf. Nicholas's *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 11 (157) and II, 12 (162) with his *De Ludo Globi*, Book II, margin number 84.
36. Augustine, *Epistles* 120.1.3 (*Patrologia Latina* 33:453): "Si igitur rationabile est ut ad magna quaedam, quae capi nondum possunt, fides praecedat rationem, procul dubio quantulacumque ratio quae hoc persuadet, etiam ipsa antecedit fidem."