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SCIENCE, RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE, AND ANALOGY

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Ian Barbour sees four ways to relate science and religion: (1) conflict, (2) disjunction or independence, (3) dialogue, and (4) synthesis or integration. David Burrell posits three ways to construe religious language, as (a) univocal, (b) equivocal, or (c) analogous. The paper contends that Barbour's (1) and (4) presuppose Burrell's (a), Barbour's (2) presupposes Burrell's (b), and Barbour's (3) presupposes Burrell's (c), and it explores some of the implications for each alternative.

Ian Barbour's typology of the four ways to relate science and religion consolidated an era of discussion in science and religion.[1] The four ways are (1) conflict, (2) disjunction or independence, (3) dialogue, and (4) synthesis or integration. What is less well known is the scholastic typology of ways that religious language can function: univocally, analogically, or just equivocally, "merely" in symbols. One place this typology can be found is David Burrell's *Knowing the Unknowable God*.[2] Burrell's typology can be used to explain Barbour's. Conflict and synthesis between science and religion presuppose that the terms of the encounter are used in the same way; this is necessary if simple agreement or disagreement are to be possible. This is the way of univocation. Pure equivocation leads to a disjunction between science and religion: they are incapable of even disagreeing with one another, because they are about different things. But if at least religious language is analogical, dialogue is possible.

It is natural to name Maimonides as the exemplar of the way of equivocation: for Maimonides, God is simply different from us, and one cannot reason cavalierly from intra-mundane and human meanings of terms to an identical meaning when those terms are used of God. The pivotal insight appears when Burrell puts Karl Barth at the same place in the spectrum as Maimonides. For Barth, and indeed for most of the Neo-Orthodox, science, and especially the new physics of the 20s, had little potential for conversation with theology. The origins of the Rabbinic and Neo-Kantian / Neo-Orthodox positions are different, though not as different as they might seem. For Thomists and at least some Protestant spokesmen, religious language is analogical, and dialogue is possible between theology and science, but not conflict. Both

conflict and synthesis have flourished in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the land of empiricism, with its univocating instincts. It is here that "science and religion" have been a problem for each other, sometimes ending in reconciliation, sometimes in hostility.

1. Correlating Burrell and Barbour

One can fairly easily confirm my conjecture that Burrell's typology correlates with Barbour's in at least a coincidental way. The first of Barbour's categories, conflict, is occupied by scientific materialists and biblical literalists. The designation of the latter group gives the correlation away: it is the *literal* (i. e., univocal) character of their reading of religious language that creates the conflict. This understanding of religious language is shared by their scientific opponents (otherwise it would be impossible for them to conduct a disagreement in any interesting way).

In the second category, independence, the most notable Christian examples are indeed the Neo-Orthodox. The diagnostic marks of taking science and religion as independent are attribution to them of differing methods and differing languages. Here we have clearly Burrell's option of taking religious language as equivocal with respect to intra-mundane (in particular, scientific) language. Barbour recognizes that the Neo-Orthodox emphasize transcendence at the expense of immanence, in parallel to Burrell's account at this point. Barbour does not to my knowledge make much of the Kantian origins of the Neo-Orthodox position; the Neo-Orthodox, for more or less Kantian motives, provide approximate, if rough, parallels to Maimonides.

Barbour finds the third category, dialogue between science and religion, marked by attention to boundary questions and methodological parallels, and to presuppositions and commitments held in common between science and religion. He begins with the observation that the rise of science was probably motivated by the doctrine of creation, which lays the groundwork for contingent and intelligible order in nature. More generally, science, on finding order in nature, poses questions that it cannot answer, but which are inherently religious. One hallmark of the way of dialog is that it has no patience with theories of a "God of the gaps". To use scholastic terms, any such idea presupposes confusion between primary and secondary causation. Secondary causation is accessible to science, and consists in intra-mundane relations between intra-mundane beings and events; primary causation inquires after the existence of the world *at all*. As we know from Heidegger, primary causation, appearing as the "ontological difference," is all too easily forgotten. To look for a "God of the gaps" is precisely to obscure the distinction of God from the world, and thus to force language used of God into the same meanings as language used of the world. It also makes it impossible to bring primary causation or anything like the contingency of being into clear focus.

In the fourth category, synthesis and integration of science and religion, the largest group we find are natural theologies. In one way or another, I would contend that they all use language as univocally as

they can. Barbour puts the Thomists here, but with little comment (I would disagree, but his assertion has some merit, as we shall see). He also concludes his typology with the Process theologians. I think they are correctly placed, but it is not clear that they use language simply in a univocal way, or not clear without further investigation. Perhaps they are an intermediate case. One could only resolve the question by attention to analogous or univocal usage of specific concepts critical to process theology. In any event, and a few hard cases aside, one can roughly verify by inspection the coincidence between Burrell's and Barbour's typologies.

   By the way, Avery Dulles has found a typology similar to Barbour's, in the ways the Christian theologian relates to *history* in his Christological thinking, and there, too, a correlation with Burrell's typology is clear.[3] But this was to be expected; Burrell's typology was intended to have far broader significance than just questions of science and religion.

2. The task of religious language

   More interesting than the coincidence of the two typologies is the underlying theological problem to be solved, and how it shapes the theological approaches of the various thinkers who follow the four ways to relate science and religion. Burrell's posing of the problem is succinct and helpful. The task is to both distinguish and relate God and the world, and in particular, to speak coherently of *acts* of God in the world. The requirement placed on the solution is to not treat the distinction of God from the world as like every other distinction we make. If this requirement is not met, the distinction of God from the world then surreptitiously becomes another distinction *within* the world.[4] This tendency has two effects, seemingly quite opposed to one another. In a Platonist spirit, it can denigrate the world we know, in favor of another, or in favor of God, which "is" in a more real sense. On the other hand, forgetting that the distinction we seek is not one within the world, we can come to speak of a system that comprehends both God and the world, and evacuate the distinction of its original intent.

   For one example of what can happen when religious language becomes univocal, Burrell says that Process Theology tends to comprehend God and the world in a larger system, evacuating the distinction between them. The other conspicuous possibility for univocal language is represented by Fundamentalists, in Barbour's first category. They express no intent to denigrate the world before God, but an outsider does get the impression that such is the import of their theological culture.

   The clean alternative to univocation and anthropomorphic language, as Burrell says, is simply and resolutely to assert God to be other than the world. Here he names Maimonides and Barth. But, he continues, "it takes little reflection to realize that God cannot be *that* neatly other if we are to use the name *creator*, or if divinity is to be in any way accessible to our discourse." The strategy of the Rabbis and the Neo-Orthodox would appear to be performatively incoherent, in as much as it under-

mines its founding assertion any time it speaks of God at all, certainly any time it speaks of God as acting in the world.

Burrell is anticipated and confirmed in Langdon Gilkey's assessment of the predicament of theology, in "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,"[5] where Gilkey makes an eloquent plea for analogy in theological language. Gilkey's examples supplement Burrell's: Current liberal theology, afraid of a univocal conflict between religion and the integrity of the causal continuum of events in the world (vital not only to science but more immediately to critical history) simply abandons the biblical language that expressed faith in acts of God. Neo-Orthodox theology, insistent on retaining both biblical language and the integrity of the historical causal continuum, does not see that its language is analogical, and does not see that unless the analogies can be given intelligible and credible meanings, they will collapse into mere equivocation.

"What is needed, then," Burrell continues, "to articulate the distinction between God and the world in such a way as to respect the reality appropriate to each, is a distinction that makes its appearance, as it were, within the world as we know it, yet does not express a division within that world." Burrell and Thomists at this point move to a distinction between essence and existence as the key to understanding the concept of an "act of God." I shall not follow them, not because I disagree, but because I want to explore other things here. Instead, I would like to generalize to the functional properties of the distinction between God and the world that are necessary to fulfill the task set for it: it must keep God and the world distinct, yet allow human language to transfer meaning across the distinction. The meaning must cross the distinction, without collapsing it, and still carry responsible truth.

3. The performative force of analogical language

My strategy at this point is to turn to the performative character of religious language. The pivotal clue is found in a throw-away remark: as David Burrell has it, "As metaphors, . . . [some] terms are inherently analogous; we use them better the more we realize how using them reveals us to ourselves and shapes the self we will become. In short, inherently analogous expressions are inescapably performative in character."[6] It is the *commissive* feature of performative language that leaps out first, to use John Searle's classification. Those who oppose or twist analogical language in religion strive most to evade the commissive implications of such language, seeking instead to treat it as simply assertive, and among assertives, often enough, as logically compelling: proof. This is *natural theology*, and such language is intended in a functionally univocal way, whether this is acknowledged or not. But analogy can always be twisted, and it can be twisted in two ways: toward univocal or toward simply equivocal language. "Taking it literally," as we say, it can be rejected in a sense different from its original analogous intention. The commissive force of analogy is disavowed. Analogical language can also be pushed in the other direction, regarded as "just

symbols," i. e., without binding force. The challenge of analogical lan-
guage — its *directive* force, in Searle's terms, or its *kerygmatic* force, in the
language of New Testament theology, is then undermined or even
overtly repudiated. Taken literally, it can also — and unnoticed — be
asserted in ways quite alien to its analogical intention.

Theological language which combines the force of commissives and
directives is here, as H. Richard Niebuhr calls it, *confessional* language.
Analogy is inherently confessional. Niebuhr's remarks on confessional
language, in the beginning of *The Meaning of Revelation*,[7] while directed
at what he calls "apologetic", attempts to "prove" things about God, are
applicable in particular to natural theology.

Light on the performative force of theological language turns attention
to the motives for choice between univocal, analogous, and merely equiv-
ocal language. One turns to univocal language in a desire for certainty,
for logically coercive proof. Fear of fideism, the irresponsibility of merely
symbolic language, and of ultimate meaninglessness, militates in the
direction of univocation. Some can imagine no other way to conceive a
synthesis of divine transcendence and immanence. Some turn to univo-
cal language to avoid the anxieties of a confessional stance; others, to ana-
logical or equivocal language precisely to safeguard the confessional
force of theological language. Wanting responsibility in theological lan-
guage, and seeing no other way to it, people turn to univocal language.

4. Mistaking Analogy for Univocation or Equivocation

One can apply these connections between analogy and its performa-
tive force to show how the character of religious language is at issue in
particular thinkers. This is mildly tricky, since virtually all theologians
use analogical language someplace. Nevertheless, some also treat it as
univocal or equivocal in dealing with some particular issues. There may
not be consistent univocators or equivocators, but contrasts do appear in
dealing with particular issues. There one can find that, where one
thinker is candidly analogous and confessional, another will lean on a
relatively univocal meaning of the pivotal terms, in order to make a point
without confessional commitments. When analogous language is not
acknowledged as such, it can appear univocal. When its challenge to the
hearers is dodged, even by the speaker, it can appear merely symbolic
and equivocal. The details of such inquiry tend to be more complex
than its general inspiration, but a few examples may help.

Analogy can be pressured toward univocation. When Barbour puts
Thomists in his fourth category, it is because they can yield to such pres-
sure, and despite a careful theory of analogy, function in ways that are
effectively univocal. The "Five Ways" of "proving" the existence of God
must leap to mind as evidence that Aquinas himself is performatively
demonstrative at this point. Yet David Burrell unravels their performa-
tive import as not conventional proofs, as natural theology takes them,
but rather as retrospectives from the point of view of prior faith. They
are confessional, not apologetic.[8] Interpreters of analogy tend to fall
back on a univocal core of analogical meaning in order to secure the

ability to calculate with analogy,[9] and so to reach the required goals of natural theology. Indeed, in the traditional reading of St. Thomas, Cajetan's interpretation, analogy can serve natural theology, and so evade the confessional import of theological claims. Recent Thomistic interpretation, with however much regret and affection for Cajetan, tends to demur from his reading of Thomas at this point.

The move contrary to univocation, to declare religious language simply equivocal, works out better in practice than one might think. There are good reasons for Maimonides' (and the Neo-Orthodox) reluctance to admit the analogical character of religious language. When it is not noticed that the language is analogous, it can almost trivially be subverted (by both its enemies and its supposed friends) and re-interpreted as univocal language. It is in order to prevent this subversion, and so to protect the holiness of God, that Maimonides refuses to admit the analogical character of his language, instead calling it *simply* equivocal, in order to emphasize its non-univocal character. Kant's motives are surprisingly similar — in separating speculative and practical reason, he intends to protect science and religion from each other. His heirs well into the present century have followed his strategy. When the party of equivocation takes its own denials seriously, and tries to treat its language as if it really were just equivocal and not analogous, what results is called *fideism*. But fideism attempts to evade the responsibility entailed in confessional language in a way different from those who take religious language as univocal: not because it conceals its own acts of faith, but because it refuses to spell out what it is doing in them.

Univocation takes literally what was a projection *into* the world of the distinction of God *from* the world. I choose the term "projection" here precisely for the analogy to its mathematical senses. We can project a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional figure, where we can also visualize the three-dimensional object directly. We can also project a four-dimensional object (which we cannot visualize directly) onto three dimensions, and then, with a good artist, again onto a two-dimensional figure. Failure to recognize the figure as a projection leads to total misunderstanding. If the projection-analog in theological language is not seen, and the language is taken as literal, God is placed on the same level as other natures within the world, defined by being different from them, because different as ordinary beings are different one from another. And taken literally, this language is then no longer available to distinguish God radically from the world. Trancendence has been lost, and divine action appears as a worldly phenomenon, and moreover, as one which is incoherent. When an analogy such as this one, from mathematics, is itself not seen as an analogy to explain analogical language in theology, one could conclude that, just as in projective geometry, one may calculate to theological conclusions with the force of logical proof. At this point, a theory of analogical language in theology has been made to support what is functionally not analogical at all, but univocal at its core.

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* remarks, in the article on "Analogy," that mistaking analogy for equivocation, symbolism, is less hazardous than taking it as univocation, an anthropomorphic conception

of God. It is possible to indicate briefly why univocation is so dangerous. Robert Sokolowski, in *The God of Faith and Reason*, lays out guidelines for conceiving the Incarnation, guidelines that may be paraphrased to apply to any acts of God in the world. If the action of God in the world could not take place without a truncation of natural properties and causation, it would mean that God was one of those natural phenomena, and his presence in history and nature would involve a conflict, a need to exclude or restrict some part of the world that he acts in. Either God would only seem to be active in the world, or he would have to become a new sort of being in the world. "These are ways in which the pagans thought the gods could take on human form . . ."; i. e., more generally, act in the world. "The reason the pagans could not conceive of anything like the incarnation is that their gods were part of the world, and the union of any two natures in the world is bound to be, in some way, unnatural, because of the otherness that lets one being be itself only by not being the other."[10] Generalizing again to any acts in the world, pagans could not conceive of God's action in ways that monotheism does because their gods are part of the world. Falling into univocation, however innocently, in the end effectively converts biblical monotheism into what is functionally closer to nature-worship than to historical-covenantal religion. The way this happens is interesting: The first move is made by thinkers who would construct a defense of God from science, and so inadvertently convert theological knowledge into scientific reasoning. Critics, accepting the univocal character of their language at face value, show that it is incoherent or is empirically falsified. The faithful then dig themselves in, with an apologetic that appears to deliver the empirical defense of God demanded by the critics, but is in fact utterly immune to empirical disconfirmation. Worse, it conceals its original character as analogy, and so its original confessional commitments are unrecoverable. An account of this in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be found in R. M. Burns' *The Great Debate on Miracles; from Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*.[11] (In fairness, I am not sure that Burns would draw from his own argument the conclusions that I do.)

5. Unanswered Questions in Analogy-Research

The chief question that I am aware of for theories of analogy is to spell out how analogy can speak responsible truth: how the speaker can be held responsible, and how he can hold his hearers responsible. This has to be shown in spite of the fact that the performative force of analogous discourse is not any sort of proof, whether inductive or deductive. Its performative force is confessional, and its effect is to make both speaker and hearer responsible. One may add, that when theology articulates a historical-covenantal religion, the analogies in its language will themselves be based in history. The form of its confessions will then at bottom be historical.

Analogy, practiced within its own inherent limits, is always a way of anxiety, because always confessional, never polemical or apologetic. Someone speaking in analogies must take responsibility for the claimed

analogies, and his respondent is always free not to join him. The principal analogies are drawn from history, looking from the past to the future. Consider only, to be particular, that the monotheistic doctrine of providence looks for good in all of life. When non-monotheistic neighbors scoff at the sight of the monotheist in trouble, there is never an easy answer to the taunt, "Israel, where now is your God?". It is the desire to be able to point to something visible in reply that leads into the temptations of univocal language.

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NOTES

1.   Ian Barbour (1990). *Religion in an Age of Science*. San Francisco: Harper and Row. Cf. ch. 1, and his essay, "Ways of Relating Science and Theology," in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology*, ed. R. J. Russell, W. R. Stoeger, and G. V. Coyne (Vatican Observatory and University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

2.   David Burrell (1986). *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.

3.   Dulles, Avery (1992 December). "Historians and the Reality of Christ". *First Things* 28, 20.

4.   I am following Burrell's *Knowing the Unknowable God*, pp. 17-18, quite closely here.

5.   Burrell, David (1961). *J. Rel.* 41, 194-205. Cf. esp. pp. 202-203, and Langdon Gilkey (1959). *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Lanham MD: Univ. Press of America, 1985), chapter 10. He also articulates a plea for analogy in theological language.

6.   Burrell, David (1979). *Aquinas, God and Action*. University of Notre Dame Press. Cf. p. 116.

7.   Niebuhr, H. Richard (1941). New York: Macmillan, 1941. Cf. the Preface, p. viii; pp. 17-18; and esp. Chapter I, part. III, "Revelation and Confessional Theology."

8.   David Burrell (1978). "The Performative Character of the `Proofs' for the Existence of God". *Listening* 13, 20.

9.   Cf. Burrell, David (1973). *Analogy and Philosophical Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Cf. Chs. 1 and 2.

10.   Sokolowski, Robert (1982). *The God of Faith and Reason*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. Cf. p. 36.

11.   Burns, R. M. (1981). *The Great Debate on Miracles; from Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*. Lewisburg, KY, Bucknell University Press.