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## **Review: God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes**

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## BOOK REVIEW

*God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes*,  
by Millard J. Erickson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1998.  
303 pp.) ISBN 0-8010-1154-X. \$26.99.

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In this book Millard Erickson tackles some of the most difficult and key issues in philosophical clarity and explanatory *legerdemain*. He presents a well-constructed coverage of the topics discussed and a surprisingly methodical explanation of some difficult concepts, views, and terms. While Erickson does tend to rely heavily upon the leaders in the field—the likes of Alvin Plantinga, Thomas V. Morris, Norman Kretzmann, William Hasker, Richard Swinburne, and a long list of others, he does weigh and evaluate the various texts of these individuals with fairness in light of his goal: *to lay out a comprehensive idea of God that is amenable to the critically-minded contemporary evangelical systematic or philosophical theologian*. Much of the work that needs to be done for the advanced undergraduate or graduate student is to translate and understand the leading literature in the field of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Erickson has done a good job at providing such a translation and understanding.

A basic precis of the book might read something like this: Erickson provides a classic investigation of the metaphysical attributes of God, especially as these divine characteristics relate to the created order, showing the need for the evangelical scholar to steer between an excessively Thomistic and an excessively process theological view of God. What is interesting in this approach is the undeniably Thomistic methodology that imbues much of Erickson's fine analysis of God's attributes, especially in how we are to conceptualize or imagine what the divine attributes are 'really' like or how we are to comprehend them. We cannot get around the need for analogical thinking in the area of properly considering what God's nature and properties might actually be 'like,' and the method of *via analogiae* comes to the forefront in this analysis, as it rightfully should. Thomas would be quite satisfied with Erickson's preference for and use of this method [1]; however, Aquinas would be eager to respond to some of Erickson's reasons for being quite careful and dubious of the Thomistic conceptions of some of the attributes of God, classically conceived (as in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologica*).

At first, I confess being skeptical of Erickson's overall project in this book, wondering why such a book was really needed, in light of three excellent somewhat similar books that have appeared in recent years, viz. Stephen Davis's *Logic and the Nature of God* (1983, Eerdmans), Ronald Nash's *The Concept of God* (Zondervan, 1984), and Thomas V. Morris's *Our Idea of God* (InterVarsity/Notre Dame, 1991). Morris's book, which is referred to regularly in Erickson's text, itself makes a point of departing from the classical views of eternity, simplicity and allied metaphysical characteristics of God as seen in both Aquinas and Anselm. However, there seem

to be enough salient differences between these texts and Erickson's text to warrant the recommendation, usefulness and intrinsic value of Erickson's text at this time.

First I shall speak of the text's helpful layout; then the unique endeavors and contributions it makes; and finally some criticisms of the text.

## I. FORMAT

The layout of the text, covering four main sections, includes an introduction, challenges to the traditional understanding of God, the attributes of God, and a conclusion. This layout communicates clearly to the reader that there are some very nontraditional approaches to God presently being touted and bandied about, no part of which ought to be confused with a considered conservative view of God. Erickson is seeking, as is Nash, Morris, and Davis, to steer between the two lurking enemies that have haunted classical theology since its inception, namely, the Scylla of pure *being* theology, and the Charybdis of pure *becoming* theology.

The developed, or at least considered, evangelical intuition is that Aquinas *is* a scholar who can both enlighten our philosophical theology and frighten with his overpowering Grecian form of pure being theology. "Use his clever and ingenious methods and distinctions, but be very careful of the results!" seems to be the feeling of many evangelical scholars. Some, like Norman Geisler, being trained for the advanced degree at a Catholic institution, may wonder whether my characterization is too strong. It may be that there are more 'peeping Thomists' around than we think, and why not? Aquinas looms large as an absolute watershed in the history of Christian thought as a theoretician *in excelsis*. But it is still proper to ask if there is too much of an on-going influence in Christian theology of Greek metaphysics, for example, in our intuitions about substance, essential and accidental properties, actuality and potentiality, and allied topics. (Concepts all of which are, I might add, so nearly necessary to our current day analytical philosophical theology that it would be hard to imagine the latter without the use of the former.) Because of the history of ideas, and the undeniable, unchangeable influence of Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy upon Christian theology, this question will continuously have to be asked; it will not go away, because our language, our thought patterns, our definitions of key philosophical concepts are and will probably always be significantly influenced by the thinkers who formed part of the birth of Western philosophy.<sup>[2]</sup>

I would submit, however, that most scholars in our camp try consciously to steer clear of the concept of God that is traditionally found in writers like Aquinas, since the feeling one comes away with after reading the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is that God is not a person but an impersonal, at once a *kinetic akinnesis* (showing a sort of incomprehensible infinite energy but having no real relation to temporal change possibly to move), unmoveable, religiously-unavailable deity. After the fashion anachronistically of Spinoza, Aquinas spins out the implications of his atemporally eternal God, leading him at one point to conclude that

[i]n God however there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation according to reason only, in so far as creatures are referred to him.<sup>[3]</sup>

God according to this view can enter into no real relations with his creatures; it is at once a disturbing if theologically fecund idea.

The swing of the pendulum to the opposite extreme from Aquinas takes us to the process view of God where God is so religiously available that he is too much like us, ultimately lacking transcendence and the omnipotent properties (such as omnipotence and omniscience) as fondly found in Aquinas's idea of the almighty God.

Nash, Morris, Davis, and now Erickson wish to steer us between this impending Scylla and opposing Charybdis by synthesizing the classical view of God as found in Aquinas with the commonsense notions that there can be analyses of knowledge, causal input, power, being, simplicity, goodness, and outside influences wherein God is maximally perfect, religiously available to his people (the latter being made in his image), and also wonderfully the creator, sustainer, and sovereign Lord who redeems his people through his son Jesus Christ.

To achieve this end, of laying out a way between a pure being and a pure becoming theology, Erickson stresses the importance (a la Grenz and Olson in InterVarsity Press's *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology* [4]) of God's being both *transcendent* and *immanent in some sense*: above his creation in some relevant ways, while also being within his creation, in other salient ways (again notice the center-stage positioning of Aquinas's analogical thinking). Of course, theologians have often referred to these two terms as a sort of *deus ex machina*: a way to explain what seems intrinsically unexplainable, or a way to say something, as Augustine reminds us in *De Trinitate*, so as not to be silent. Traditional theists know that the transcendence of God and the immanence of God have to play a key role in the final account of how God can be both maximally perfect and also available to his people who pray and call out to this God. The question has always been how exactly to characterize this relationship between these two aspects of the divine being, without falling into an undesirable account of any of the individual properties traditionally attributed to God. Also, another live question that philosophical theologians have had to deal with is how much to say about each of the individual properties of God, and about the conjunctions of the properties, or how the properties relate one to another.

In essence, Erickson's solution is to look at the traditional concepts of God's omniscience, omnipotence, sovereignty, eternity, and omnipresence with a "both/and" eye: God both possesses, in some sense, the traditional set of 'omni' properties, eternity, simplicity, and sovereignty, but must possess these characteristics in a way that is beyond or that transcends our basic notions of these properties.

Of course, being a trained philosopher himself (having taken, as we discover in a footnote on p.226, the M.A. degree in Philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1958), Erickson wants to carry out his examination in such a way as to determine that the traditionally-named 'old' metaphysical property names of God such as eternity, aspatiality, acorporeality, and the like can preserve our evangelical hermeneutical intuitions about God in his being and as related to the world, as seen in Scripture while tendering a sufficiently robust view so that God remains the ultimate being, the maximally great being, the one than which none greater can even be conceived.

It is also important to note the format of most of the individual *chapters*. The outline of the chapter on Divine Eternity will again help us here. The subtitles in this chapter, with page numbers (to weigh proportion given to each idea/concept), include:

Biblical Data (p. 114)

The Issue (p. 115)

The Atemporalist View (p. 117)

The Temporalist View (p. 124)

The Biblical Concept of Eternity (p. 128)

*The Position of Cullman: Eternity as Extended Time* (p. 128)

*James Barr's Criticism* (p. 130)

A Mediating Position: Relative "Timelessness" or "True Temporality" (p. 131)

A Synthetic Position (pp. 134-140)

Erickson's synthetic conclusions can be seen to 'synthesize' the data reviewed and criticized not only to steer between pure being and pure becoming theology, but also between mere philosophical or rational reflections on what God's properties might be like and the data of Scripture. Again, this point is similar to Morris and others who have written in this genre, but Erickson does take more time, and is keenly aware, of what the Scriptures report concerning (what appears often to be) the 'real' properties or characteristics of God (as opposed to something merely metaphorical or anthropomorphic).

## II. UNIQUE FEATURES

One of the unique features of the book is the willingness and riskiness to propose new terminology that is argued to be needed to express some meaning that should be included in a given concept but seems not to be. Often new terms show up when Erickson is trying, via the *via analogiae* to form some slightly different concept by which we might picture God's relationship to time, or space, or governance, or knowledge, or the like. A good example of this tendency can be found in Erickson's helpful discussion of God's eternity. You will not find large sections of text here, again, that score high on originality; the keen review and assessment of the current writers in the field make up a great percentage of the text. However, at various junctures Erickson does a good service to suggest insights that repay our efforts to grasp them. For example, at the end of chapter 6 on God and eternity, Erickson ends with this point:

It would probably be desirable to formulate some new terminology for these aspects of God's relationship to time. The adjective "atemporal" is negative in orientation. If we followed the pattern of the other attributes of God, we would speak of him as 'omnitemporal,' although the idea of omnitemporality may be contained within the concept of omniscience. And to capture the idea that time, at least thought of as cosmic time, does not limit God, we might speak of him as being 'supertemporal.' (p. 140)

Erickson here shows that we have perhaps expended all of the linguistic and etymological support of some of the words associated with God's properties, classically portrayed, and that after sufficient criticism and extension of the terms by scholars over the last forty or so years, the old terms either have perhaps finally run their course or are in need of some timely auxiliary

concepts. As above, there are several instances in the book in which the author attempts to point to new directions where our conceptualization of some specific attribute of God may wish to go in the future. It is at these points (after extended summarization and critique, which is usually quite incisive but fair) that Erickson, though terse, is at his creative best indicating where some future philosophical theological developments might focus.

### III. CRITICISMS: SOME REFLECTIONS

Erickson's book does read a bit colloquially at most points, which is in some ways a welcome relief from the sometimes nearly incomprehensible articles found on similar topics in the professional journals (say) *Nous* and *Review of Metaphysics*. Still, the book smacks of having been written too quickly. Ambiguously referring demonstratives pepper various sections and cause some consternation; some phrases not-so-well formed crying out for explanation or clarification interrupt otherwise pellucid discussions. It would be overly tedious to present each of these passages, so perhaps a short example will suffice. Consider for example the sense conveyed in this text:

[Concerning theodicy, the classical theist has an upper edge over, e.g. the free will theist.] For God, who knows all things and all possibilities, deemed even the consequences he would experience, including the death of his Son, to be worth the total benefit. (p. 288-89)

The question that Erickson generates here is, "the total benefit *when achieved and for whom?*" The author offers no clarification here. However, it is clear that Erickson here aligns himself with the traditional 'greater-good theodicy' in the classical camp. Admittedly our own camp could be more unified and clear in our thinking on this particular point regarding the 'greater good defense.' (No better a treatment can be found than Keith Yandell's "The Greater Good Defense," in *Sophia* [Australian journal of contemporary philosophy of religion] 13 (1974): 3-14.) At any rate, I found this passage (and a few similar to it) to be unclear, but to contain nothing that could not be cleared up and explained had more simply been written to avoid meaning or referential ambiguity or underdetermination (in which the data provided concerning some point in the text is not sufficient to warrant a particular statement or conclusion).

Again, there are virtues in this sort of quasi-colloquial presentation: technical terms are used sparingly; the audience (advanced undergraduate or beginning graduate students are probably in view) is likely to track with the models of explanation that are copiously sprinkled throughout the text, and especially numerous in the chapter on the transcendence and immanence of God (chap. 12); and allied positive benefits of simplicity and comprehensiveness accrue without the *technicalia*. However, for those trained in philosophical theology with such writers as Thomas Morris, William Rowe, Alvin Plantinga, Phillip Quinn, William Hasker, Keith Yandell, William Wainwright, and other leading figures, the book will not satisfy the philosophical theologian who is a purist at heart. Such readers would find happier hunting grounds in the works mentioned previously by Stephen Davis, Thomas Morris and Ronald Nash.

In reading this book, I found that the last chapter on practical implications of the doctrine of God seemed quite inviting, and so I actually read it first. I would recommend the same for most readers, since proceeding in this fashion offers a summary of the most important conclusions

drawn in the main text, laying out the strengths and some weaknesses (that are really quite livable in comparison to the opposing views) of the considered classical (and now updated Evangelical) conception of Deity.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is the last two chapters that put a nice capstone on Erickson's text and warrant finally a satisfactory review. The titles for these two chapters here indicate their purpose well: "God's Immanence and Transcendence" [chap. 12], and "The Practical Implications of the Doctrine of God" [chap. 13]. These sections again are a synthetic attempt to show how the doctrines of transcendence and immanence must play a role in the resolution of our views of the divine attributes. Also, they show the wonderful theoretical explanatory strength—by way of *practical implications* of the doctrine of God—that is inherent in the Christian theistic view of God and his created order. A scripture index and a general index are supplied at the end of the book.

Erickson's book is in one way extremely patient and measured, in another way in need of at least one extra chapter. On the one hand, he slowly looks at what he takes to be many of the leading theorists (mostly philosophers, but as we saw above in mentioning Cullman (obviously his *Christ and Time* is in view, above)) regarding some property or position. Only after fairly assessing each position does Erickson offer his 'synthetic' position. The extra chapter should be added in a specific, patient, and measured view of the meta-issue that Erickson touches on at some points explicitly (e.g., p. 283), but merely presupposes to be in place in the rest: the issue (as above) of *analogical predication*. I believe the book would be not insignificantly improved if there was a specific chapter devoted to how the Evangelical is justified to think about God's essence, nature, *personhood*, and attributes in a fashion that is analogical to our attributing same-named properties or states to other possible or actual beings. With respect to the *personhood* of God, Erickson does say something extremely helpful, albeit terse. He writes in his discussion of divine simplicity:

God is a unitary being. Sometimes one gets the conceptions that the nature of God is a bundle of attributes, somewhat loosely tied together: God, however, is not an attribute or a predicate. He is a living person, a subject. Perhaps what we need is a new metaphysic of persons. Much of the discussion has been carried on in terms of a substance metaphysic, in which reality is a substance possessing certain attributes. A better way of thinking may be to conceive of reality as fundamentally personal rather than impersonal. Thus, God is a subject, a person—and a very complex person at that. (p. 231)

I believe a rich field of inquiry lies in this general area of a person-based metaphysic, and think that Erickson has nicely stated the sort of insight that needs to be part of a chapter justifying some of the methodological issues that need to be decided on and justified up front in such a study.

Our talk of God's goodness or knowledge, and of his being a person, assuredly are to be taken in some sort of analogical fashion. Our considered analogical predication theory, I think, has to be roughly equivalent in structure and context to Aquinas's doctrine of analogy. I submit, in conclusion, then, that Erickson would do well to provide this missing justification and treatment

of this important methodological meta-issue (that of predication of terms of God) in such a book. Providing this missing feature would enhance the book's value, and help the student to appreciate more readily the practical implications of God's relations (both actual and possible) to us and his world. So, perhaps Erickson's use of the analogy doctrine needs to be examined and justified to be of value, or more value, to the contemporary members of our camp. Even if the unjustified analogical predication doctrine is a bit of unacknowledged borrowed Thomistic capital, still Erickson has treated us to a fine survey of contemporary analyses of our idea of God.

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#### FOOTNOTES

[1] See Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 1, chap. 34 for discussion of analogical predication.

[2] Obviously there are the Pre-Socratic philosophers who were not unfamiliar with philosophy of religion themselves (cf. Hesiod's *Theogony*). However, so as to start somewhere, a good place is Socrates and his pupil and pupil's pupil.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 19 in *Great Books of the Western World*, Ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952; Q. 13, Art. 7, *respondeo*, p. 69. The name of this article is, "Whether Names Which Imply Relation to Creatures are Predicated of God Temporally?"

[4] See Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 1992).