

## CAN THERE BE AN “ORTHODOX” POSTMODERN THEOLOGY?

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In the editor’s introduction to *Theology and the End of Modernity*, a *Festschrift* in honor of Reginald Stackhouse, we are confronted with a somewhat startling claim: there is (or at least could be) such a thing as *orthodox* postmodern theology.<sup>1</sup> This claim, I say, is rather surprising. According to Alvin Plantinga, for example, “various claims plausibly labeled ‘postmodern’ do indeed conflict with [orthodox] Christian belief.”<sup>2</sup> And Douglas Groothuis goes perhaps still further, insisting that “postmodernism poses a *plethora* of challenges to Christian theology.”<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, notoriously difficult to say just what postmodernism *is* in any definitive way. For present purposes, however, I shall take postmodern theology to include a rejection of the following: (a) the correspondence theory of truth; (b) the referential use of language; and (c) a person’s ability to access reality directly, unmediated by conceptual or linguistic schemes.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to recent opinion,<sup>5</sup> I shall argue that some of these postmodern elements do indeed put in an appearance in Stackhouse’s theology, and jointly lead to a most unexpected and unorthodox conclusion.

### I. “OBJECTIFYING” GOD

1. *Intellectual crisis.* I begin with Reginald Stackhouse’s intellectual autobiography “More Than Thirty Years On.”<sup>6</sup> In this frank and revealing piece, Stackhouse charts the course of his personal journey from modern to postmodern theology (though of course he does not describe it as such). His

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark Husbards, “Introduction,” in *Theology and the End of Modernity: Essays in Conversation with Reginald Stackhouse* (ed. Mark Husbards; Toronto: Wycliffe College, 1996) 62. Stackhouse is professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 425.

<sup>3</sup> “The Postmodern Challenge to Theology,” *Themelios* 25/1 (1999) 4, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> See J. P. Moreland, “Postmodernism and the Intelligent Design Movement,” *Philosophia Christi* Ser. 2, 1/2 (1999) 98.

<sup>5</sup> Husbards, for example, is unsure whether Stackhouse counts as a postmodernist. This, he says, is a “question for others to decide” (“Introduction” 62). But one thing *is* clear, Husbards suggests: if the essays in the *Festschrift* are postmodern (and presumably, Stackhouse’s own essay is also in view here), they “would most certainly be candidates for what Gerard Louglin terms an ‘orthodox’ rather than ‘nihilist’ postmodern theology” (ibid. 3).

<sup>6</sup> In *Theology and the End of Modernity* 9–16.

initial understanding of the task of the theological educator was both mainstream and conservative:

My years in theological education began with my being committed to theology as a corpus of objective knowledge which could be learned, believed and practised . . . it was knowledge not essentially different from what I might have amassed had I continued my studies in political economy instead of entering theology. Both presupposed a body of truth which could be imparted from teacher to student and then applied to the so-called "real world."<sup>7</sup>

On this way of looking at things, there is a set of theological propositions, each of which is objectively true, that is, true independently of what we think, believe, or assert. For orthodox Christians, of course, this set of truths includes (among other things) the proposition that God exists. Furthermore, this proposition is held to be true in virtue of the fact that there *really is* an omnipotent, omniscient, creator of the universe who exists independently of us. It is true because it corresponds to the way things really are in the extramental, extralinguistic world. As Stackhouse puts it elsewhere, to say that God's existence is objective is to say that he can be conceived "as having an *independent existence*."<sup>8</sup> Still further, the state of affairs consisting in God's existence is not up to us or within our control. We do not bring it about that God exists; the obtaining of this state of affairs does not depend on anything we human beings have managed to do (say, with our language).<sup>9</sup>

Gradually, however, Stackhouse's views evolved (or devolved, as the case may be). Indeed, he says, they took "a one hundred and eighty degree turn."<sup>10</sup> But why so? What brought about this Copernican revolution in his thinking? The fact, he says, that the "language of objectification"<sup>11</sup>—that is, talking about God, angels, and the like, as if they enjoyed an independent existence—was no longer effectively communicating to people what Christianity had to offer:

I came to see the struggle [between Christianity and its critics] was not really about whether Christianity was true or false, but about what the meaning of the gospel of Christ could offer people . . . my Christianity . . . pointed to an objective God revealed in a person defined by an objective Christology. As a defender of that kind of Christianity, I eventually found myself in an intellectual crisis.<sup>12</sup>

To call the crisis "intellectual" is perhaps a bit misleading. If the basic problem is that the language of objectification fails to communicate to contem-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Reginald Stackhouse, *The God Nobody Knows: Unexplored Dimensions of Belief* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1986) 31, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> James Fodor has suggested that our linguistic activities ultimately determine what is true. See his *Christian Hermeneutics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 88. For a sustained critique of this view, see Richard Davis and David Brown, "James Fodor's Christian Theory of Truth: Is it Christian?" *Heythrop Journal* 41 (2000) 436–48.

<sup>10</sup> "More than Thirty Years On" 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 10–11.

porary culture the benefits of embracing Christianity, then would not the crisis (if indeed there is one) be more aptly described as, say, linguistic or even missiological? "I saw," Stackhouse says, "that the problem of communication for Christians lay in articulating our faith in a language no longer meaningful."<sup>13</sup> To say that the crisis is intellectual, by contrast, suggests that it is false or otherwise irrational to believe that God's existence is independent of human beings and their cognitive and linguistic activities. This is an enormous claim. It therefore requires substantial proof, if it is to be accepted. Yet why, one wonders, should a Christian theologian be at all inclined to prove such a thing? Would not doing so necessitate lodging *de facto* or *de jure* objections against orthodox Christian belief?<sup>14</sup> And is that really the job of the theologian?

Well, it turns out that Stackhouse *does* have an argument against conceiving of God as existing independently. Indeed, he says, "this is the last thing any believer should want" to do.<sup>15</sup> How does the argument go? Approximately as follows: in order to relate to God in the ways proposed in the Bible—to properly worship or pray to him, for example—God must be the sort of being who can be "there." That is, he must be "a being to whom others can point, one which we can identify and conceive as having an independent existence."<sup>16</sup> Stackhouse calls this "objectifying" God. We objectify God when we conceive of him as existing in this way. But there is a problem: an objectified God is strictly inconceivable. Despite the fact that such giants of Christian theology as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin all conceived of God as existing independently from all else, what they say they could conceive, they really could not. They were one and all mistaken. The question, of course, is whether Stackhouse is right. What is it that he knows and the rest of us do not? The answer, I believe, is that (for Stackhouse) it is a matter of conceptual necessity that if God exists independently, he occupies a spatial location. The concept of independent existence includes or contains the concept of being spatially located:

But conceiving God as an [independently existing] object is no longer possible unless believers are to pretend to be what they are not and cannot be. There is no spatial heaven in which to locate God, and no objectified substance we can conceive as being there. All this went out with the intellectual revolution that showed people our earth is just one of the planets revolving around the sun . . . it was possible when people, such as Dante, understood the earth as being surrounded by nine concentric circles—the moon, the sun, the planets, the fixed stars, a crystalline heaven, and beyond them all an ultimate, motionless heaven.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>14</sup> Following Plantinga, a *de facto* objection to Christian belief attempts to show that Christianity is false; a *de jure* objection, on the other hand, merely argues that Christian belief is irrational, unjustified, or otherwise epistemically unacceptable. For further details, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) ix.

<sup>15</sup> *The God Nobody Knows* 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

We now know better, however. In our enlightened scientific age, we recognize that our universe is not arranged in concentric spheres. Space is immense (maybe infinitely so), in which case there literally is “nowhere” for heaven or God to be. We must therefore resist the urge to “objectify” God. In fact, it “is the first way to encourage people to drop belief in God altogether.”<sup>18</sup>

2. *A piece of Spinozistic PIE?* In presenting his Five Ways, Aquinas thought he was offering good reasons to believe in God’s objective existence. What he was actually (and one hopes, unwittingly) doing, however, was encouraging us to become agnostics or atheists! Now this is a serious claim. Is it at all plausible? Does Stackhouse’s argument support a contention of this magnitude? I am afraid it does not. For the most part, the difficulties besetting the argument trace back to a certain general principle upon which Stackhouse counts rather heavily—the “principle of independent existence” (PIE), as we might call it:

PIE: Necessarily, for any objects A and B, if A exists independently of B, and B is spatially located, then A is spatially located.

It seems clear, I think, that PIE is false. Perhaps we can see this as follows. Let us suppose that there are things occupying spatial locations: you and I, for example. Now either there are things independent of us or not. If not, then everything depends on us for its existence, in which case we turn out to be sovereign in a way that classical theism has been unwilling to ascribe to anyone but God himself. According to this alternative, therefore, you and I are divine beings. But here, of course, we encounter a problem. For, by hypothesis, we have a spatio-temporal location, and (necessarily) whatever has a spatio-temporal location is a concrete physical object. So if PIE is true, and if everything depends on us for its existence, God is extended in three dimensions; God is a concrete physical object. And this leaves us not with classical theism, but rather with something like Spinozistic pantheism.

Suppose, on the other hand, that there are things whose existence does *not* depend on us—God, say, or angels, or the mental states of others. If PIE is true, each of these things will be a spatially located object, so that they are, one and all, concrete and physical. This is because anything existentially independent of a spatio-temporal thing has a spatio-temporal location and must therefore be physical in nature. But surely this is mistaken. In the first place, many philosophers (myself included) believe in the existence of abstract objects such as numbers, sets, propositions, and the like.<sup>19</sup> Unlike concrete physical objects (e.g. books, bats, and brains), *abstracta* have no spatio-temporal location. Take, for example, the number 7. Like God, this number exists necessarily; it could not possibly fail to exist. Furthermore, 7’s existence is independent of my own; for even if I had failed to

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>19</sup> See Richard Brian Davis, *The Metaphysics of Theism and Modality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

exist, it would still have been the case that, say,  $7 + 5 = 12$ ; in which case the number 7 would have existed even if I had not. But then, if PIE is true, it follows that 7 is a concrete physical object with a spatio-temporal location, which seems absurd.

A further difficulty is this. The German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz held that in addition to truths of fact—that is, contingently true propositions—there are so-called truths of reason or eternal truths: such propositions as “every triangle is a three-sided figure” and “if  $p$  entails  $q$ , and  $p$  is true, then  $q$  is true.” The eternal truths are necessary; they are true and could not possibly be false; they are true in every possible world, as philosophers like to say. Leibniz vigorously opposed the Cartesian position, according to which the eternal truths are under the direct control of God’s will (at least prior to creation).<sup>20</sup> For this would imply, among other things, that God could have willed an entirely different set of eternal truths to be true, in which case the eternal truths God has in fact willed are not *necessarily* true at all.<sup>21</sup> Here, oddly enough, Stackhouse strikes a modernist and Cartesian pose. For if the eternal truths are existentially independent of us, they turn out (on his way of thinking) to be concrete physical objects, and thus could easily have failed to exist and so be true. And even if we suppose that these truths *do* depend on us (say, on our noetic or linguistic behavior), it is not the case that we are logically necessary. We could have failed to exist, in which case so too could the eternal truths, so that they are, if true, only contingently so.

But the worst is yet to come. If God is existentially independent of us, then he is just one of the many physical objects in our world. Again, however, this is a Spinozistic concept of God at best; no theist could possibly accept it and remain a *classical* theist. Now here Stackhouse apparently agrees; but rather than rejecting PIE, the offending principle, he draws the unwarranted conclusion that God does not exist independently of spatially located objects, of the material things he has made. This conclusion is deeply problematic. Indeed, I should say that we are warranted in believing it only if we are in possession of some rather powerful reason(s) for thinking that PIE is true. Yet it is difficult to see that this is the case. In the first place, Stackhouse offers not a single word in defense of PIE; he treats it throughout as if it were a self-evident truth of reason. However, I think it is clear not only that it is not self-evident, but that it does not even express a truth—let alone a truth of reason. Once we understand what PIE means, we see that it entails a variety of absurdities and is therefore itself absurd. So it is far more obvious that PIE is false than that God does not exist independently of what he has created. At any rate, this conclusion does seem

<sup>20</sup> Thus Descartes: “The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on Him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of Him as if He were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and the Fates” (Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630) in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters* (ed. Anthony Kenny; Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) 11.

<sup>21</sup> Plantinga dubs this position “universal possibilism.” For critical discussion, see his *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980) 95–103.

to follow provided that one assumes the perspective of classical (orthodox) theism.

3. *Apology for no apologies.* So far, then, we have not been given the slightest reason for thinking that God's existence is not objective and independent of our own. Stackhouse, however, has a second line of argument on this score, this one having to do with the problem of *defending* such claims as that God objectively exists or that he has revealed himself (objectively) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This, he thinks, cannot be done. Now at first glance, this claim seems perplexing. Does not the apostle Peter tell us that we are to give an *apologia* (verbal defense) for our faith when called upon to do so?<sup>22</sup> He does; so obviously he must believe that the faith *can* be defended. After all, why command that something be done, if it cannot be done? That is hardly sensible. But, of course, the question is: *what* faith is it that we are to defend? Perhaps due to cultural pressure,<sup>23</sup> Stackhouse's faith "became something fundamentally different from assent to doctrinal propositions, so different that it had no need for support or confirmation by empirical evidence or rational exposition."<sup>24</sup> The basic idea is that only those theists whose faith involves assent to objective truth claims or doctrinal propositions must offer rational support for their faith; they and they alone are required to *defend* the faith. If you stop making objective truth claims, well, then, you have nothing to defend. Fair enough; but what is supposed to be the difficulty with defending the faith?

When I first appreciated that *none* of the faith claims I have made all my life could be verified by arguments not open to the very opposite interpretation, I had to wonder if I could carry on as a believer. There was no prospect in view at all until I realized that was a problem only as long as I insisted on faith being objectified. Once I appreciated that faith by definition should be, and in fact had to be, a subjective reality, I had no problem at all.<sup>25</sup>

Here, it seems, we come face to face with a familiar postmodern refrain: there is a plethora of conceptual schemes or linguistic frameworks by means of which we interpret and experience the world,<sup>26</sup> such that there is no "view from nowhere," no God's-eye take on objective reality. Accordingly, if I offer you a set of reasons for believing some conclusion (say, that God raised Jesus from the dead), I do this from the perspective of *my* conceptual or linguistic framework (or more generally, that framework shared by the members of the language-using community in which I participate). For those outside my framework, however, there is no obligation to assent to either

<sup>22</sup> See 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>23</sup> "I found myself moving intellectually in the same direction that I discerned Western culture to be following" ("More than Thirty Years On" 10)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 10–11.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Thomas Sheehan: "Christianity is a 'hermeneusis,' or interpretation. Its beliefs and doctrines are but one of many possible and equally valid ways of understanding the universally available empirical data about Jesus of Nazareth." Cited in Alvin Plantinga, "Sheehan's Sheenigans: How Theology Becomes Tomfoolery," *The Reformed Journal* 37/4 (April 1987) 22.

my reasons or my conclusion. Indeed, there will no doubt be certain conceptual perspectives, which, if adopted, will permit or even require that you affirm their denials. The problem with claiming that Christianity is objectively true, therefore, is that in so doing I obligate myself to contend for the faith—an obligation that (at least humanly speaking) cannot be fulfilled, since proving objective truth claims requires appeal to objective, extramental facts. There is a catch, however: my experience of objective reality is mediated by my conceptual or linguistic scheme, which undercuts not only my access to the objective facts, but also the objectivity of the rational processes made use of in assessing those facts.

Now why accept this argument? There are powerful reasons, I believe, to reject it. In the first place, it is difficult to see just how this argument can be coherently advanced. If my reading of Stackhouse is correct, it looks as if he is endorsing what might be dubbed the "principle of interpretive mediation" (PIM):

PIM: For any human agent S, there is an interpretive framework F such that F mediates S's access to and experience of objective reality—that is, the way the world is independent of our cognitive and linguistic activities.

Notice that PIM makes a definite claim about objective reality: it is such that no one can directly access or experience it. So PIM is either true or false. Let us suppose, first of all, that it is false. Well, then, objective reality is such that it could be known without the mediation of an interpretive scheme or framework. But this, of course, does not quite suit Stackhouse's purposes, since direct access to the objective evidence would then be within our cognitive and experiential grasp, paving the way for a defense of Christian truth claims.

Let us suppose, then, that PIM is true. Here one wants to know just how Stackhouse could know such a thing (and presumably he does think he knows it). How could he show or prove that it *is* true? After all, PIM is no doubt to be understood as characterizing *objective* reality—reality as it stands apart from our interpretation of it. But PIM also tells us that the noumenal world is not directly accessible to us. So what objective facts or evidence could Stackhouse appeal to here, in order to show that PIM is true? Any evidence he cobbled together in its favor would be mediated, obviously enough, by his own interpretive scheme (or perhaps that of his faith community). But then even if PIM comes out true on Stackhouse's interpretation, there is no reason to think it will come out true on others; indeed, for the vast majority of Christians, PIM is a rank falsehood. Ironically, then, this principle cannot "be verified by arguments not open to the very opposite interpretation." Therefore, if PIM is true, it presents itself with an undefeated defeater—a reason for thinking that PIM is false that is itself undefeated.<sup>27</sup> We should therefore reject it.

<sup>27</sup> "Undefeated": any attempt to defeat this defeater will itself be subject "to the very opposite interpretation."

But Stackhouse has a second reason for rejecting the classical apologetic enterprise, and by extension the need to construe God as having an independent existence. This has to do with the failure of the arguments of natural theology. And here, I am afraid, Stackhouse's argument is distressingly weak.<sup>28</sup> To take one example: he contends that it is fundamentally mistaken to posit a creator as the best explanation for the origin of the universe; for if "we assume creation was an isolated event that took place a long, long time ago, then we are really in for trouble intellectually."<sup>29</sup> And why is that? Because, he says, it does a serious disservice to theology:

This disservice is the contention that, as an event, divine creation is not a matter of faith but a fact that can be verified or rebutted by evidence or the lack of it. But there being no evidence of a divine creation commonly acceptable by scientists, the whole thing becomes another problem for the believer who wants to be a truly contemporary person.<sup>30</sup>

So the idea is that if you claim that the universe had a temporal beginning (and posit God as its cause), you will have to "put up or shut up" as it were; it will be requested and required of you that you supply the appropriate empirical justification for your cosmological claim.

<sup>28</sup> His condemnation of natural theology, for instance, amounts to a mere gesture at Kant's oft-repeated criticisms of the traditional ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments. At best, however, this would show that these historically conditioned versions of the proofs were deficient. Stackhouse fails to mention that all of the theistic proofs find sophisticated contemporary proponents whose formulations of those proofs, I might add, are not subject to Kant's criticisms. On the cosmological argument, see William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979); William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); Robert Koons, "A New Look at the Cosmological Argument," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997) 193–210; Brian Leftow, "A Modal Cosmological Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 24 (1988) 159–88; *idem*, "A Leibnizian Cosmological Argument," *Philosophical Studies* 57 (1989) 135–55; James Ross, *Philosophical Theology* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). On the design argument, see M. A. Corey, *God and the New Cosmology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); William Lane Craig, "The Teleological Argument and the Anthropic Principle," in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays* (ed. William Lane Craig and M. McLeod; Problems in Contemporary Philosophy 24; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990) 127–53; Brian Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint* (London: Penguin, 1995); William Dembski, *The Design Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989); Richard Swinburne, "The Argument from Design—A Defense," *Religious Studies* 8 (1972) 193–205. On the ontological argument, see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) 198–221. On the moral argument, see George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment* (ed. R. Audi and W. J. Wainwright; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). For arguments for an omniscient Mind based on the reality of abstract objects, see Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?" *Nous* 24 (1990) 591–98; Alvin Plantinga, "How to be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1982) 47–70; "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments" (paper presented at the 33rd Annual Philosophy Conference, Wheaton College, October 23–25, 1986). A theistic argument based on the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties may be found in Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 216–37.

<sup>29</sup> *The God Nobody Knows* 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Now it is not clear to me just what the problem here is supposed to be. Is it that there *is not* any scientific or empirical evidence to which the believer might appeal in this connection? If this is Stackhouse's point, then I can only respond by saying that he is desperately out of touch with the relevant literature in both philosophy of religion and physical cosmology.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as William Craig has recently pointed out, "It can be confidently said that no cosmogonic model has been as repeatedly verified in its predictions and as corroborated by attempts at its falsification, or as concordant with empirical discoveries and as philosophically coherent, as the Standard Big Bang Model."<sup>32</sup>

Where, then, is the intellectual trouble? Perhaps the problem (as Stackhouse sees it) is not with the evidence *per se*, but rather with the fact that the evidence is not "commonly acceptable by scientists." The believer who makes use of it in support of theism is not *au courant* and "truly contemporary," since he is out of step with the methodological naturalism currently fashionable in scientific circles. Perhaps so. But, of course, this would not show that the evidence *did not* favor an initial beginning of the universe. At best, it would establish the reluctance of scientists to ascribe the absolute origination of things to God's causal agency. But *that* says more about the metaphysical outlook of the scientific community than it does about the scientific evidence. For consider the alternatives: if you reject the theistic explanation in terms of a personal agent, you are left with saying that the universe either caused itself to exist or that it sprang into existence *ex nihilo* without an efficient cause.<sup>33</sup> Both of these options, however, strike me as metaphysically impossible. In the face of these considerations, it is rather clear that Stackhouse has incorrectly located the intellectual problem. It does not lie with the evidence for theism or lack thereof. Rather, it lies with those who would reject or simply ignore the empirical evidence and, more importantly, its ontological implications. As one team of astrophysicists has remarked: "The problem of the origin [of the universe] involves a certain metaphysical aspect which may be either appealing or revolting."<sup>34</sup> At any rate, if we reflect on Stackhouse's preferred solution here—that "a believer can be contemporary once creation is seen to be a *symbol . . . not an event in time, a 'big bang' that went off . . .*"<sup>35</sup>—we can

<sup>31</sup> For a helpful survey of the evidence—both philosophical and scientific—for the origin of the universe, see Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*; and Craig and Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology*.

<sup>32</sup> "The Ultimate Question of Origins: God and the Beginning of the Universe," *Astrophysics and Space Science* 269–270 (1999) 733.

<sup>33</sup> Even the great Scottish skeptic David Hume refused to deny that *ex nihilo nihil fit*: "I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that anything might arise without a cause*" (David Hume to John Stewart, February, 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume* [ed. J. Y. T. Greig; Oxford: Clarendon, 1932] 1.187).

<sup>34</sup> Hubert Reeves, Jean Audouze, William A. Fowler, and David N. Schramm, "On the Origin of Light Elements," *Astrophysical Journal* 179 (1973) 912. Cited in Craig, "The Ultimate Question of Origins" 726.

<sup>35</sup> *The God Nobody Knows* 59; emphasis added.

see that it is really Stackhouse himself who is in for the intellectual trouble, as he flies in the face of contemporary scientific thought.

## II. "SYMBOLIZING" GOD

Thus far I have argued that neither of Stackhouse's reasons for rejecting God's independent existence succeeds. There is no good reason, so far as I can see, to deny the classical theistic position that God created the world a finite time ago and that his own existence does not depend on the world or anything in it. This does not imply, furthermore, that God occupies some region of space-time. Nor does it require us to jettison the classical position on the grounds that creation must be taken as purely symbolic.

But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Stackhouse is right. What follows? Well, according to Husbands, Stackhouse's observation—that the Christian faith can survive without the language of objectification, without conceiving of God as existing objectively—"secures the insight that faith in God is not faith in an objective state of affairs to which we can make public and unambiguous reference."<sup>36</sup> In other words, if Stackhouse is correct, believers place their faith in a subjective state of affairs to which they can make only private and ambiguous reference.

A number of questions arise here. I think I know what it means to place one's faith in an objectively existing person. But what is it to have faith in a subjective *state of affairs*? States of affairs, like propositions, properties, and the like, are abstract objects, and so are not the sorts of things in which persons *could* place their faith. Perhaps the idea is just that one's faith is to be placed in a person whose existence constitutes a subjective state of affairs. Well, then, what is it to exist subjectively? For Stackhouse, you recall, if something exists objectively, then it can be conceived "as having an *independent existence*."<sup>37</sup> To exist subjectively is therefore to exist in a *dependent* way. And so if God exists in this way, he, too, is dependent. But dependent on what? On our cognitive or linguistic activities? Are we to conceive of God himself as a mere imaginative construct? If so, then our departure from classical theism is complete, and the vast majority of our statements about God come out necessarily false.<sup>38</sup> It goes without saying that this is hardly the way of true religion.

I am happy to report that Stackhouse rejects this subjectification of God. It "cannot be adequate," he says, "regardless of what advantages it offers."<sup>39</sup> Can we really believe, he asks, that God is calling us "unless we believe God has a reality all his own?"<sup>40</sup> I should think not. However, since God's

<sup>36</sup> See his "Narrative, Human Agency and Self-Description," in *Theology and the End of Modernity* 114.

<sup>37</sup> *The God Nobody Knows* 31; emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> As Plantinga points out, if God is a symbol or human construct, then to assert, say, that "God created the heavens and the earth" is literally incoherent. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 37.

<sup>39</sup> *The God Nobody Knows* 37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

existence is either objective or non-objective (that is, subjective), one would think that the conclusion to be drawn here is that God exists objectively and independently of all else. In a surprising move, however, Stackhouse proposes to reject *both* of these logically exhaustive alternatives. "So we are in trouble," he observes, "an objectified God is inconceivable, and the subjectified alternative is inadequate. There must be something better."<sup>41</sup>

And what, precisely, is that? Well, to begin with, we must recognize that all talk about God is necessarily symbolic:

No other language is up to the task, given the infinite distance between God and man. There being no direct likeness between the one as ultimate and the other as finite, communication is possible only by symbols . . . To conceive the inconceivable is otherwise impossible; only symbols can transcend the chasm between finite and infinite.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, symbols

create a world for the people who use them and understand them. They do this by providing the terms of reference by which life gains its meaning. . . . Symbols provide the language of faith by which believers can communicate to themselves and others the meaning of the deepest of all dimensions of existence.<sup>43</sup>

And this is crucially important, for theology is "primarily a perspective on what it means to be truly human."<sup>44</sup> It sets out for us "how we should be related to one another as people sharing a common humanity."<sup>45</sup> In short, there is a kind of language game that some Christians play (but presumably is open to anyone). The function of religious language in this game is purely symbolic. Its purpose is to create for the participant a meaningful (linguistic) framework, which will help her interpret and make sense of the world. Indeed, this is how life "gains it meaning" in the first place.

I do not have the space here to canvass all the difficulties with this "better alternative."<sup>46</sup> Its central problem, however, is that it is simply incoherent. I take it that when Stackhouse says that religious language is "necessarily symbolic," he means that our terms and concepts do not literally apply to God.<sup>47</sup> This is not because the term "God" is an empty proper name. Not at all. This term, he insists, has a specific denotation; it "points beyond itself to the reality it signifies."<sup>48</sup> So far so good. The problem comes

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 41, 49.

<sup>44</sup> "More than Thirty Years On" 12.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Some of the difficulties are surveyed in Davis and Brown, "James Fodor's Christian Theory of Truth" 436–48.

<sup>47</sup> Stackhouse admits that "one of the most serious objections" to his position here is whether symbols "fit" or "apply" to God. After all, he says, "they may be intended to point to God [but] there may be no thought that they describe him as he is" (*The God Nobody Knows* 53–54).

<sup>48</sup> *The God Nobody Knows* 53. Thus Stackhouse would part ways with the likes of Gordon Kaufman, who claims that "God" denotes a mere imaginative construct on our part. See Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) 86. Whether Stackhouse is entitled to this parting, given his theological beliefs, is another matter.

in when we recognize that there is an “infinite distance” between God and us; strictly speaking, God is inconceivable. Thus from the fact that (1) God is inconceivable; there is an infinite distance between God and human beings, Stackhouse invites us to infer that (2) none of our terms or concepts literally applies to God.

The application of this insight goes as follows. Since (2) is true, we cannot speak about God as if he were literally the creator of heaven and earth. Thus the statement “God created the heavens and the earth” does not correspond with reality. On the contrary, it is to be understood symbolically as the claim, “This world depends for its life on God.”<sup>49</sup> Neither are such statements as “God is powerful” or “God is a person” literally true, since “powerful” and “person” are symbolic terms. Unfortunately, Stackhouse fails to tell his reader what these statements *do* mean. I take it, for example, that when he denies that the statement “God is powerful” is literally true, he does not mean to affirm that God lacks power in a literal sense. For of course *that* would be to apply the term “lacks power” to God, which (2) forbids. So just what *could* “God is powerful” mean on his view? We are never told. What is somewhat clearer, perhaps, is that since the statement “God is powerful” is not literally and objectively true, when we apply the term “power” to God, we are guilty of making an “ambiguous reference.” That is to say, we do not really know whether our reference is successful, so that we cannot say, in the final analysis, whether God is literally powerful or not.

At any rate, it is easy to see that there are serious difficulties with both the premise and the conclusion of Stackhouse’s argument.<sup>50</sup> For if either the premise or the conclusion of the argument is true, *none* of our terms has a literal application to God.<sup>51</sup> But what about the terms (1) and (2) applies to God? How can we consistently affirm that God is inconceivable without (literally) applying the term “inconceivable” to him? How can we say that none of our terms applies to God, as (2) has it, without (inconsistently and in the same breath) applying the term “none of our terms applies to him” to God? The fact is that we cannot; both (1) and (2) are self-referentially incoherent. And it is no use retreating to the position that (1) and (2) are mere symbolic truths; for such a claim is far too weak to do the argumentative work of blocking the literal application of our terms to God.

The conclusion here seems inevitable: not only is it the case that God is conceivable, but it also follows that some of our terms and concepts *do* literally apply to him. At any rate, if orthodox theism is true, it cannot be denied that a statement such as “the term ‘God’ signifies a reality,” or more simply, “God is real,” is literally true. If God’s existence or reality is merely

<sup>49</sup> See *The God Nobody Knows* 60. Similarly, the statement “Jesus rose from the dead” does not entail that Jesus rose from the grave physically and bodily; rather, taken symbolically, it means only that “Christ was with his church following the crucifixion quite as really and personally as before it” (*ibid.* 58).

<sup>50</sup> The argument that follows parallels one given by Alvin Plantinga in *Does God Have A Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980) 23–26.

<sup>51</sup> If we cannot even conceive of God, as (1) has it, we certainly will not be able to devise terms adequate to express our conceptions, let alone apply those terms to God.

symbolic, then, of course, God himself turns out to be a symbol. Now Stackhouse denies that God is a symbol,<sup>52</sup> but it is quite evident that this denial is in direct violation of his maxim that all talk about God is necessarily symbolic.<sup>53</sup> But remember: this was his "better alternative" to conceiving of God as existing either objectively or subjectively, which, to my mind, only goes to show that when you deny all the disjuncts in a logically exhaustive disjunction (even for the best of theological motives), you are in for intellectual trouble.

Are Stackhouse's views, taken together, a collective instance of orthodox postmodern theology? It is fairly clear, I believe, that they are postmodern. There is an explicit denial of the referential use of theological language and its literal correspondence with divine reality. It is also likely that Stackhouse is operating on the assumption that we do not directly access reality—divine or otherwise—that we cannot get outside our interpretive scheme to see the world as it really is. So far as orthodoxy goes, however, perhaps Stackhouse is none the worse off. Much depends here on what we mean by "orthodoxy." This is a vexed question and demands a paper in its own right.<sup>54</sup> What we can confidently assert, I think, is that any theological system of which (2) is a part sets itself outside the perimeters of classical, orthodox theism. For if (2) is true, we cannot even say of God that he literally exists.

I wish to close, therefore, with some timely and yet modern theological advice. Descartes once asked whether, if none of our terms or concepts applies to God, a person could rightly say

that God is infinite and incomprehensible, and that he cannot be represented by our imagination? How could he affirm that these attributes belonged to Him, and countless others which express His greatness to us, unless we had the idea of Him? It must be agreed, then, that we have the idea of God, and that we cannot fail to know what this idea is, nor what is meant by it; because without this we could not know anything at all about God. It would be no good saying that we believe that God exists, and that some attribute or perfection belongs to Him; this would say nothing because it would have no meaning to our mind. Nothing could be more impious or impertinent.<sup>55</sup>

Just so.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See *The God Nobody Knows* 41.

<sup>53</sup> If Stackhouse falls back to the position that "real" and "exists" *do* literally apply to God, then he owes us a convincing account of why these terms do apply, but "power," "knowledge," "goodness," and the like do not. Notice, too, that if "God exists" expresses a literal truth, then it is false that our theological language is *necessarily* symbolic.

<sup>54</sup> See Eleonore Stump's fine reflections on this score in "Orthodoxy and Heresy," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999) 147–63.

<sup>55</sup> Letter to Mersenne, July 1641 in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters* 106.

<sup>56</sup> I am indebted to David Brown, Sarah Lublink, Michael Daley, and Ed Luk for their helpful remarks on an earlier version of this paper.