

NOTAS Y COMENTARIOS

REDUCTIONISM AND KAI NIELSEN

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In "Reductionism and Religious Truth Claims"¹ Kai Nielsen sets down the following "minimum content" criterion of religious belief: "...the reality of one and only one God who is infinite, transcendent to the universe, who is thought to have created the universe out of nothing and upon whom man, a sinful creature, is dependent and in whom man will discover the *raison d'être* for his existence."² He holds this to be the minimum content of religious belief either for "Jew, Christian, or Moslem," or else for Jew and Christian. He makes both statements. But he provides no evidence supporting the presence of these items, and only these, in the criterion for the three (or two) religious groups with which he is concerned. Nor does he tell us how the criterion is to be applied. Is it to be applied to every worshipper with institutional relations to these several religions, or every theologian in good standing with the religions in question, or every philosopher with such relations, or all of these, or some combination of these groups? In any case the criterion is not of a single piece since some of the items pertain more clearly to worshippers and others to philosophers or theologians.

If we take the phrase with the most direct reference to the worshipper, "...upon whom man, a sinful, finite creature is dependent..." it is not clear that all philosophers who have written about these religions have regarded man as "sinful," rather than merely ethically deficient. Nor is it the case that all worshippers and theologians in these two or three religions have so regarded man. Among worshippers the blood-guilt tradition of sin was challenged by the idea of sacrifice as personal dedication, and sin as having

¹ *Diálogos*, 27, pp.25-39.

² *Ibid.*, p.35.

fallen short of an ideal state.³ The challenging tradition is very close, ethically, to the view of those Nielsen calls non-descriptivists who "reconstruct Christianity" rather than perspicuously displaying its nature. Indeed, the second view may be the source of much of what is now regarded in the West as ethical behavior. Both traditions have strength. If Nielsen is willing to recognize the second, he allows the nondescriptivists into his "minimum content" circle (which he does not want to do). If he rules out the second, he excludes important traditions, central to both Judaism and Christianity. The notion of "dependence," of course, is separate from both of these types of sinfulness; it is of "philosophical manufacture" (which Nielsen in other contexts regards as "dubious" and "*Ersatz*"), having its clearest expression in Schleiermacher.

The rest of the catalogue of minimum-content predicates consists of abstract items, relating more properly to the theoreticians of the religions in question than to the worshippers *per se*: i.e., unity,⁴ infinity, transcendence and *creatio ex nihilo*. Every one of these is really, like "dependence," of "philosophical manufacture" (*pace* Nielsen), but not for that reason necessarily either dubious or *Ersatz*. The point is that religious practice does not ordinarily require such fine-grained distinctions. They are shaped by philosophers who, reflecting on the material of religious practice, produce these terms as the intellectual correlatives of such practice.

Despite the anomalous character of the list, Nielsen wishes to use it as a test against theological heresy. Unlike most inquisitors, however, he does not cherish the orthodoxy which he for a moment defends. Indeed, he wishes to use the orthodox view to eliminate the heretics before he jettisons the orthodox view as itself incredible. Among the heterodox he finds the Whitehead-Hartshorne view of a surrelativistic deity particularly heinous. He brings two charges against the view. One is that of distortion, unduly stretching the minimum-content catalogue. The other is that of incoherence. The two charges merge into the single charge that the view in question results in "an *Ersatz* God of dubious philosophical manufacture," so completely so that it can be ruled out by "definitional fiat."

Concerning the second charge, Nielsen says that the Whitehead-Hartshorne view is "thoroughly incoherent." The charge seems

³ For part of this development see my "Religious Seeing-As," *Religious Studies* 14, esp. pp.82-87.

⁴ Although the phrase "one and only one God" is more redolent of the rallying cry of Islam than of either Judaism or Christianity, and is not quite the philosophical abstraction of divine unity.

relatively empty since he had earlier⁵ spoken of "the radical incoherence of [all] God-talk." To be "thoroughly incoherent" would not seem to be much different from being "radically incoherent." But concerning this radical and thorough incoherence, a distinction or two deserves to be drawn. In the first place the traditional view of an infinite transcendent creator *ex nihilo* had long been known to harbor certain incoherencies, and it was to their resolution that the Whitehead-Hartshorne view was directed. Full treatment of the issue cannot be undertaken here, nor should it be necessary since thousands of pages have been devoted to the subject.⁶ But the over-all schema works with the following points: If God is absolute with no hint of relativity, if he is transcendent with no hint of immanence, then he cannot be related to the world whether as creator or in any other manner. Similarly, if God is eternal with no hint of temporality, then either the temporality of the world is illusory or is something apart from God; but since, on the absolutistic hypothesis, there is nothing apart from God, time must be illusory. And if before the creation of the world God knew every event which was to occur, then human freedom, in the sense of the capacity to have done otherwise, is impossible. Coherence is gained on each of these points by the surrelativistic view of the divine which Nielsen rejects as incoherent. The view argues for a correlativity of ultimate, categorial terms, viewing God as absolute-relative, transcendent-immanent, infinite-finite, pure actuality and pure potentiality; and shows that the contrasting terms, on different levels of abstraction, are mutually consistent. Finally, since the definition of omniscience (meaning simply all there is to know) specifies knowledge of the actual as actual and of the possible as possible, omniscience and human freedom as capacity to do otherwise are seen to be compatible.

And although both this view and the one Nielsen canonizes as the standard position (I now turn to the charge of distortion) are a result of philosophical manufacture, Hartshorne and I long ago demonstrated—and this has not been contravened in more than a quarter century—that the major thrust of the primary scriptural material, at least in Judaism and Christianity, supports the surrelativistic, more clearly than the absolutistic, view. In view of all of this I hold that Nielsen's charge of incoherence is itself incoherent, and that his charge of distortion is itself distorted.

⁵ On p.28.

⁶ The earliest sustained account having been Hartshorne and Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953; Midway Reprints, 1976).

With respect to verifiability Nielsen says that while the term "God" must be a referring expression, one should not require more of "religious utterances" than of utterances in "other domains." And that is fair enough. The only point I would be interested in making is that his division of God-talk people into descriptivists and non-descriptivists is incomplete. I should think that the largest group of intellectuals using the term might be called descriptive second intentionalists, in that the term refers, if it does, by virtue of the behavior of other terms. As Duns Scotus regarded "God" as referring to whatever shores up the principle of induction, and Aquinas to whatever is needed to complete the explanations of motion, causality, contingency, order, and judgments of value, so Whitehead has the term refer to whatever accounts for the ordering of possibilities and the conservation of the past. If all of these terms are explicatively autonomous, then the term "God" is non-referring, and all the philosophers who use it are, despite themselves, nondescriptivists. Should any transcendental supplementation be required for any of these terms—and Nielsen could never show that it is never required except through an act of atheistic fideism—then the term "God" is a referring term and the philosophers who use it are descriptivists. But even should the term not be a referring term in the sense of referring to an entity, in my view both it and other religious terms are referring metaphors. They refer to features of the natural order seen as signs of a sacral order. And, taken even in this sense (a sense which seems to me to be religiously basic), "God" and other religious terms fall between Nielsen's classification of religious positions into descriptivists and non-descriptivists.

Near the end of his essay Nielsen seems to recognize that his comments would have had to be altered had he approached the issue "with a careful historical sense." With that, at least, I agree; and some of the needed alterations are implicit, I believe, in my remarks. Finally, it seems to me that, if one wishes to speak rationally about God, one must remain with if-then statements. Since Nielsen wishes to speak more strongly, what he says cannot be viewed, really, as rational. This seems to me to denominate him a Wittgensteinian fideist of atheistic persuasion.⁷

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⁷ I am here simply using Nielsen's term. I personally don't believe that fideism is the outcome of Wittgenstein's view, finding "forms of life" to be more Winchian than Wittgensteinian.