

## God Everlasting

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All Christian theologians agree that God is without beginning and without end. The vast majority have held, in addition, that God is *eternal*, existing outside of time. Only a small minority have contended that God is *everlasting*, existing within time.<sup>1</sup> In what follows I shall take up the cudgels for that minority, arguing that God as conceived and presented by the biblical writers is a being whose own life and existence is temporal.

The biblical writers do not present God as some passive factor within reality but as an agent in it. Further, they present him as acting within *human* history. The god they present is neither the impassive god of the Oriental nor the nonhistorical god of the Deist. Indeed, so basic to the biblical writings is their speaking of God as agent within history that if one viewed God as only an impassive factor in reality, or as one whose agency does not occur within human history, one would have to regard the biblical speech about God as at best one long sequence of metaphors pointing to a reality for which they are singularly inept, and as at worst one long sequence of falsehoods.

More specifically, the biblical writers present God as a redeeming God. From times most ancient, man has departed from the pattern of responsibilities awarded him at his creation by God. A multitude of evils has followed. But God was not content to leave man in the mire of his misery. Aware of what is going on, he has resolved, in response to man's sin and its resultant evils, to bring about renewal. He has, indeed, already been acting in accord with that resolve, centrally and decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What I shall argue is that if we are to accept this picture of God as

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1. The most noteworthy contemporary example is Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Eng. tr., Philadelphia, 1950).

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acting for the renewal of human life, we must conceive of him as everlasting rather than eternal. God the Redeemer cannot be a God eternal. This is so because God the Redeemer is a God who *changes*. And any being which changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession. Of course, there is an important sense in which God as presented in the Scriptures is changeless: he is steadfast in his redeeming intent and ever faithful to his children. Yet, *ontologically*, God cannot be a redeeming God without there being changeful variation among his states.

If this argument proves correct the importance of the issue here confronting us for Christian theology can scarcely be exaggerated. A theology which opts for God as eternal cannot avoid being in conflict with the confession of God as redeemer. And given the obvious fact that God is presented in the Bible as a God who redeems, a theology which opts for God as eternal cannot be a theology faithful to the biblical witness.

Our line of argument will prove to be neither subtle nor complicated. So the question will insistently arise, why have Christian theologians so massively contended that God is eternal? Why has not the dominant tradition of Christian theology been that of God everlasting?

Our argument will depend heavily on taking with seriousness a certain feature of temporality which has been neglected in Western philosophy. But the massiveness of the God eternal tradition cannot, I am persuaded, be attributed merely to philosophical oversight. There are, I think, two factors more fundamental. One is the feeling, deep-seated in much of human culture, that the flowing of events into an irrecoverable and unchangeable past is a matter for deep regret. Our bright actions and shining moments do not long endure. The gnawing tooth of time bites all. And our evil deeds can never be undone. They are forever to be regretted. Of course, the philosopher is inclined to distinguish the mere fact of temporality from the actual pattern of the events in history and to argue that regrets about the latter should not slosh over into regrets about the former. The philosopher is right. The regrettableness of what transpires in time is not good ground for regretting that there is time. Yet where the philosopher sees the possibility and the need for a distinction, most people have seen none. Regrets over the pervasive pattern of what transpires within time have led whole societies to place the divine outside of time—freed from the "bondage" of temporality.

But I am persuaded that William Kneale is correct when he contends that the most important factor accounting for the tradition of God eternal within Christian theology was the influence of the classical Greek philos-

ophers on the early theologians.<sup>2</sup> The distinction between eternal being and everlasting being was drawn for the first time in the history of thought by Plato (*Timaeus* 37-38), though the language he uses is reminiscent of words used still earlier by Parmenides. Plato does not connect eternity and divinity, but he does make clear his conviction that eternal being is the highest form of reality. This was enough to influence the early Christian theologians, who did their thinking within the milieu of Hellenic and Hellenistic thought, to assign eternity to God. Thus was the fateful choice made.

A good many twentieth-century theologians have been engaged in what one might call the dehellenization of Christian theology. If Kneale's contention is correct, then in this essay I am participating in that activity. Of course, not every bit of dehellenization is laudatory from the Christian standpoint, for not everything that the Greeks said is false. What is the case, though, is that the patterns of classical Greek thought are incompatible with the pattern of biblical thought. And in facing the issue of God everlasting versus God eternal we are dealing with the fundamental pattern of biblical thought. Indeed, I am persuaded that unless the tradition of God eternal is renounced, fundamental dehellenizing will perpetually occupy itself in the suburbs, never advancing to the city center. Every attempt to purge Christian theology of the traces of incompatible Hellenic patterns of thought must fail unless it removes the roadblock of the God eternal tradition. Around this barricade there are no detours.

## I

Before we can discuss whether God is outside of time we must ask what it would be for something to be outside of time. That is, before we can ask whether God is eternal we must ask what it would be for something to be eternal. But this in turn demands that we are clear on what it would be for something to be a temporal entity. We need not be clear on all the features which something has by virtue of being temporal—on all facets of temporality—but we must at least be able to say what is necessary and sufficient for something's being in time.

For our purposes we can take as the decisive feature of temporality the exemplification of the temporal ordering-relations of precedence, succession, and simultaneity. Unless some entities did stand to each other in one or the other of these relations, there would be no temporal reality. Conversely, if there is temporal reality then there are pairs of entities whose

2. William Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1961).

members stand to each other in the relation of one occurring before (precedence) or one occurring after (succession) or one occurring simultaneously with (simultaneity) the other.

We must ask in turn what sort of entity is such that its examples can stand to each other in the relations of precedence, succession, and simultaneity. For not every sort of entity is such. The members of a pair of trees cannot stand in these relations. The golden chain tree outside my back door neither occurs before nor after nor simultaneously with the shingle oak outside my front door. Of course, *the sprouting of the former* stands in one of these relations to *the sprouting of the latter*; and so too does *the demise of the latter* to *the demise of the former*. But the trees themselves do not. They do not occur at all.

We have in this example a good clue, though, as to the sort of entity whose examples can stand in the relations of precedence, succession, and simultaneity. It is just such entities as *the demise of my golden chain tree* and *the sprouting of my shingle oak*. It is, in short, what I shall call events that stand in these relations.

As I conceive of an event, it consists in something's actually having some property, or something's actually performing some action, or something's actually standing in some relation to something. Events as I conceive them are all actual occurrences. They are not what *can have* occurrences. They are, rather, themselves occurrences. Furthermore, as I conceive of events, there may be two or more events consisting in a given entity's having a given property (or performing a given action). For example, my golden chain tree flowered last spring and is flowering again this spring. So there are two events each consisting in the flowering of my golden chain tree. One began and ended last year. The other began and will end this year.

Such events as I have thus far offered by way of example are all temporally limited, in the sense that there are times at which the event is not occurring. There are times at which it has not yet begun or has already ended. Last year's flowering of my golden chain tree is such. It began at some time last spring and has now for about a year or so ceased. But there are other events which are not in this way temporally limited; *3's being prime*, for example. If time itself begins and ends, then this event, too, occurs wholly within a finite interval. Yet even then there is no time at which it does not occur.

I said that every event consists in something's actually having some property, actually performing some action, or actually standing in some relation to something. So consider some event *e* which consists in some entity *a* having some property or performing some action or standing in

some relation. Let us call *a*, a *subject* of *e*. And let us call *e* an *aspect* of *a*. A given event may well have more than one subject. For example, an event consisting of my sitting under my shingle oak has both me and the shingle oak as subjects. Indeed, I think it can also be viewed as having the relation of *sitting under* as subject. I see nothing against regarding an event consisting of my sitting under my shingle oak as identical with an event consisting of the relation of *sitting under* being exemplified by me with respect to my shingle oak.

Now consider that set of a given entity's aspects such that each member bears a temporal order-relation to every member of the set and none bears a temporal order-relation to any aspect not a member of the set. Let us call that set, provided that it is not empty, the *time-strand* of that entity. I assume it to be true that every entity has at most one time-strand. That is, I assume that no entity has two or more sets of temporally interrelated aspects such that no member of the one set bears any temporal order-relation to any member of the other. I do not, however, assume that each of the aspects of every entity which has a time-strand belongs to the strand. And as to whether every entity has at least one time-strand—that of course is involved in the question as to whether anything is eternal.

Consider, next, a set of events such that each member stands to every member in one of the temporal order-relations, and such that no member stands to any event which is not a member in any of these relations. I shall call such a set a *temporal array*. A temporal array is of course just the union of a set of time-strands such that every member of each member strand bears some temporal order-relation to every member of every other member strand, and such that no member of any member strand bears any temporal order-relation to any member of any strand which is not a member of the set. In what follows I assume that there is but one temporal array. I assume, that is, that every member of every time-strand bears a temporal order-relation to every member of every time-strand.

Now suppose that there is some entity all of whose aspects are such that they are to be found in no temporal array whatsoever. Such an entity would be, in the most radical way possible, outside of time. Accordingly, I shall define "eternal" thus:

Def. 1: *x* is eternal if and only if *x* has no aspect which is a member of the temporal array.

An alternative definition would have been this: "*x* is eternal if and only if *x* has no time-strand." The difference between the two definitions is that, on the latter, an entity is eternal if none of its aspects bears any temporal order-relation to any of those events which are *its* aspects;

whereas on the former, what is required of an entity for it to be eternal is that none of its aspects be related by any temporal order-relation to *any event whatsoever*. Of course, if every event which bears any temporal order-relation to any event whatsoever is also simultaneous with itself, then everything which fails to satisfy the "temporal array" definition of "eternal" will also fail to satisfy the "time-strand" definition.

At this point, certain ambiguities in the concepts of precedence, succession, and simultaneity should be resolved. By saying that event  $e_1$  occurs *simultaneously with* event  $e_2$ , I mean that there is some time at which both  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  are occurring. I do *not* mean—though indeed this might reasonably also have been meant by the words—that there is *no* time at which one of  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  is occurring and the other is not. When two events stand in that latter relation I shall say that they are *wholly simultaneous*. By saying that  $e_1$  *precedes*  $e_2$ , I mean that there is some time at which  $e_1$  but not  $e_2$  is occurring, which precedes all times at which  $e_2$  is occurring. I do not mean that every time at which  $e_1$  occurs precedes every time at which  $e_2$  occurs. When  $e_1$  stands to  $e_2$  in this latter relationship, I shall say that it *wholly precedes*  $e_2$ . Lastly, by saying that  $e_1$  *succeeds*  $e_2$ , I mean that there is some time at which  $e_1$  but not  $e_2$  is occurring which succeeds all times at which  $e_2$  is occurring. This, as in the case of precedence, allows for overlap. And, as in the case of precedence, an overlapping case of succession may be distinguished from a case in which one event *wholly succeeds* another.

When 'simultaneity,' 'precedence,' and 'succession' are understood thus, they do not stand for exclusive relations. An event  $e_1$  may precede, occur simultaneously with, and succeed, another event  $e_2$ . But of course  $e_1$  cannot *wholly* precede  $e_2$  while also being *wholly* simultaneous with it, and so forth for the other combinations.

Reflecting on the consequences of the above definitions and explanations, someone might protest that the definition of eternal is altogether too stringent. For consider, say, the number 3. This, no doubt, was referred to by Euclid and also by Cantor. So, by our explanation of "aspect," *3's being referred to by Euclid* was an aspect of the number 3, and *3's being referred to by Cantor* was another aspect thereof. And of course the former preceded the latter. So, by our definition, 3 is not eternal. But—it may be protested—the fact that something is successively referred to should not be regarded as ground for concluding that it is not eternal. For after all, successive references to something do not produce any change in it. Although they produce variation among its aspects, they do not produce a changeful variation among them.

In response to this protest it must be emphasized that the concept of

an eternal being is not identical with the concept of an unchanging being. The root idea behind the concept of an eternal being is not that of one which does not change but rather that of one which is outside of time. And a question of substance is whether an unchanging being may fail to be eternal. The most thoroughgoing and radical way possible for an entity to be outside of time is that which something enjoys if it satisfies our definition of "eternal." And it must simply be acknowledged that if an entity is successively referred to, then it is not in the most thoroughgoing way outside of time. There is temporal succession among its aspects.

However, the idea of change could be used by the protester in another way. It is indeed true that not every variation among the aspects of an entity constitutes change therein. Only variation among some of them—call them its *change-relevant* aspects—does so. So on the ground that the change-relevant aspects of an entity are more basic to it, we might distinguish between something being *fundamentally* noneternal and something being *trivially* noneternal. Something is *fundamentally* noneternal if it fails to satisfy the concept of being eternal by virtue of some of its change-relevant aspects. Something is *trivially* noneternal if its failure to satisfy the concept of being eternal is not by virtue of any of its change-relevant aspects.

Now in fact it will be change-relevant aspects of God to which I will appeal in arguing that he is not eternal. Thus my argument will be that God is *fundamentally* noneternal.

## II

In order to present our argument that God is fundamentally noneternal we must now take note of a second basic feature of temporality; namely, that all temporal reality comes in the three modes of past, present, and future.<sup>3</sup>

An important fact about the temporal array is that some events within it are *present*: they *are occurring*; some are *past*: they *were occurring*; some are *future*: they *will be occurring*. Indeed, every event is either past or present or future. And not only *is* this the case now. It always was the case in the past that every event was either past or present or future. And it always will be the case in the future that every event is either past or present or future. Further, every event in the array is such that it either

3. There are two other basic features of temporality: one is the phenomenon of temporal location—the fact that events occur at or within intervals. The other is the phenomenon of temporal duration—the fact that intervals have lengths. In our preceding discussion we repeatedly made appeal to the phenomenon of temporal location without calling attention to our doing so.

was present or is present or will be present. No event can be past unless it was present. No event can be future unless it will be present. Thus the present is the most basic of the three modes of temporality. To be past is just to have been present. To be future is just to be going to be present. Further, if an event is past, it *presently* is past. If an event is future, it *presently* is future. In this way, too, the present is fundamental.

The reason every event in the temporal array is either past, present, or future is as follows: in order to be in the array at all, an event must occur either before or after or at the same time as some other event. But then, of course, it must occur sometime. And when an event is occurring it is present. So consider any event *e* which is to be found in the temporal array. If *e* is occurring, *e* is present. If, on the other hand, *e* is not occurring, then *e* either precedes or succeeds what is occurring. For *some* event is presently occurring. And every event in the array either precedes or succeeds or is wholly simultaneous with every other. But if *e* were wholly simultaneous with what is occurring, *e* itself would be occurring. So *e* either succeeds or precedes what is occurring if it is not itself occurring. Now for any event *x* to precede any event *y* is just for *x* sometime to be past when *y* is not past. So if *e* precedes what is occurring and is not itself occurring, then *e* is past. On the other hand, for any event *x* to succeed any event *y* is just for *x* sometime to be future when *y* is not future. So if *e* succeeds what is occurring and is not itself occurring, then *e* is future. Hence everything to be found in the temporal array is either past, present, or future.

In contemporary Western philosophy the phenomenon of temporal modality has been pervasively neglected or ignored in favor of the phenomena of temporal order-relationships, temporal location, and temporal duration. Thus time has been "spatialized." For though space provides us with close analogues to all three of these latter phenomena, it provides us with no analogue whatever to the past/present/future distinction.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most fundamental and consequential manifestation of this neglect is to be found in the pervasive assumption that all propositions expressed with tensed sentences are mode-indifferent and dated. Consider for example the tensed sentence 'My golden chain tree is flowering.' The assumption is that what I would assert if I now (June 5, 1974) assertively uttered this sentence with normal sense is *that my golden chain tree is or*

4. A recent example of the neglect of temporal modality in favor of temporal location is to be found in David Lewis, "Anselm and Actuality," *Nous*, 4 (May 1970). Concluding several paragraphs of discussion he says, "If we take a timeless view and ignore our own location in time, the big difference between the present time and other times vanishes."

*was or will be flowering on June 5, 1974.* And that the proposition I would be asserting if I assertively uttered the same sentence on June 4, 1975, is *that my golden chain tree is or was or will be flowering on June 4, 1975.* And so forth.

In order to see clearly what the assumption in question comes to, it will be helpful to introduce a way of expressing tenses alternative to that found in our natural language.<sup>5</sup> We begin by introducing the three tense operators, *P*, *T*, and *F*. These are to be read, respectively, as "it was the case that," "it is the case that," and "it will be the case that." They are to be attached as prefixes either to sentences in the present tense which lack any such prefix,<sup>6</sup> or to compound sentences which consist of sentences in the present tense with one or more such prefixes attached. And the result of attaching one such operator to a sentence is to yield a new sentence. For example: *P* (my golden chain tree is flowering), to be read as, *"it was the case that my golden chain tree is flowering."* And: *F*[*P* (my golden chain tree is flowering)], to be read as: *"it will be the case that it was the case that my golden chain tree is flowering."*

So consider any sentence *s* which is either a present tense sentence with no operators prefixed or a compound sentence consisting of a present tense sentence with one or more operators prefixed. The proposition expressed by *P(s)* is true if and only if the proposition expressed by *s* was true (in the past). The proposition expressed by *T(s)* is true if and only if the proposition expressed by *s* is true (now, in the present).<sup>7</sup> And the proposition expressed by *F(s)* is true if and only if the proposition expressed by *s* will be true (in the future).

Any proposition expressed by a tensed sentence from ordinary speech can be expressed by a sentence in this alternative language. Thus "My golden chain tree was flowering" has as its translational equivalent "*P* (my golden chain tree is flowering)." And "My golden chain tree will have been flowering" has as its translational equivalent "*F*[*P* (my golden chain tree is flowering)]."

Let us now introduce a fourth tense operator, *D*, defining this one in terms of the preceding three thus:

5. See the writings of Arthur Prior, especially *Time and Modality* (Oxford, 1957); *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford, 1967); and *Time and Tense* (Oxford, 1968).

6. This reflects the fact that the past is what was *present*; the future what will be *present*.

7. Thus, strictly speaking, the *T* operator is unnecessary. Attaching *T* to any sentence *s* always yields a sentence which expresses the same proposition as does *s* by itself. This reflects the fact that what is past is *presently* past, what is future is *presently* future, and, of course, what is present is *presently* present.

Def. 2:  $D(\dots)$ , if and only if  $P(\dots)$  or  $T(\dots)$  or  $F(\dots)$ .

And let us read it as: "It was or is or will be the case that..." Let us call this the *tense-indifferent* tense operator. And, correspondingly, let us call a sentence which has at least one tense operator and all of whose tense operators are tense-indifferent, a *wholly tense-indifferent* sentence. Furthermore, as the ordinary language counterpart to the tense-indifferent operator let us use the verb in its present tense with a bar over it, thus: "My golden chain tree is flowering." Or "My golden chain tree flowers."

Finally, let us add to our linguistic stock a certain set of modifiers of these tense operators—modifiers of the form "at  $t$ ," "before  $t$ ," and "after  $t$ ," where  $t$  stands in for some expression designating a time which is such that that expression can be used to designate that time no matter whether that time is in the past, present, or future. These modifiers are to be attached to our tense operators, thus:  $P$  at 1974 (...). The result of attaching one to an operator is to yield an operator of a new form—what one might call a *dated* tense operator. The proposition expressed by a sentence of the form  $P$  at  $t(s)$  is true if and only if the proposition expressed by  $s$  was true at or within time  $t$ . The proposition expressed by  $T$  at  $t(s)$  is true if and only if the proposition expressed by  $s$  is true at or within time  $t$ . And the proposition expressed by  $F$  at  $t(s)$  is true if and only if the proposition expressed by  $s$  will be true at or within time  $t$ . Thus the proposition expressed by "P at 1973 (my golden chain tree is flowering)" is true if and only if my golden chain tree was flowering at or within 1973. Similarly, the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form  $P$  before  $t(s)$  is true if and only if the proposition expressed by  $s$  was true before  $t$ ; likewise for  $T$  before  $t(s)$  and  $F$  before  $t(s)$ . And the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form  $P$  after  $t(s)$  is true if and only if the proposition expressed by  $s$  was true after  $t$ ; likewise for  $T$  after  $t(s)$  and  $F$  after  $t(s)$ . Let us call a sentence which has tense operators and all of whose tense operators are dated ones, a *fully dated* sentence.

The assumption underlying a great deal of contemporary philosophy can now be stated thus: every proposition expressed by a sentence which is not wholly tense-indifferent and not fully dated is a proposition which can be expressed by some sentence which is wholly tense-indifferent and fully dated. Consider, for example, the sentence 'T (my golden chain tree is flowering)'—the translational equivalent of the ordinary sentence, 'My golden chain tree is flowering.' Suppose that I assertively utter this sentence on June 5, 1974. The assumption is that the proposition I assert by uttering this sentence is that which is expressed by 'D at June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering).' And in general, where  $s$  is some

present tense sentence, the assumption is that the proposition asserted by assertively uttering  $s$  at time  $t$  is just that which would be asserted by assertively uttering  $D$  at  $t(s)$ . Similarly, it is assumed that the proposition asserted by assertively uttering  $P(s)$  at time  $t$  is that which would be asserted by assertively uttering  $D$  before  $t(s)$ . And it is assumed that the proposition asserted by assertively uttering  $F(s)$  at time  $t$  is that which would be asserted by assertively uttering  $D$  after  $t(s)$ .

On this view, tense-committed sentences are characteristically used to assert different propositions on different occasions of use. For example, if the sentence 'My golden chain tree is flowering' is assertively uttered on June 5, it is being used to assert that it is or was or will be the case on June 5 that my golden chain tree is flowering; whereas, if uttered on June 4, it is being used to assert that it is or was or will be the case on June 4 that my golden chain tree is flowering. Whether this view is correct will be considered shortly. If it is, then tense-committed sentences are in that way different from wholly tense-indifferent sentences. For these latter are used to assert the same proposition on all occasions of utterance.

I think we now have the assumption in question clearly enough before us to weigh its acceptability. It is in fact clearly false. To see this, suppose that I now (June 5, 1974) assertively utter the sentence 'My golden chain tree is flowering' and ' $D$  at June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering).' The proposition asserted with the former entails that the flowering of my golden chain tree is something that *is* occurring, *now*, *presently*. But the latter does not entail this at all. In general, if someone assertively utters a present tense sentence  $s$  at  $t$ , what he asserts is true if and only if the proposition ' $D$  at  $t(s)$ ' is true. Yet ' $s$ ' and ' $D$  at  $t(s)$ ' are distinct propositions. So also, if I now assertively utter 'My golden chain tree was flowering,' what I assert entails that the flowering of my golden chain tree is something that *did* take place, in the past. Whereas the proposition asserted with ' $D$  before June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering)' does not entail this. And this nonidentity of the propositions holds even though it is the case that if someone assertively utters  $P(s)$  at  $t$ , what he asserts is true if and only if the proposition  $D$  before  $t(s)$  is true.

Just as a wholly tense-indifferent sentence is used to assert the same proposition no matter what the time of utterance, so, too, the proposition asserted with such a sentence does not vary in truth value. If it is ever true, it is always true, that  $D$  at June 5, 1974 (my golden chain tree is flowering). And if it is ever false, it is always false. Such a proposition is constant in its truth value. But an implication of the failure of the contemporary assumption is that the same cannot be said for the propositions

expressed by tense-committed sentences. At least some of these are such that they are sometimes true, sometimes false. They are variable in their truth value. For example, 'My golden chain tree is flowering' is now true; but two weeks ago it was false.

So the situation is not that in successively uttering a tense-committed sentence we are asserting distinct propositions, each of which is constant in truth value and each of which could also be expressed with wholly tense indifferent, fully dated, sentences. The situation is rather that we are repeatedly asserting a proposition which is variable in its truth value. Contemporary philosophers, along with assuming the dispensability of the temporal modes, have assumed that all propositions are constant in truth value. Plato's lust for eternity lingers on.

Though philosophers have ignored the modes of time in their theories, we as human beings are all aware of the past/present/future distinction. For without such knowledge we would be lost in the temporal array. Suppose one knew, for each event  $x$ , which events  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  simultaneously with  $x$ , which  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  before  $x$ , and which  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  after  $x$ . (Recall the significance of the bar over a present-tense verb.) Then with respect to, say, Luther's posting of his theses, one would know which events  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  simultaneously therewith, which  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  before it, and which  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  after it. And so forth, for all other temporal interrelations of events. There would then still be something of enormous importance which one would not on that account know. One would not know where we are in the array of temporally ordered events. For one would not know which events are occurring, which were occurring, and which will be occurring. To know this it is not sufficient to know, with respect to every event, which events  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  simultaneously therewith, which  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  before, and which  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  after.

Nor, as we have seen above, is such knowledge gained by knowing what  $\overline{\text{occurs}}$  at what time. If all I know with respect to events  $e_1 \dots e_n$  is that they all  $\overline{\text{occur}}$  at the time, say, of the inauguration of the first post-Nixon President, then I do not yet know whether those events are in the past, in the present, or in the future. And if all my knowledge with respect to every event and every interval is of that deficient sort, I do not know where we are in the temporal array. For I do not know which events are present, which are past, and which are future.

### III

It might seem obvious that God, as described by the biblical writers, is a being who changes, and who accordingly is fundamentally noneternal. For God is described as a being who *acts*—in creation, in providence, and

for the renewal of mankind. He is an agent, not an impassive factor in reality. And from the manner in which his acts are described, it seems obvious that many of them have beginnings and endings, that accordingly they stand in succession relations to each other, and that these successive acts are of such a sort that their presence and absence on God's time-strand constitutes changes thereon. Thus it seems obvious that God is fundamentally noneternal.

God is spoken of as calling Abraham to leave Chaldea and later instructing Moses to return to Egypt. So does not the event of *God's instructing Moses* succeed that of *God's calling Abraham*? And does not this sort of succession constitute a change on God's time-strand—not a change in his "essence," but nonetheless a change on his time-strand? Again, God is spoken of as leading Israel through the Red Sea and later sending his Son into the world. So does not his doing the latter succeed his doing the former? And does not the fact of this sort of succession constitute a change along God's time-strand?

In short, it seems evident that the biblical writers regard God as having a time-strand of his own on which actions on his part are to be found, and that some at least of these actions vary in such a way that there are changes along the strand. It seems evident that they do not regard changes on time-strands as confined to entities in God's creation. The God who acts, in the way in which the biblical writers speak of God as acting, seems clearly to change.

Furthermore, is it not clear from how they speak that the biblical writers regarded many of God's acts as bearing temporal order-relations to events which are not aspects of him but rather aspects of the earth, of ancient human beings, and so forth? The four cited above, for example, seem all to be described thus. It seems obvious that God's actions as described by the biblical writers stand in temporal order-relations to all the other events in our own time-array.

However, I think it is not at all so obvious as on first glance it might appear that the biblical writers do in fact describe God as changing. Granted that the language they use suggests this. It is not at once clear that this is what they wished to say with this language. It is not clear that this is how they were describing God. Let us begin to see why this is so by reflecting on the following passage from St. Thomas Aquinas:

Nor, if the action of the first agent is eternal, does it follow that His effect is eternal, . . . God acts voluntarily in the production of things, . . . God's act of understanding and willing is, necessarily, His act of making. Now, an effect follows from the intellect and the will according to the determination of the intellect and the command of the will.

Moreover, just as the intellect determines every other condition of the thing made, so does it prescribe the time of its making; for art determines not only that this thing is to be such and such, but that it is to be at this particular time, even as a physician determines that a dose of medicine is to be drunk at such and such a particular time, so that, if his act of will were of itself sufficient to produce the effect, the effect would follow anew from his previous decision, without any new action on his part. Nothing, therefore, prevents our saying that God's action existed from all eternity, whereas its effect was not present from eternity, but existed at that time when, from all eternity, He ordained it (*SCG* II.35; cf. II.36, 4).

Let us henceforth call an event which neither begins nor ends an *everlasting* event. And let us call an event which either begins or ends, a *temporal* event. In the passage above, St. Thomas is considering God's acts of bringing about temporal events. So consider some such act; say, that of God's bringing about Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The temporal event in question, Israel's deliverance from Egypt, occurred (let us say) in 1225 B.C. But from the fact that what God brought about occurred in 1225 it does not follow, says Aquinas, that God's act of bringing it about occurred in 1225. In fact, it does not follow that this act had any beginning or ending whatsoever. And in general, suppose that God brings about some temporal event *e*. From the fact that *e* is temporal it does not follow, says Aquinas, that God's act of bringing about *e*'s occurrence is temporal. The temporality of the event which God brings about does not infect God's act of bringing it about. God's act of bringing it about may well be everlasting. This can perhaps more easily be seen, he says, if we remember that God, unlike us, does not have to "take steps" so as to bring about the occurrence of some event. He need only will that it occur. If God just wants it to be the case that *e* occur at *t*, *e* occurs at *t*.

Thus God can bring about changes in our history without himself changing. The occurrence of the event of Israel's deliverance from Egypt constitutes a change in our history. But there is no counterpart change among God's aspects by virtue of his bringing this event about.

Now let us suppose that the four acts of God cited above—instructing Moses, calling Abraham, leading Israel through the Red Sea, and sending his Son into the world—regardless of the impression we might gain from the biblical language used to describe them, also have the structure of God's bringing about the occurrence of some temporal event. Suppose, for example, that God's leading Israel through the Red Sea has the structure of God's bringing it about that Israel's passage through the Red Sea occurs. And suppose Aquinas is right that the temporality of Israel's pas-

sage does not infect with temporality God's act of bringing about this passage. Then what is strictly speaking the case is not that God's leading Israel through the Red Sea occurs during 1225. What is rather the case is that Israel's passage through the Red Sea occurs during 1225, and that God brings this passage about. And the temporality of the passage does not entail the temporality of God's bringing it about. This latter may be everlasting. So, likewise, the fact that the occurrence of this passage marks a change in our history does not entail that God's bringing it about marks a change among God's aspects. God may unchangingly bring about historical changes.

It is natural, at this point, to wonder whether we do not have in hand here a general strategy for interpreting the biblical language about God acting. Is it not perhaps the case that all those acts of God which the biblical writers speak of as beginning or as ending really consist in God performing the everlasting event of bringing about the occurrence of some temporal event?

Well, God does other things with respect to temporal events than bringing about their occurrence. For example, he also *knows* them. Why then should it be thought that the best way to interpret all the temporal-event language used to describe God's actions is by reference to God's action of bringing about the occurrence of some event? May it not be that the best way to interpret what is said with some of such language is by reference to one of those other acts which God performs with respect to temporal events? But then if God is not to change, it is not only necessary that the temporality of *e* not infect God's act of *bringing about* the occurrence of *e*, but also that *every* act of God such that he performs it with respect to *e* not be infected by the temporality of *e*. For example, if God *knows* some temporal event *e*, his knowledge of *e* must not be infected by the temporality of *e*.

So the best way of extrapolating from Aquinas' hint would probably be along the lines of the following theory concerning God's actions and the biblical speech about them. All God's actions are everlasting. None has either beginning or ending. Of these everlasting acts, the structure of some consists in God's performing some action with respect to some event. And at least some of the events that God acts with respect to are temporal events. However, in no case does the temporality of the event that God acts with respect to infect the event of his acting. On the contrary, his acting with respect to some temporal event is itself invariably an everlasting event. So whenever the biblical writers use temporal-event language to describe God's actions, they are to be interpreted as thereby claiming that God acts with respect to some temporal event. They are not to be inter-

preted as claiming that God's acting is itself a temporal event. God as described by the biblical writers is to be interpreted as acting, and as acting with respect to temporal events. But he is not to be interpreted as changing. All his acts are everlasting.

This, I think, is a fascinating theory. If true, it provides a way of harmonizing the fundamental biblical teaching that God is a being who acts in our history, with the conviction that God does not change. How far the proposed line of biblical interpretation can be carried out, I do not know. I am not aware of any theologian who has ever tried to carry it out, though there are a great many theologians who might have relieved the tension in their thought by developing and espousing it. But what concerns us here is not so much what the theory can adequately deal with as what it cannot adequately deal with. Does the theory in fact provide us with a wholly satisfactory way of harmonizing the biblical presentation of God as acting in history with the conviction that God is fundamentally eternal?

Before we set about looking for a refutation of the theory it should be observed, though, that even if the theory were true God would still not be eternal. For consider God's acts of bringing about Abraham's leaving of Chaldea and of bringing about Israel's passage through the Red Sea. These would both be, on the theory, *everlasting* acts. Both are always occurring. Hence they occur simultaneously. They stand to each other in the temporal order-relation of simultaneity. And since both are aspects of God, God accordingly has a time-strand on which these acts are to be found. Hence God is not eternal. Further, these are surely change-relevant aspects of God. Hence God is fundamentally noneternal.<sup>8</sup>

Though I myself think that this argument is sound, it would not be decisive if presented to Aquinas. For Aquinas held that God is simple. And an implication of this contention on his part is that all aspects of God are identical. Hence in God's case there are no two aspects which are simultaneous with each other; for there are no two aspects at all.

A reply is possible. For consider that which is, on Aquinas' theory, God's single aspect; and refer to it as you will—say, as *God's being omnipotent*. This aspect presumably occurs at the same time as itself. Whenever it occurs, it is itself occurring. It is simultaneous with itself. Furthermore, it occurs simultaneously with every temporal event whatsoever. Since God's

8. By a similar argument the number 3 can be seen to be fundamentally noneternal. Surely 3's *being odd* and 3's *being prime* are both change-relevant aspects of 3. If either of these were for a while an aspect of 3 and then for a while not, we would conclude that 3 had changed. But these two aspects occur simultaneously with each other. They stand to each other in the temporal order-relation of simultaneity. Hence 3 is fundamentally noneternal.

being omnipotent is always occurring, it "overlaps" all temporal events whatsoever. So once again we have the conclusion: God is noneternal, indeed, he is fundamentally noneternal.

It is true, though, that even if Aquinas were to accept this last argument he would not *say*, in conclusion, that God was noneternal. For Aquinas defined an eternal being as one which is without beginning and without end, and which has no *succession* among its aspects (*ST*, I.I q 10 a 1). Thus as Aquinas defined eternal, an eternal being may very well have aspects which stand to each other in the temporal order-relation of simultaneity. What Aquinas ruled out was just aspects standing in the temporal order-relation of succession. Our own definition of "eternal," which disallows simultaneity as well as succession, is in this way more thoroughgoing than is Aquinas'. For a being at least one of whose aspects occurs simultaneously with some event is not yet, in the most radical way possible, outside of time. However, in refutation of the extrapolated Thomistic theory sketched out above I shall now offer an argument against God's being eternal which establishes that there is not only simultaneity but succession among God's aspects, and not just succession but *changeeful* succession. This argument will be as relevant to the issue of God's being eternal on Aquinas' definition of eternal as it is on my own definition.

To refute the extrapolated Thomistic theory we would have to do one or the other of two things. We would have to show that some of the temporal-event language the biblical writers use in speaking of God's actions cannot properly be construed in the suggested way—that is, cannot be construed as used to put forth the claim that God acts in some way with respect to some temporal events. Or, alternatively, we would have to show that some of the actions that God performs with respect to temporal events are themselves temporal, either because they are infected by the temporality of the events or for some other reason.

One way of developing this latter alternative would be to show that some of God's actions must be understood as a response to the free actions of human beings—that what God does he sometimes does in response to what some human being does. I think this is in fact the case. And I think it follows, given that all human actions are temporal, that those actions of God which are "response" actions are temporal as well. But to develop this line of thought would be to plunge us deep into questions of divine omniscience and human freedom. So I shall make a simpler, though I think equally effective objection to the theory, arguing that in the case of certain of God's actions the temporality of the event that God acts on infects his own action with temporality.

Three such acts are the diverse though similar acts of knowing about

some temporal event that it is occurring (that it is *present*), of knowing about some temporal event that it was occurring (that it is *past*), and of knowing about some temporal event that it will be occurring (that it is *future*). Consider the first of these. No one can know about some temporal event *e* that it is occurring except when it is occurring. Before *e* has begun to occur one cannot know that it is occurring, for it is not. Not after *e* has ceased to occur can one know that it is occurring, for it is not. So suppose that *e* has a beginning. Then P's knowing about *e* that it is occurring cannot occur until *e* begins. And suppose that *e* has an ending. Then P's knowing about *e* that it is occurring cannot occur beyond *e*'s cessation. But every temporal event has (by definition) either a beginning or an ending. So every case of knowing about some temporal event that it is occurring itself either begins or ends (or both). Hence the act of knowing about *e* that it is occurring is infected by the temporality of *e*. So also, the act of knowing about *e* that it *was* occurring, and the act of knowing about *e* that it *will be* occurring, are infected by the temporality of *e*.

But God, as the biblical writers describe him, performs all three of these acts, and performs them on temporal events. He knows what is happening in our history, what has happened, and what will happen. Hence, some of God's actions are themselves temporal events. But surely the nonoccurrence followed by the occurrence followed by the nonoccurrence of such knowings constitutes a change on God's time-strand. Accordingly, God is fundamentally noneternal.<sup>9</sup>

It is important, if the force of this argument is to be discerned, that one distinguish between, on the one hand, the act of knowing about some event *e* that it  $\overline{\text{occurs}}$  at some time *t* (recall the significance of the bar) and, on the other hand, the act of knowing about *e* that it is occurring or of knowing that it was occurring or of knowing that it will be occurring. Knowing about *e* that it  $\overline{\text{occurs}}$  at *t* is an act not infected by the temporality of the event known. *That Calvin's flight from Geneva  $\overline{\text{occurs}}$  in 1537* is something that can be known at any and every time whatsoever. For it is both true, and constant in its truth value. But *that Calvin's flight from Geneva is occurring* is variable in its truth value. It once was true, it

9. This line of argument is adumbrated by Arthur Prior here and there in his essay "Formalities of Omniscience," in *Time and Tense*. It is also adumbrated by Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (1966). The essence of the argument is missed in discussions of Kretzmann's paper by Hector Castaneda, "Omniscience and Indexical Reference," *Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1967); and Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York, 1970), ch. 5. Castaneda and Pike fail to take the *modes* of time with full seriousness; as a partial defense of them it should perhaps be admitted as not wholly clear that Kretzmann himself does so.

now is false. And since one can know only what is true, this proposition cannot be known at every time. It cannot be known now. God can know, concerning every temporal event whatsoever, what time that event occurs at, without such knowledge of his being temporal. But he cannot know concerning any temporal event whatsoever that it is occurring, or know that it was occurring, or know that it will be occurring, without that knowledge being itself temporal.

Similarly, we must distinguish between, on the one hand, the act of knowing about some temporal event  $e$  that it occurs simultaneously with events  $e_1 \dots e_n$ , after events  $f_1 \dots f_n$ , and before events  $g_1 \dots g_n$ ; and, on the other hand, the act of knowing about  $e$  that it is occurring or of knowing that it was occurring or of knowing that it will be occurring. Knowledge of the former sort is not infected by the temporality of the event whose temporal order-relationships are known. Knowledge of the latter sort is. I know now that Calvin's flight from Geneva occurs after Luther's posting of his theses occurs. But once again, I do not and cannot now know that Calvin's flight *is* occurring. Because it is not. So too, God once knew that Calvin's flight from Geneva was occurring. But he no longer knows this. For he, too, does not know that which is not so. Thus, in this respect his knowledge has changed. But God always knows that Calvin's flight from Geneva occurs after Luther's posting of his theses occurs. Only if time lacked modes and only if propositions were all constant in truth value could God's knowledge be unchanging—assuming that God's knowledge comprises temporal as well as everlasting events.

The act of *remembering* that  $e$  has occurred is also an act infected by the temporality of  $e$  (remembering is, of course, a species of knowing). For one can only remember that  $e$  has occurred after  $e$  has occurred. 'P remembers that  $e$  occurs' entails that  $e$  has occurred. So if  $e$  is an event that has a beginning, then the act of remembering that  $e$  has occurred has a beginning. But some events with beginnings are such that God remembers their occurrence. Consequently this act on God's part is also a temporal event. It too cannot be everlasting.

God is also described by the biblical writers as planning that he would bring about certain events which he does. This, too, is impossible if God does not change. For consider some event which someone brings about, and suppose that he planned to bring it about. His planning to bring it about must occur before the planned event occurs. For otherwise it is not a case of planning.

So in conclusion, if God were eternal he could not be aware, concerning any temporal event, that it is occurring nor aware that it was occurring

nor aware that it will be occurring; nor could he remember that it has occurred; nor could he plan to bring it about and do so. But all of such actions are presupposed by, and essential to, the biblical presentation of God as a redeeming God. Hence God as presented by the biblical writers is fundamentally noneternal. He is fundamentally in time.

## IV

As with any argument, one can here choose to deny the premisses rather than to accept the conclusion. Instead of agreeing that God is fundamentally noneternal because he changes with respect to his knowledge, his memory, and his planning, one could try to save one's conviction that God is eternal by denying that he knows what is or was or will be occurring, that he remembers what has occurred, and that he brings about what he has planned. It seems to me, however, that this is clearly to give up the notion of God as a redeeming God; and in turn it seems to me that to give this up is to give up what is central to the biblical vision of God. To sustain this latter claim would of course require an extensive hermeneutical inquiry. But lest someone be tempted to go this route of trying to save God's eternity by treating all the biblical language about God the redeemer as either false or misleadingly metaphorical, let me observe that if God were eternal he could not be the object of any human action whatsoever.

Consider, for example, my act of referring to something, X. The event consisting of *my referring to X* is a temporal event. It both begins and ends, as do all my acts. Now the event of *my referring to X* is identical with the event of *X's being referred to by me*. And this event is an aspect both of X and of me. So if X is a being which lasts longer than my act of referring to X does, then for a while X has this aspect and for a while not. And thus X would have *succession* on its time-strand. And so X would not be eternal. Thus if God were eternal, no human being could ever refer to him—or perform any other temporal act with respect to him. If he were eternal, one could not know him. In particular, one could not know that he was eternal, or even believe that he was. Indeed, if God were eternal one could not predicate of him that he is eternal. For predicating is also a temporal act. So this is the calamitous consequence of claiming of God that he is eternal: if one predicates of him that he is eternal, then he is not.

## V

I have been arguing that God as described by the biblical writers is a being who changes. That, we have seen, is not self-evidently and obviously so, though the mode of expression of the biblical writers might lead one to think it was. Yet it is so nonetheless.

But are there not explicit statements in the Bible to the effect that God does not change? If we are honest to the evidence, must we not acknowledge that on this matter the biblical writers contradict each other? Let us see.

Surprisingly, given the massive Christian theological tradition in favor of God's ontological immutability, there are only two passages (to the best of my knowledge) in which it is directly said of God that he does not change. One of these is Malachi 3:6. The prophet has just been saying to the people that God is wearied by their hypocrisy; however (he goes on), God will send his messenger to clear a path before him; and "he will take his seat, refining and purifying." As a result of this cleansing, the "offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to the Lord as they were in days of old." And then comes this assurance: "I am the Lord, unchanging; and you, too, have not ceased to be sons of Jacob. From the days of your forefathers you have been wayward and have not kept my laws. If you will return to me, I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts" (NEB).

Surely it would be a gross misinterpretation to treat the prophet here as claiming that God is ontologically immutable. What he says, on the contrary, is that God is faithful to his people Israel—that he is unchanging in his fidelity to the covenant he has made with them. All too often theologians have ontologized the biblical message. Malachi 3:6 is a classic example of a passage which, cited out of context, would seem to support the doctrine of God's ontological immutability. Read in context, however, it supports not that but rather the doctrine of God's unswerving fidelity. No ontological claim whatever is being made.

The other passage in which it is said of God that he is unchanging is to be found in Psalm 102:27. Again we must set the passage in its context:

My strength is broken in mid course;  
the time allotted me is short.

Snatch me not away before half my days are done,  
for thy years last through all generations.

Long ago thou didst lay the foundations of the earth,  
and the heavens were thy handiwork.

They shall pass away, but thou endurest;  
like clothes they shall all grow old;  
thou shalt cast them off like a cloak,  
and they shall vanish;

but thou art the same and thy years shall have no end;  
thy servants' children shall continue,  
and their posterity shall be established in thy presence (NEB).

Here, too, it would be a gross misinterpretation to regard the writer as

teaching that God is ontologically immutable. The Psalmist is making an ontological point of sorts, though even so the ontological point is set within a larger context of religious reflection. He is drawing a contrast between God on the one hand and his transitory creation on the other. And what he says about God is clearly that God is without end—"Thy years shall have no end." He does not say that God is ontologically immutable.

In short, God's ontological immutability is not a part of the explicit teaching of the biblical writers. What the biblical writers teach is that God is faithful and without beginning or end, not that none of his aspects is temporal. The theological tradition of God's ontological immutability has no explicit biblical foundation.<sup>10</sup>

## VI

The upshot of our discussion is this: the biblical presentation of God presupposes that God is everlasting rather than eternal. God is indeed without beginning and without end. But at least some of his aspects stand in temporal order-relations to each other. Thus God, too, has a time-strand. His life and existence is itself temporal. (Whether his life and existence always was and always will be temporal, or whether he has taken on temporality, is a question we have not had time to consider.) Further, the events to be found on God's time-strand belong within the same temporal array as that which contains our time-strands. God's aspects do not only bear temporal order-relations to each other but to the aspects of created entities as well. And the aspects and succession of aspects to be found on God's time-strand are such that they constitute *changes* thereon. God's life and existence incorporates changeful succession.

Haunting Christian theology and Western philosophy throughout the centuries has been the picture of time as bounded, with the created order on this side of the boundary and God on the other. Or sometimes the metaphor has been that of time as extending up to a horizon, with all creaturely reality on this side of the horizon and God on the other. All such metaphors, and the ways of thinking that they represent, must be discarded. Temporality embraces us along with God.

This conclusion from our discussion turns out to be wholly in accord with that to be found in Oscar Cullmann's *Christ and Time*. From his

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10. "I am that I am" (Exod. 3:13) has also sometimes been used to support the doctrine of God's immutability. However, this is one of the most cryptic passages in all of Scripture; and—to understate the point—it is not in the least clear that what is being proclaimed is God's ontological immutability. There is a wealth of exegetical material on the passage, but see especially the comments by J. C. Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven, 1967), ch. 1.

study of the biblical words for time Cullmann concluded that, in the biblical picture, God's "eternity" is not qualitatively different from our temporality. Cullmann's line of argument (though not his conclusion) has been vigorously attacked by James Barr on the ground that from the lexicographical patterns of biblical language we cannot legitimately make inferences as to what was being said by way of that language.<sup>11</sup> Verbal similarities may conceal differences in thought, and similarities in thought may be clothed with verbal differences. Barr's objection is *apropos*. But though we have traveled a very different route from Cullmann's we have come out at the same place. We have not engaged in any word studies. Yet, by seeing that God's temporality is presupposed by the biblical presentation of God as redeemer, we too have reached the conclusion that we share time with God. The lexicographical and philosophical cases coincide in their results.

Though God is within time, yet he is Lord of time. The whole array of contingent temporal events is within his power. He is Lord of what occurs. And that, along with the specific pattern of what he does, grounds all authentically biblical worship of, and obedience to, God. It is not because he is outside of time—eternal, immutable, impassive—that we are to worship and obey God. It is because of what he can and does bring about within time that we mortals are to render him praise and obedience.

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11. *Biblical Words for Time* (London, 1962).