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Response to Richmond

Some general comments

In writing on 'Explanations', I had as a background Patrick Richmond's earlier article on Richard Dawkins' objections to complexity in God.¹ Although this article contains much of interest, I felt that its approach was unsatisfactory and wished to construct a very different kind of argument. Richmond discusses issues concerning the simplicity and complexity of God at considerable length, with various theological and philosophical citations, and he hypothesises in depth about how God's consciousness may operate. But there is not a single biblical reference, and negligible acknowledgement that Christianity is a revealed faith. On what basis then can these things about God be said? His hope is that it can all be worked out rationally, as the Response above also shows. I on the contrary have little confidence in this, and here our positions diverge. It seems to me that Richmond's thinking is almost entirely Athens, with very little of Jerusalem about it.²

Let me amplify somewhat the admittedly brief final sections of my own article by suggesting that Orthodox teaching has important things to say to us here. It is a deeply held Orthodox criticism of the West that we over-intellectualise our theology. A central distinction is needed between two different aspects of God. Vladimir Lossky writes: 'This distinction is that between the essence of God, or His nature, properly so-called, which is inaccessible, unknowable and incommunicable; and the energies or divine operations,...in which He goes forth from Himself, manifests, communicates, and gives Himself.'³ In other words, God's basic nature is not something we can discuss. But of course, we do get knowledge of God, individually and corporately, from the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. All of this arises out of God's energies. Personal experiences of various kinds are given to some, leading Pascal in his case to exclaim that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not the God of the philosophers and scholars.⁴ Philosophy and natural theology should not be allowed to dominate the scene.

Richmond ends his Response with some further proposals. To me they succeed in illustrating the difficulties of an over-intellectual approach to theology, for in the end, the intellect will only take us so far. I think a rather broader-

1 Richmond, P. *Science & Christian Belief* (2007) 19 (2), 99-116.

2 Tertullian made the famous statement 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' in his *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* (On ruling the heretics out of court). His objection was to the importation of inappropriate philosophy into Christian debate.

3 Lossky, V. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Cambridge: James Clarke (1973), p.70.

4 Pascal, B. 'The Memorial', to be found in most collections of his works. Aquinas also had a vision of God, after which he declared that all his theological writings were as 'straw'.

based approach is necessary – that, however, was not the subject of either of our articles.

On attributing simplicity to God.

There are two major ways in which God, or any other being, may be ‘simple’. One is in having a lack of component *parts*, or non-compositeness, and the other is in having a lack of *features*. The ecclesiastical sources cited in Richmond’s article mainly stress God’s having no parts. The first of the Thirty-Nine Articles does not mention simplicity, and while Chapter II of the Westminster Confession lists many attributes of God, simplicity is not one of them. Aquinas says that ‘God is altogether simple and in no wise composite’.⁵ Elsewhere an important context is that of affirming the Trinity without having three Gods, although Richmond passes over this central aspect of the Christian debate. But the kind of question raised by Dawkins really relates to whether God has complex *features*, such as complex thoughts. His comparison of God to a composite object such as an aeroplane is therefore inappropriate. Richmond’s solution is to attribute an infinite consciousness to God, full of every idea, which God selects according to value.⁶ Now this may perfectly well be true, but I would hardly term it simple.⁷ Infinities need to be handled with care and not just pulled out of the bag. To be honest, with speculations of this kind we are out of our depth.

There is another aspect: complexity can manifest itself actively and need not be a static quality. Here the Orthodox teaching of the divine *energies* is relevant. To quote Lossky again:⁸ ‘God’s presence in His energies must be understood in a realistic sense. It is not the presence of a cause operative in its effects: for the energies are not the effects of the divine cause;...[they] are the outpourings of the divine nature...’ So something dynamic in God is indicated. Talk about God’s ‘statistical probability’ seems to be based on a static picture and misses this.

Richmond rightly points out in his Response that comparing the complexity of the world with that of a designer may not be comparing like with like. This is of course precisely what Dawkins attempts to do. Overall, I think that a more ‘experimental’ element should be included; what does God’s own revelation to us indicate, if anything, about His simplicity or complexity?

5 *Summa Theologica* 1a. iii. 7, in Gilby, T. (trans.) *St Thomas Aquinas, Philosophical Texts*, Oxford: OUP (1951). These points are alluded to by Richmond (*op. cit.*, (1), 111), but he then gives up on the medieval and Reformed theologians *en bloc* because of perceived problems in other aspects of medieval theology.

6 Richmond *op. cit.*, (1), 115f.

7 In mathematics, there are infinitely long ‘area-filling’ curves, such as $x = \cos t$, $y = \sin at$, which for just one irrational parameter a will pass through any set of experimental data points in an area. But no one would use this to fit data on the grounds that it is ‘simple’.

8 Lossky, V. *op. cit.*, (3), p.73.

On simplicity and ultimacy in general

From the tone of Richmond's comments, one might think I had been pouring scorn on the idea of simple explanations. In fact I discussed the subject from many angles, giving a wide variety of specific examples, while Richmond just asserts a generic philosophical position. But yes, if simplicity is not a universal feature of hypotheses that *have* been confirmed, how then can we be absolutist about it in general? As I said, it is a 'guideline'. It is not guaranteed in scientific matters and should not be demanded of God's energies. The basic nature of God is not really something we can discuss, something I did try to say in my article.

If there is a difficulty with God as Ultimate Explanation, this may be because we can assert God from our point of view as Ultimate, and also as Explanation, but the manner in which these two attributes combine within God will not be transparent to us since we lack the necessary knowledge. Richmond claims that simplicity is important in an ultimate explanation, but despite his strong stress on this point he does not really argue it very rigorously, or clarify what kind of simplicity. Most of the time he just asserts it, appealing to others in support, and seeing it as a kind of last resort of virtue.⁹ But there is more to add here.

It seems to me that the type of argument I proposed against ultimate *scientific* explanations can in fact be extended to *any* kind of ultimate rational explanation, as seen from the human point of view (whether simple or not). If so, then there will be for us no understandable ultimate explanation, and a clarion call for simplicity will not save the day. Philosophy will fall short. God's rationality may operate but ours will not. Hence the case for a radical paradigm change at some stage, an important part of my argument that Richmond overlooks. This was the main point of the story about the tenth earl, which I think Richmond has failed to understand. I do not say that the aliens or tenth earl provide an analogy to an *ultimate* designer, but they do indicate the legitimacy of extending explanation back to designers, and the paradigm change that will be needed when this is done.¹⁰ In science we have physical reductionism, and in mathematics and systematic philosophy ideational reductionism, in which all truths must derive analytically from a few basic ideas. God, however, may not be logically structured like this at all! He may be holistic and infinite in all kinds of ways. But I say this only to indicate how incapable we are of discussing such things. At the very least, the call for 'ultimate simplicity' presupposes an understanding of the *modus operandi* of the ultimate that we surely cannot presume to have. The call is neither right nor wrong, but out of bounds.

9 There is a flavour of Anselm's 'ontological argument' here. A perfect *explanans* must be a simple *explanans*, therefore God being perfect is simple.

10 Does the Big Bang 'explain' the Mona Lisa? With no paradigm change away from physics we miss some really important things.

Some further remarks.

In all attempts to analyse God's functionality and nature, Richmond demands rational, understandable arguments. Everywhere he rejects intellectual positions that have 'problems', though with a subject such as this I really don't see how they can be avoided. I on the other hand much prefer the Orthodox approach, where there is an acceptance of mystery.¹¹ My experience is that people differ crucially on this matter: there are those who will accept mystery, and those for whom mystery is abhorrent. This point is *extremely* important for Christians to bear in mind when discussing with scientifically-minded unbelievers. Richmond is apparently not one of those who are happy with mystery, while I believe that intellectual and human honesty compel us to come to terms with it.

I would never claim that an article such as my own offers the final word on this kind of subject matter. Of course there are open issues and questions. Richmond seems to feel I should have written a much longer piece, one that would have set out a full argument for believing in God's existence, a proper justification for the Christian God in preference to other possibilities, a rigorous rationale for how God can be the Ultimate Explanation, and something about different possible creations, amongst other things. Quite a tall order, and impossible in a modest-sized article! It is good that he does finally suggest a few ways forward, even though he does not sound very optimistic about them.

My position, summed up, is that we can reasonably posit God as complex enough at one level (His energies) to offer an explanatory cause for the Universe – but deeper speculations are unlikely to be legitimate. We lack the categories to discuss the 'why God' question. The explanations provided by the idea of God will not be complete, and none of the various available arguments will in itself constitute a proof. However they will provide a set of evidences for God to be considered as a whole. We then have the teachings of our own particular faith, and the dimension of mystery. It is important to note the big difference between mystery, which transcends the human intellect, and the negative alternative where things just stop when we cease to understand. As a physicist, I obviously require rationality in the conduct of science, but a key issue is going to be how we ascertain the border between rationality and mystery. In our scientific age, the symbolic question may well be asked as 'What has Princeton to do with Jerusalem?'¹² This question is not at all rhetorical and requires a constructive answer, which is of course the remit of this Journal.

¹¹ With which we interact by prayer, not intellectual analysis.

¹² Princeton Institute for Advanced Study was where Albert Einstein spent his final years.