

March 5, 2006

## **Cheesefare Sunday**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

There is a glaring fallacy in the contemporary presumption that idolatry is found only in polytheism. I admit, of course, that all polytheism is necessarily idolatrous, but it seems not to have occurred to most folks that the confession of one false god is just as idolatrous as the confession of several. Monotheism is no defense against idolatry.

This modern misunderstanding about idolatry, moreover, is the twin and steady companion of another, the strange fancy that all monotheists necessarily confess the same divinity.

Arguably the clearest spokesman for the latter fallacy may be that C. S. Lewis character who forthrightly declared, "Tash is another name for Aslan. All that old idea of us being right and the Calormenes wrong is silly. We know better now. The Calormenes use different words but we all mean the same thing. Tash and Aslan are only two different names for you know Who. That's why there can never be any quarrel between them. Get that into your heads, you stupid brutes. Tash is Aslan: Aslan is Tash."

The telltale line in that discourse, I submit, is "We know better now." On matters respecting God, I can't think of anything we know better now.

The character that made that proclamation was, of course, the Ape in Lewis's *The Last Battle*, and it really was an apish thing to say. Although I have heard his thesis proclaimed times out of mind (and even alas, by those who call themselves Orthodox Christians), it cannot stand up to two seconds of critical reflection.

Let us recall that monotheism made its appearance in this world in the same voice that identified the one God's essence with His existence, "I am the One Who Is." When Moses heard that auto-identification, perhaps he did not have a clear idea, at first, what it meant (and modern biblical scholars still argue about it!), but he faithfully recorded the words, and the faithful have been thinking about them seriously ever since.

Typical of the faithful in this respect was St. Gregory of Nyssa, who interpreted the words to mean that God revealed Himself as "the Existent One" (*Against Eunomius* 2.4). The same writer reflected further, "all things depend on Him Who is, nor can there be anything that does not owe its existence to Him Who is" (*The Great Catechism* 25).

Gregory asserts two things in these texts. First, it is of God's very being that He exists, which is to say that God exists of Himself. Latin terminology calls this the aseity of God (*a se*="of Himself"), meaning that He exists by reason of Himself. Second, this aseity pertains to no other being. Whatever exists, besides God, exists only because of God.

This twofold thesis enunciated by St. Gregory of Nyssa (chosen at random, really, because all the Church Fathers that spoke on the subject said the same thing) indicates two reflective approaches to the true God, both of them unique to the biblical revelation.

Let us observe, moreover, that Christian thinkers have converted both of these theological considerations into apologetic arguments for the existence of God.

First, there is God as Being in Himself. Now it is a fact that no pagan philosopher ever thought to identify God as Being. This historical fact is perhaps difficult for us to appreciate, because the history of Christian reflection has so accustomed us to a proposition unknown to ancient pagan thought.

After about a thousand years of pondering this thesis, some Christian philosophers were ready to convert it into an argument for God's existence. It is a deductive, *a priori* argument that begins with identifying God as the One Who, if He exists, must exist. Put in its simplest form, the argument runs something like this: If He Who must exist can exist, He does exist. This is called the Ontological Argument, which reasons from the idea of God to the existence of God.

Leaving aside the question of its validity, the striking fact about this argument is that it never occurred to anyone outside of the data of biblical revelation. Some pagan thinkers adopted it afterwards (the recently lamented Charles Hartshorne being a notable example), but it was Bible-believers, significantly, who thought of the argument first.

Nor is there is any reason to believe it would have entered anyone's mind except for that voice on Sinai.

Second, there is God as the cause of all that is not God. This approach to God is more developed in Holy Scripture, which teaches in many places that He is the Maker of all things.

This thesis, too, provided an argument for God's existence, an inductive, *a posteriori* case known as the Cosmological Argument. This line of reasoning, which is found explicitly in Holy Scripture itself, endeavors to discover an explanation (or efficient cause) for the existence of those things that do, in fact, exist. The existence of these non-necessary things (things that don't have to exist) is sought in some Maker that caused them to exist, and this Maker we call God. We find this argument briefly elaborated in Wisdom 13 and Romans 1.

Both of these approaches to the existence of God are based in the voice from Sinai, which in which God identified Himself as the Existing One, the One Who, needing nothing from us, nonetheless decided to talk to us.

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