

**“Divine Narcissism? A Further Defense of God’s Humility”
Published in *Philosophia Christi* New Series 8 (January 2006): 313-325.
Posted by permission.**

PAUL COPAN
PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS
PALM BEACH ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY
WEST PALM BEACH, FL

Winston Churchill, adept at cutting his opponents down to size, once said of someone, “He’s a humble man—and for good reason!” Apparently, the man had his limitations and needed to keep them in mind!

When it comes to God, not a few atheists and skeptics have found God to be reprehensibly arrogant and egocentric. For example, atheist philosopher Bede Rundle considers the biblical God to be an egotistical attention-seeker:

If you are going to make your god in the image of man, you might at least filter out some of the less desirable human traits. God should be above any sort of attention-seeking behaviour, for instance, and an insistence on being told how unsurpassably wonderful one is does not rate highly. As Hume, in the guise of Philo, observed: “It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions, and one of the lowest of human passions, a restless appetite for applause.” True, this objection assumes that God commands us to worship him in order to gratify some self-regarding desire on his part, when it could be that the point of singing God's praises was protective—to propitiate a God who could be angry or jealous, for instance—but this hardly shows God in a better light¹

Is there merit to Rundle’s argument? Is God vain and egotistical? Why does God desire for us to worship, praise, and glorify Him? Why is it wrong for *us*—but not *God*—to be so self-preoccupied?

¹ Bede Rundle, *Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 18.

The citation from David Hume is from N. Kemp Smith’s second edition of *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1947), 226. Thanks to Charles Taliaferro for pointing out this quotation and for his other helpful comments on this essay.

Theologians and philosophers of religion have traditionally discoursed about God's *loving* himself, *contemplating* himself, *enjoying* himself. We read in Scripture that God wants to "make a name for Himself" (2 Sam. 7:23; cp. Neh. 9:23).² He delivers his people from Egypt "for the sake of His name" (Ps. 106:7; cp. Isa. 63:12; Jer. 32:20; Dan. 9:15). On the surface, it may appear as though God has an unhealthy preoccupation with himself. Isn't this the height of vanity and arrogance? Do Christians worship a narcissistic deity? Surely God can't be humble!

In the points that follow, I would like to build on the reflections of thinkers such as C.S. Lewis and Charles Taliaferro, hoping to extend their arguments a bit further.³ There are some important perspectives to keep in mind as we try to think about God's command to love, worship, and serve him. I shall argue that the triune God's other-centered character and his interaction with humans express gracious humility and astonishing condescension. In doing so, I shall also respond to the general claims of Daniel A. Campana that (a) there is no scriptural basis for affirming divine humility and (b) God simply cannot be humble: "it is logically impossible for the God of [the] Christian tradition to be humble."⁴ In my essay defending divine humility, I shall respond to these problematic claims.

² All biblical quotations are taken from the New American Standard Version (1995).

³ I am thinking of C. S. Lewis's thoughts in *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958); "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); and "The Great Sin" in Bk. III, Chap. 8 of *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).

See also Charles Taliaferro's fine essay entitled, "The Vanity of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (April 1989): 140-54. This essay has made its way into philosophy of religion anthologies such as *Philosophy and Faith: A Philosophy of Religion Reader*, ed. David Shatz (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002). All citations of Taliaferro's essay are taken from the former.

⁴ Daniel A. Campana, "On 'The Vanity of God': A Reply to Taliaferro," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (January 1992): 107.

*First, we should get clear on definitions of “pride” and “humility.” Humility involves an appropriate acknowledgment and realistic assessment of oneself; pride, on the other hand, is an inflated view of oneself or one’s accomplishments. So then “pride” or “vanity” does not accurately describe God, who has a realistic—rather than an inflated—view of himself. Lest one should be guilty of trumping up false charges against God, one ought to clarify or define what exactly is meant by God’s alleged vanity or pride. How is the vice of pride to be defined? We are aware that pride is a kind of false advertising campaign, in which we promote an exaggerated *image* of ourselves because we suspect that others won’t accept who we *really* are.⁵ Pride is, in fact, a lie about a person’s identity or achievements; this inflated psychological state simply fails to correspond to reality.⁶ To be proud is to live in a world propped up with falsehoods about oneself, taking credit where credit isn’t due.⁷*

Some qualifications are in order, though. We aren’t here talking about being gratified or “taking pride in” one’s work (as Paul did as an apostle [2 Cor. 10:17]) or “being proud of” a person’s progress in faith (2 Cor. 7:14; 9:3-4) or in the proper use of God-given abilities. In all of this, we recognize God’s grace that makes these gifts and achievements possible. Of course, to “boast in the Lord” (2 Cor. 10:17) and in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14) puts into proper perspective our deep dependence upon divine mercy for our hope and salvation. The pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps self-reliance *is* an expression of pride—a failure or refusal to acknowledge one’s proper place before God. Grace is given to the humble, not the proud.

⁵ Lewis B. Smedes, *Love Within Limits* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 31.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 483

⁷ C.S. Lewis has some wise insights on pride and humility in Book III, chapter 8 (“The Great Sin”) of *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).

What about *humility*? Campana assumes that humility entails recognizing one's limitations, which God does not have. Therefore, God cannot be humble: "if there are no non-logical limits to God's greatness, then how could He recognize the existence of personal limitations?"⁸ Humility, however, ultimately involves having *a realistic assessment of oneself*. It is not, strictly speaking, being aware of one's *limitations* and *weaknesses*, though it may include this where there *are* genuine limitations. Humility involves having a proper awareness of one's own *strengths* as well. Obviously, it is delusional to claim you've invented aluminum foil or post-it notes when you really haven't. But it's also delusional to say you "really can't play piano all that well" when you are an award-winning pianist who regularly performs with the Cleveland Orchestra or the London Philharmonic! This would be a *false* humility that's equally out of touch with reality (and perhaps a disguised pride to get the attention of others). A truly humble human being won't deny his abilities, but he'll also acknowledge that his gifts come from God and that he can't take credit for them. *So for us to be humble is to know our place before God and others—to have a realistic view of ourselves.*⁹

Upon closer examination, we can see that God can't be called proud by this understanding. Rather, he has a *realistic* view of himself, not a false or exaggerated one. His view of himself isn't distorted or unnecessarily lofty. He *is God*, after all! His self-insight is

⁸ Campana, "On 'The Vanity of God,'" 107-8. Campana appears to misread Taliaferro's statement: "A marked difference between the prideful and humble is that the humble person is aware of the limited nature of his features" ("The Vanity of God," 142), which Campana says can't be true of God, who is without limits, or infinitely great ("On 'The Vanity of God,'" 107-8). However, this overlooks what Taliaferro asserted immediately prior this quotation: "Likewise one may have humility with respect to some relationship, characteristic, quality, degree of power or understanding which is believed to be positive" (142).

⁹ D.C. Searle, "Humility," s.v. in *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 568.

impeccably accurate. God realistically and rightly—not vainly or egotistically—affirms of himself: “there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other” (Isa. 45:6).

We can’t ascribe *too* much greatness to God since he is the greatest conceivable being. Although he is maximally great, he doesn’t “think of himself more highly than he ought to think” (Romans 12:3). Rather, he thinks quite accurately about himself. We should add that this greatness brings with it an *other-centeredness* both within triune relationships and in God’s relationship to human beings. God’s status is not a position to be grasped and clutched (cp. Phil. 2:6). Consider Jesus’ confident self-knowledge that overflows in self-giving: “[Jesus], knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself” (Jn. 13:3-4).

Perhaps this second point is a bit off the beaten path, but I believe this worth mentioning. *Jesus’ call for his followers to be humble is not inconsistent with other concerns to allow our deeds of love to be noted by others.* Atheist philosopher Michael Martin claims that Jesus’ exhortations to humility, if applied as he commanded, can be self-contradictory and problematic. Martin maintains that the warning about almsgiving and praying—and we could add fasting—for the public to see (Matthew 6:1-18) should not be absolute prohibitions: “sometimes public displays of ostensibly altruistic actions—ones that could have been done privately—may be done for completely altruistic motives. Jesus may have wrongly supposed otherwise.”¹⁰

While Martin is right about the importance of *motives*, he’s wrong to suggest Jesus may have been too unsophisticated to consider different situations. In this same context of

¹⁰ Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 171.

Matthew 6, Jesus assumes his disciples will engage in *corporate* prayer (“Our Father”) and that they won’t all squeeze into a prayer closet¹¹ to do so! And just earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples (whom he calls “the light of the world”) to “let your light so shine”—like a city on a hill—before people that “they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:13-16).

At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus himself (who regularly avoids crowds to spend time in solitary prayer) prays in public to *make a deliberate point* to those around him: “Father, I thank You that You heard Me. And I knew You always heard me; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that You sent Me” (John 11:41-42). The apostle Paul exhorts Christians that in their behavior and loving demeanor, they will “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (Tit. 2:9-10; cp. 1 Tim. 4:15; Jn. 13:35) so that God’s name and the Christian faith “will not be spoken against” (1 Tim. 6:1).

In all of this, Jesus and other New Testament writers offer a two-sided exhortation regarding pride: *show when tempted to hide* (e.g., Matthew 5:13-16) and *hide when tempted to show* (Matthew 6:1).¹² We may at times want to stifle or resist doing the right thing in front of others—a manifestation of *pride*. That’s the time to demonstrate our commitment to Christ—an act of *humility*. But at other times, we may be inclined to advertise our religious commitment—an expression of *pride*. However, out of *humility*, we should keep our displays of religion secret. Rather than being preoccupied with our own image in front of others, we should “place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God.”¹³

¹¹ Actually, the word in 6:6 is *tameion*—an inner chamber, possible a treasure room/storeroom.

¹² From A.B. Bruce, cited in John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 127.

¹³ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 173.

Upon examination of Martin’s charge, we see that Jesus’ example of and exhortations to humility are neither inconsistent nor impractical.

Third, God’s making us in his image isn’t a mark of divine pride. It’s a gift he bestows on us and one to receive gratefully. To be made in God’s image and to receive his salvation are expressions of God’s kindness, not of divine arrogance. When God created human beings, he uniquely equipped them to *rule the world with him* (a kingly role) and to *walk with and worship him* (a priestly role). Having been made in God’s image as priest-kings brings with it the ability to relate to God, to think rationally, to make moral decisions, and to express creativity, to share in God’s rule over creation. But some have claimed that God’s making us in his image is arrogant—like a vain toymaker creating dolls that look just like him.

We can look at the topic from another angle, though. By making us in his image, God is “spreading the wealth.” Historian Arthur Lovejoy (1873-1962) has tracked concept of “the great chain of being”—that God’s rich goodness overflows to his creation, which lives, moves, and has its being in him.¹⁴ Though God created freely and without constraint, He seems to be bursting with joy and love to share his goodness with his creatures. God allows us humans, as his image-bearers, to share—in a limited way—in who he is. God enables us to participate in the life of the divine community, the Trinity—a life that fills him with such joy and pleasure (2 Peter 1:4: “partakers of the divine nature”). This image is a gift to be gratefully received. God bestows upon us the great compliment of endowing us with a

¹⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: The Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971 [orig. pub. 1936]). This “principle of plenitude” contains rich ideas for fruitful theological thought. Of course, one must take care not to wander off in unbiblical and philosophically-problematic directions (e.g., pantheism or Neoplatonism).

privileged position and with important capacities—ones that reflect God’s own wonderful nature. By God’s image and Spirit, we are equipped to carry out our kingly and priestly duties on this earth (Rev. 5:10). That we can so fully participate in God’s remarkable purposes involves “things into which angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:12).

Third, worshiping God does not diminish our humanity, but rather fulfills it. To worship God is to realize our very purpose (a relationship with God), and such worship realistically reflects our place in the universe (we are creatures and God is creator). The Old Testament repeatedly declares how God desires his name to be known among the nations (“that they may know that I am the LORD”). This “knowing” can be either in blessing/deliverance or in judgment (e.g., Ez. 25:7, 11, 17). At the temple dedication, Solomon prays that “all the peoples of the earth may know” God’s name and “fear” him as Israel does (2 Chron. 6:33).

Worship—which comes from the word *worth-ship*—is simply an appropriate recognition of the triune God and of our relationship to him. Worship is simply *self-forgetfulness as we remember and acknowledge God*.¹⁵ So when God calls for our worship, this is not a manifestation of an ugly pride. The knowledge and worship of God is the highest good possible. Not only does worship express an awareness of God’s proper place in the order of things; it also transforms us into what we were designed to be. To be connected with God in worship not only humbles us. It is a lofty, lifelong endeavor that expands our minds, enriches our souls, makes us wise, and enables us to have a proper self-understanding.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *For All God’s Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 7.

Knowing God is the highest human pursuit. The loving and creating triune God is worthy of our allegiance, love, and attention.¹⁶

God's call for our worship is not because he thinks more highly of himself than he ought or because he has false beliefs about himself. God's desire to be known by us stems from his being deeply in touch with reality. He calls us to acknowledge what he himself knows to be true. Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham writes,

For a human being to seek such universal and eternal fame would be to aspire to divinity, but God must be desire to be known to be God. The good of God's human creatures requires that he be known to them as God. There is no vanity, only revelation of truth, in God's demonstrating his deity to the nations.¹⁷

Fourth, God's jealousy is aroused when human beings turn creatures or false ideas into God-substitutes. "Jealousy"—we often think of it in negative terms. It smacks of insecurity when someone feels threatened by another; it promotes resentment; it can create all kinds of unpredictable reactions. So when people read that God is a "jealous God" who won't share his glory with another (Ex. 20:5), they promptly apply to God this negative view of jealousy!

There is an appropriate kind of jealousy, though. Just imagine a wife who appears unconcerned when another woman flirts with her husband. If she weren't jealous or committed to protecting that sacred marital relationship, we'd rightly see her lack of concern as warped and morally deficient. Just as a woman is rightly angered by a husband's being intimate with another woman, so God is jealous to protect a love relationship for which all human beings were designed.

¹⁶ Some of these thoughts are taken from chapter 1 of J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973).

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle, U.K.: Baker/Paternoster, 2004), 37.

Contrary to the common misperception, we should think of God’s jealousy as noble and virtuous—a jealousy not springing from an inferiority complex that makes prideful, selfish demands. *Divine jealousy springs from a denial that God is God and that a relationship with God is optional for human flourishing.* Indeed, the word “jealousy” in Scripture is used of God in the context of idolatry and false worship.¹⁸ To choose this-worldly pursuits over against a relationship with God is not only folly, but spiritual adultery (Jas. 4:4; cp. 2 Cor. 11:2), which makes God legitimately jealous.

God is the all-good Creator and Life-giver, who wills the flourishing of his creation. When one acts in *life-denying* ways (e.g., adultery, pornography, promise-breaking—or simply suppressing the truth about God), God’s jealousy surfaces with the goal that one abandon *death-seeking goals* and return to life itself. Divine jealousy should be seen as *God’s willing the best for his creatures.*

Fifth (though related to the previous point), *we must not create a false dichotomy between divine heteronomy and human autonomy, which is often where the problem lies.*¹⁹ Philosopher Thomas Nagel has admitted that he doesn’t want there to be a God. He admits that there is a “cosmic authority problem” that has spawned much of the naturalistic and reductionistic thinking of our day.²⁰ This reflects the quest for human autonomy. But obviously, God’s ultimate role is not to advance my own (or human) interests and freedom. On the other hand, we should not view our relationship to God as a commander-commandee relationship, in which God’s will merely coerces, overriding the choices of human agents.

¹⁸ For example, see Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Dt. 4:24; 6:15; 29:20; 32:16, 21; Josh. 24:19; 1 Ki. 14:22; Ezek. 8:3 (a graven “image of jealousy”); 16:38, 42-3; 39:25; Joel 2:18; Nah. 1:2; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; Zech. 1:14; 8:2); 1 Cor. 10:22.

¹⁹ This fifth point is taken from Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *A Moral Ontology for a Theistic Ethic: Gathering the Nations in Love and Justice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 61-76.

²⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130-31.

Rather, God seeks the interpersonal intimacy with us in the context of covenant-making. Ideally, there must be a *via media* between the false alternatives of either heteronomy or autonomy; there must be a mesh between God's activity and human nature. When God's intentions for us are realized and when we attend to the divinely-given boundaries built into our nature and the world around us, this leads to human flourishing expressed in loving, trusting relationships with God and with one another. It is simply silly, in the name of autonomy, to choose a way of life that ultimately leads to dysfunction and self-destruction. God's purposes for us are not capricious or whimsical, but they have our best interests in mind—"for your good" (Dt. 10:13; cp. 8:16; 30:9).

*Sixth, when the Scriptures enjoin us to praise God, it's not **God** commanding praise. Rather, the call to praise comes from creatures spontaneously calling upon one another to recognize God's greatness, goodness, and worth-ship. Naturally-flowing praise simply completes and expresses the creature's enjoyment of God. Furthermore, God's humility is expressed in offering praise to human beings for their trust and obedience. Some people suggest that the idea of praise in Scripture is nothing more than God's fishing for compliments and flattery. A cursory examination of the Scriptures will not support such a claim. God is self-sufficient and content in and of himself. He doesn't need frail humans for some sort of ego boost (Ps. 50:11: "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all it contains"). God freely created us to share in the joys of his other-centered triune life. He hardly needs our praise, which *would be* pathetic, as Bede Rundle's earlier caricature suggests.*

The critic might ask, "Then why does God command us to praise him?" Ah, this is the seriously misunderstood part. Contrary to popular criticism, *praise isn't commanded by*

God. It's called for *by creatures* caught up with God's greatness, power, goodness, and love. Praise is the climax of realizing God's excellencies, and creatures fittingly erupt in praise, spontaneously beckoning the rest of us to do the same.²¹

C. S. Lewis had his own misconceptions about this notion of praise, and he tells of the lesson he learned:

But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their game. . . . I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is appointed consummation.²²

Lewis came to see that praise stems from doing what one couldn't help doing—giving utterance to what we regard as supremely valuable: “it is good to sing praises to our God.” Why? “For it is pleasant and praise is becoming” (Ps. 147:1). We can also add that although praise is often spontaneous and springing from an overflowing heart of joy, there are times when praise is an expression of deliberate trust in God's goodness and sovereignty in the face of hardship and loss (Job 1:21: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD”).

What's more, not only do *we* praise God to complete the compliment, but *the humble God is also willing to “praise” human beings who have trusted in his grace*: their “praise” is not from human beings, “but from God” (Romans 2:29). The other-centered God delights in praising humans who seek to please him.

²¹ Some people may object to this point by bringing up passages such as Isa. 43:21 (“The people whom I formed for Myself, will declare my praise”) or Ps. 8:2/Mt. 21:16 (God's ordaining praise from the mouths of infants). (See also Eph. 1:6, 12, 14.) But these passages can easily be reconciled with the point I have made.

²² C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 94-95.

Another related point: when we creatures show love for God, we aren't doing so because of a crass desire for rewards or the avoidance of punishment. The sheer enjoyment of God's presence—the greatest good of humans—and his approval of us is reward enough.

Once again, Lewis offers a delightful picture:

Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it . . . Those who have attained everlasting life in the vision of God know very well that it is no mere bribe, but the very consummation of their earthly discipleship.²³

Seventh, God himself is humble, and he continually manifests his humility in his interactions with human beings. Jesus of Nazareth turns out to be a remarkable example of the humility of God, who comes to serve us. Jesus describes himself as “gentle and humble in heart”—this in the very same context as (a) his declaration of uniquely knowing, relating to, and revealing the Father and (b) the one who alone can give the weary rest for their souls (Mt. 11:27-29). Jesus' greatness and humility do not contradict each other; Jesus sees himself clearly and accurately.

Jesus not only declares his humility, but he models a serving leadership for his disciples. He not only reminds them that the one who is greatest in his new community is the one who serves; Jesus himself takes the role of a slave: “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). This “Lord” and “Teacher” displays his self-humbling servanthood by assuming the place of a slave in washing his disciples' dirty feet (John 13:1-20). Truly, God in Christ did not come to be waited upon but to “serve” and “give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Philippians 2 marvelously displays the depths to which God is willing to go

²³ C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 4-5.

for our salvation: God the Son humbles (empties) himself, becoming a slave who dies in great shame and humiliation (vv. 6-8). This is just like God.

He does not just act humbly and condescendingly in the temporary earthly mission of Christ. Rather, God is humble *in his very nature*. As biblical scholar F.S. Fitzsimmonds observed, “The importance of this virtue springs from the fact that it is found as part of the character of God.”²⁴ For instance, Ps. 113:5-6 declares that the LORD is not only “high above the nations,” but the one who “humbles Himself to behold” things in heaven and on earth. Similarly, Isaiah 57:15 affirms that the “high and exalted God” also dwells “with the contrite and lowly of spirit.” Throughout his dealings with humans, God consistently displays a gracious self-humbling and self-giving. Not only this, God shares in and identifies with the joys and sorrows of Christ’s brothers and sisters—“the least of these” (Mt. 25:40, 45). When Saul persecutes Christ’s body, Jesus confronts him as one who feels the pain himself: “Why are you persecuting Me?” (Ac. 9:4). In the final state of the redeemed—after Christ returns and the new heavens and earth are established—he himself (“the master”) will “gird himself” and “wait on” his own servants, his disciples (Luke 11:37).²⁵ Indeed, the very nature of the triune God is to be other-centered and service-oriented—the paradigm of humility.

Eighth, the ultimate picture of divine humility is most evident in the humiliating and degrading death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross, which is simultaneously God’s greatest, most glorious achievement. A Muslim friend, Abdul, once expressed his difficulties with the idea of God’s becoming man and dying on the cross. “It’s such a humiliation!” he exclaimed. From the Christian perspective, Abdul spoke better than he knew. For the Muslim, God is

²⁴ F.S. Fitzsimmonds, “Humility,” sv. in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. F.F. Bruce, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962; repr. InterVarsity Press), 547.

²⁵ For an excellent discussion of these themes, see Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

transcendent and great; he cannot stoop to the level of humans. Yet how different is this from the God who “became flesh, and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14), sitting down at table with society’s undesirables and outcasts!

Just after the September 11 terrorist attacks, I watched with interest the *Larry King Live* show. The panel—a couple of Christians, a Jewish rabbi, a Hindu, and a Muslim—discussed the topic “Where was God?” One of the Christians spoke of God’s incarnation in Christ, who came to provide atonement for us. The Muslim (Dr. Maher Hathout) expressed his disagreement with “the incarnation part, because we don’t believe in that. We believe that God is way beyond being imprisoned in space or in place. He is beyond perception, beyond concretization.”²⁶

In response to the question “Where was God?” the Christian rather than the Muslim has the far richer and more remarkable contribution to make. The sovereign God stoops and condescends. The triune self-giving God is Immanuel, “God with us” (Mt. 1:23)—and God “for us” (Rom. 8:31). As we noted in Ps. 113:5-6 and Isaiah 57:15, God is not only exalted, but he *also* dwells with the contrite and lowly. The compatibility of greatness and humility is marvelously demonstrated in Jesus’ own crucifixion—a display of God’s humiliation that turns out to be his own mark of distinction and moment of glory!

On the one hand, the *Romans* intended for crucifixion to be a barbaric, humiliating, and painful death. Crucified victims (typically runaway slaves or criminals) were severely

²⁶ This broadcast of “Larry King Weekend” on CNN was aired on 29 September 2004. See <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/mac-1kl.htm> (accessed 1 February 2005).

beaten, stripped naked, and placed at crossroads or on a high hill for all to see. And to make the humiliation complete, their bodies would be left on the cross to be devoured by vultures.²⁷ On the other hand, the *Jews* would naturally view Jesus, by hanging on a tree/cross, as one cursed by God (Gal. 3:13; cp. Dt. 21:23); so he couldn't be the appointed Messiah. But Jesus, who was faithfully living out Israel's story as God had intended it, was actually enduring the curse of exile so that God's new community could receive blessing through the onset of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

Let's return to the hymn in Philippians 2. Campana claims (against Taliaferro) that Christ's humility is an example for Christians to follow, but Christ is then exalted after his self-humiliation. Campana adds that this display of humility, "in its textual context, is a virtue humans are to exhibit" but it "can hardly describe the God whose redemptive plan, culminating in Christ, was designed to bring about his own unlimited glory."²⁸ But this humiliation-exaltation sequence reflects one aspect of Paul's theological point in Philippians. However, there is another aspect to be considered—namely, Johannine theology, which displays Christ as victor *in* the defeat of the cross, as exalted *in* the very humiliation of his death.

In Isaiah 52-53, God's "Servant" suffers and faces humiliation ("despised and rejected"), but this same "Servant" is also "lifted up" and "glorified" (Isa. 52:13; cp. 6:1 and 57:13 with Jn. 12:38-48). John's Gospel, referring back to these Isaianic passages, shows that Jesus' being "lifted up" on the cross (Jn. 12:32; cp. 3:14-15; 8:28) is both *literal* (being physically raised up onto a cross) and *figurative* (spiritual exaltation/honor from God,

²⁷ See Martin Hengel's *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

²⁸ Campana, "On 'The Vanity of God,'" 107.

including the drawing of the nations to salvation [12:32]). The moment of Christ's humiliating death is *precisely when* he is "glorified" (Jn. 12:23-24; 13:31-2). John's point? *God's great moment of glory is when he experiences the greatest humiliation and shame—* when he takes the form of a servant and suffers death on a cross. Thus, Bauckham writes, this Servant "in both his humiliation and exaltation, is therefore not merely a human figure distinguished from God, but, in both his humiliation and his exaltation, belongs to the identity of the unique God."²⁹

*These are the lowest of depths to which God is willing to go for our salvation!*³⁰ This is utterly unique in antiquity. No wonder the German New Testament scholar Martin Hengel has written, "The discrepancy between the shameful death of a Jewish state criminal and the confession that depicts this executed man as the pre-existent divine figure who becomes man and humbles himself to a slave's death is, as far as I can see, without analogy in the ancient world."³¹ The God of the Jewish-Christian Scriptures is utterly removed from narcissism and arrogance. The God of Hume, Rundle, and Martin is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus!

The singer Michael Card expresses so well the divine irony of the crucifixion:

We in our foolishness thought we were wise.
He played the fool, and he opened our eyes.
We in our weakness believed we were strong,
He became helpless to show we were wrong.³²

In another of his songs, he writes,

The just and gentle Promised One

²⁹ Ibid., 51.

³⁰ See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³¹ Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 1.

³² Michael Card, "God's Own Fool." From *Joy in the Journey* (Sparrow 1997).

Would triumph o'er the fall,
And conquer by His own defeat
And win by losing all.³³

One Muslim expressed to me his disbelief and even scorn at the idea of Christians wearing crosses: “How can Christians wear with pride the instrument of torture and humiliation? If your brother were killed in an electric chair, would you wear an electric chair around your neck?” I replied, “It depends. If my brother happened to be Jesus and his death on/in an instrument of torture brought about my salvation and was the means by which evil was defeated and creation renewed, then he would have transformed a symbol of shame and punishment into something glorious.” The apostle Paul boasts in the cross, which humbles the pride of human self-reliance (Gal. 6:14). Because of this magnificent salvation, we can follow the humble Christ, “bearing His reproach” (Heb. 13:13).

God is hardly self-centered and egotistical. He is the self-giving, other-centered triune God who is willing to go to incredible lengths for our salvation: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32). Commenting on these verses, Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance is willing to go so far as to say that “God loves us more than he loves himself.”³⁴

The evidence of God’s self-revelation reveals a God very different from the one described by Bede Rundle—and (to a lesser degree) the one suggested by Campana, for whom “divine humility” is oxymoronic. The late theologian Colin Gunton remarked that “it is

³³ Michael Card, “Vicit Agnus.” From *The Promise* (Sparrow, 1994).

³⁴ Thomas Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 244.

as truly godlike to be humble as it is to be exalted.”³⁵ God’s other-centered character within the Trinity and towards us and his activity in history reveal that he is indeed humble—and for good reason!

³⁵ Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 181.