Panmetaphoricism and Abrahamic Religion

Dan Howard-Snyder
Western Washington University

Abstract
Abstract In this paper, I will argue that panmetaphoricism is incompatible with Abrahamic religion. I will argue that adherents of Abrahamic religion are committed to God's being personal, whereas the panmetaphoricist denies this. The panmetaphoricist is an implicit atheist, no matter what her practice, pietg, or position might be. Moreover, I will argue that certain passages in the Quran and Imam Ali's words that might be thought to support panmetaphoricism can be understood otherwise.

Key words: panmetaphoricism, God's personality, God's being, Quran, Imam Ali, Abrahamic religion.
When the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, Katherine Jefferts-Schori, gave the homily at the closing Eucharist of General Convention in 2006, she said:

[Paul’s letter to the] Colossians calls Jesus the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from the dead. That sweaty, bloody, tear-stained labor of the cross bears new life. Our mother Jesus gives birth to a new creation—and you and I are His children.

Jefferts-Schori’s gender-bending reference to “mother Jesus” raised more than just a few Anglican eyebrows world-wide. When an Australian reporter inquired about it, she said, “It’s a metaphor, as all language about God is a metaphor”.

The claim that all of our talk about God is metaphorical is not new. In recent years, we’ve heard it from more than one theologian. For example, here’s Vancouver School of Theology’s Sallie McFague:

Increasingly…, the idea of metaphor as unsubstitutable is winning acceptance: what a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly or apart from it. (3)

The basic point of metaphorical assertion is that something is there that we do not know how to talk about and which we have no access to except through metaphors. If then we apply metaphorical thinking to the reality that is the referent of our metaphors, what would, could that mean? I think it means most basically that we say God both “is” and “is not”. Metaphorical theology applied to the ‘being of God’ agrees with the tradition of the via negativa and with the deconstructionists in stressing the absence of God over our presumptuous insistence in Western religious thought on the presence of the divine. God is not, not just in the sense of being unavailable to us or absent from experience but as a basic aspect of the being of God….To affirm this, however, does not mean that there is not a reality (nor does it mean that there is), though the presumption of metaphorical discourse…is that these metaphors…are of something, or there would be no point in arguing for one rather than the other.

(196, n. 13)
Models are necessary...but also dangerous, for they exclude other ways of thinking and talking, and in so doing they can easily become literalized, that is, identified as the one and only one way of understanding a subject. (24)

And here’s Harvard theologian Walter Kaufman:

God is ultimately profound Mystery and utterly escapes our every effort to grasp or comprehend him. Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable.

Let me be clear from the outset. I have no problem with metaphorical speech about God. Without it, worship would be a dry ordeal indeed; without it, many great truths about God and his purposes and activities would not capture our imaginations and guide our lives as fully as they do. For me, hymns that relate the beauty of nature with the majesty of God, and which call forth adoration and gratitude, are especially moving. For example:

v1. O worship the King, all glorious above; O gratefully sing, his power and his love. Our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days; pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise.

v3. Your bountiful care, what tongue can recite? It breathes in the air, it shines in the light. It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain; and sweetly distils in the dew and the rain.

v5. O measureless Might, unchangeable Love; whom angels delight to worship above. Your ransomed creation, with glory ablaze, in true adoration shall sing to your praise.

Or this:

v1. Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes; most blessed most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, your great name we praise.

v2. Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, nor wanting nor wasting, you rule day and night; your justice like mountains high soaring above, your clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

v3. Life-giving Creator of both great and small, of all life the maker, the true life of all; we blossom, then wither like leaves on the tree, but you are forever, who was and will be.
v4. We worship before you, great Father of light, while angels adore you, all veiling their sight; our praises we render, O Father, to you, whom only the splendour of light hides from you.6

Great stuff!—or so I think.

Let me also say that, as a Christian, I have no problem with people referring to Jesus metaphorically as a mother. Many of us want to relate personally with the one whom we regard as the risen Lord but for whom relationships with males have been rife with neglect, abuse, and violence. In order to help develop that relationship, it might well be wise for us to use feminine metaphors to help overcome the resulting scars. We are told by the author of the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus encouraged the application of feminine metaphors to himself when, lamenting over Jerusalem, he cried:

O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you; how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

(23:37)

So, in general, I have no problem with metaphorical speech about God and I have no problem with applying feminine metaphors to Jesus, as Bishop Jefferts-Schori did.

What I do have a problem with, however, is panmetaphoricism, the claim that our speech about God can only be metaphorical. It is this claim that will be my focus in this paper.7

Five unconscionably brief preliminary remarks are in order.

First, a very brief word about how I understand the literal-metaphorical distinction. The literal-nonliteral distinction marks different ways in which terms (words or phrases) in a language can be used. It falls on the speech side of the language-speech divide. When one uses a term in accordance with one of the standard meanings established within a language, one uses it literally. When one uses a term but not in accordance with one of its standard meanings, one uses it nonliterally. One way to use a term nonliterally is to use it metaphorically.
Second, panmetaphoricists tend to use the term “metaphor” loosely, not in contrast with simile, parable, symbol, and other forms of figurative speech, but rather in contrast with the literal use of language. You might say they use the term “metaphor” metaphorically. When they say that our talk about God can only be metaphorical, they intend to imply that none of our talk about God can be literal. And in this intention they are correct. If our talk about God can only be metaphorical, then none of it can be literal. It is this implication that is important to them. It is this implication that poses difficulties—or so I will argue.

Third, when panmetaphoricists say that we cannot speak literally of God, they do not mean to imply that we cannot form a subject-predicate sentence with “God” as the subject term and make a literal use of the predicate while intending to utter a truth. That’s easy: “God is merciful”. I just did it. Rather, what they mean to imply is that no such intention can succeed. No literal use of a predicate in relation to God can successfully result in a true utterance, or, as I will say, no predicate of ours applies to God literally.

Fourth, I assume that if a predicate applies to a thing literally, then there is something about it in virtue of which the predicate applies to it literally. Since I prefer an ontology according to which there are things and their properties, I will often express this assumption by saying that if a predicate applies to a thing literally, then that predicate signifies or is associated with some property (or complex of properties) and it is in virtue of that thing having that property (or complex of properties) that the predicate applies to it literally.8

Fifth, contemporary panmetaphoricists tend to defend their view on the grounds that if a predicate of ours were to apply to God literally, then, as McFague put it in the quotation above, that would “exclude other ways of thinking and talking” about God, which is “dangerous” because it might lead us to suppose that there is just “one and only one way of understanding [God]”. I’ll have more to say about this line of thought later.
Much more needs to be said about each of these remarks but what I’ve said will have to suffice for the nonce. Now let me get down to work.

Panmetaphoricism, taken in the unrestricted fashion many of its adherents seem to espouse it, possesses an unenviable property: if it is true, then it is false. For if our talk about God can only be metaphorical, then the predicate “can be talked about by us only metaphorically” applies to God literally. But if the predicate “can be talked about by us only metaphorically” applies to God literally, then our talk about God cannot only be metaphorical, contrary to panmetaphoricism. Panmetaphoricism is self-refuting.

The strictly consistent panmetaphoricist will deny the premise that her view entails that the predicate “can be talked about by us only metaphorically” applies to God literally. After all, she will insist, since our talk about God can only be metaphorical, then every predicate of ours can only apply to God metaphorically, even the predicate “can be talked about by us only metaphorically,” from which it follows that that predicate cannot apply to God literally.

What should we make of strictly consistent panmetaphoricism?

Consider an analogy. Marcus Borg says that God is ineffable, that is, that none of our concepts apply to God. When we remind him that one of our concepts is the concept of a concept not applying to something, he replies, in effect, “And that one doesn’t apply either”. In Borg’s case, consistency results in foolishness. It is foolish to say that none of our concepts apply to God, not even the concept of a concept not applying to something. For if none of our concepts apply to God, then at least one of our concepts does not apply to God, and if at least one of our concepts does not apply to God, then our concept of a concept not applying to something must apply to God, and if our concept of a concept not applying to something must apply to God, then, naturally enough, it does, in which case some of our concepts apply to God, contradicting the initial claim that none of our concepts apply to God. In Borg’s case, self-refutation tracks strict consistency.

Something similar holds for the strictly consistent panmetaphoricist, although unlike Borg she’s not so daft as to revel in her awareness of her
self-contradiction. She says that no predicate of ours can apply literally to God. When we remind her of the predicate “cannot be talked about by us literally,” she replies, “And that one doesn’t apply either”. But if no predicate of ours can apply to God literally, there must be something about him in virtue of which that is the case. It isn’t just magic, a brute fact that no predicate of ours can apply to God literally. But if there is something about God in virtue of which no predicate of ours can apply to him literally, we can make up a new one—say, the predicate “is illiterable”—and we can stipulate that it signifies whatever that something is, from which it follows that some predicate of ours can apply to God literally after all. As with Borg, so with strictly consistent panmetaphoricism: self-refutation tracks strict consistency.

Our panmetaphoricist has no reasonable recourse but to distinguish two domains of speech about God. In the domain of first-order speech, there is only speech about God, such as utterances of “God is merciful,” “God spoke to Moses,” and the like, as well as “God is our fortress,” “God stands beside us in our suffering,” and their ilk. In the domain of second-order speech about God, there is only speech about our first-order speech about God, such as utterances of “Our speech about God can only be metaphorical,” “None of our speech about God can be literal,” and the like, as well as speech that is equivalent to such claims, such as applications of the predicates “can only be spoken of metaphorically” and “cannot be spoken of literally”. I submit that panmetaphoricism is better seen as the view that first-order speech can only apply to God metaphorically, that no first-order speech can apply to God literally. This leaves it wide open whether second-order speech can apply to God literally. In that case, the panmetaphoricist can say that the predicates “can only be spoken of metaphorically” and “cannot be spoken of literally” can both apply to God literally—she can thereby avoid self-refutation.

McFague alludes to another reason to distinguish two domains of speech about God when she sensibly observes in the quotation above that “the presumption of metaphorical discourse…is that these metaphors…are of
something”. I think she means to imply that when we speak of God metaphorically, we presuppose that our utterances are of something, something we refer to with the subject term ‘God’. That is, when we speak of God metaphorically, we presuppose that the predicate “is capable of being referred to by us with our words” applies to God. Now, McFague might insist that, like any other predicate, this one too can only apply to God metaphorically. But this would not be in the spirit of her observation. It seems that she wants to allow that when we speak of God metaphorically, we presuppose that the predicate “is capable of being referred to by us with our words” applies to God literally. The distinction between first- and second-order speech about God allows her to say it; she can locate that predicate in the second-order domain of speech about God.

Two-domain panmetaphoricism avoids the self-refutation problem, but serious problems remain—or so I think.

Here’s one. According to Abrahamic religion, God exists, really exists. However, if our first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical—as our panmetaphoricist insists—then no first-order linguistic expression of ours can be used of God literally, including the predicate “exists”. But if the predicate “exists” cannot be used of God literally, then there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate “exists” can apply to him literally. And
if there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate “exists” can apply to him literally, then the statement “God exists, really exists” is false, which is to say that God does not exist, not really. Panmetaphoricism, therefore, entails atheism. As such, it is incompatible with Abrahamic religion. Since I am an adherent of Abrahamic religion, I regard this implication as a serious problem a problem for panmetaphoricism, that is. I can imagine someone demanding proof that, according to Abrahamic religion, God exists, really exists. What would be my answer? This: according to Abrahamic religion, God speaks, really speaks. But nothing can (really) speak unless it exists, really exists. And if my hypothetical examiner were to demand proof that, according to Abrahamic religion, God (really) speaks, I would direct her to read the Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim scriptures, and to listen to the testimony of garden-variety Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the ages, all of which attest to God’s really speaking. Is my claim here just another instance of “our…insistence in Western religious thought on the presence of the divine,” as McFague puts it? Absolutely. The font of “Western religious thought” just is Abrahamic religion, and McFague is absolutely right that it insists on “the presence of the divine”, the real presence, not some ersatz substitute of the sort she offers us.

Perhaps our panmetaphoricist will accept the conclusion that God does not (really) exist but argue that it is compatible with Abrahamic religion. True enough, she might say, God does not (really) exist. But even so, it does not follow that there is no God. And what is essential for Abrahamic religion is not that God (really) exists but that there is a God.

How could it be that God does not (really) exist even though there is a God? Here our panmetaphoricist might turn to Alexius Meinong who, among others, thought that statements of the form x does not exist do not entail statements of the form there is no x. After all, the plenitude of objects includes not only those that exist (the real ones) but those that do not exist (the unreal ones). Our panmetaphoricist might concur and then posit that
God is not an existent object but rather a nonexistent object, that God is not a
denizen of reality but unreality. Perhaps he is an imaginary object like the
Fountain of Youth or unicorns; or perhaps he is an impossible object like a
round square or the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. In any
case, the predicate “exists” does not apply to God literally and so God does
not exist, God is not real; nevertheless, there is a God. And it is this claim
that is essential to Abrahamic religion, not the claim that God exists.

What should we make of the recommendation that the panmetaphoricist
should appeal to Meinong’s ontology or something comparably hospitable to
solve the problem of incompatibility with Abrahamic religion?

For starters, we might reject the ontologies in question. For example,
contrary to Meinong, we might deny the distinction between objects that
exist and those do not, we might deny the distinction between denizens of
reality and unreality. The only objects that there are are those that exist,
those that are real. Alternatively, we might endorse one of these ontologies
but reject the recommended application of them to God. For example, we
might endorse Meinong’s ontology but, contrary to the recommendation,
insist that God is an existent object, a denizen of reality. But a deeper
difficulty remains.12

The deeper difficulty is that, according to the recommended solution, the
predicates that signify these ontological categories—for example, “is a non-
existent object,” “is an imaginary object,” “is an impossible object,” and the
like—apply to God literally, in which case some first-order speech can apply
to God literally after all.

If our panmetaphoricists replies that she means for her use of these
ontological predicates to be merely metaphorical, she will fail to solve the
problem for which she invoked them. For if they don’t apply to God literally,
and if “exists” and the like don’t either, he won’t show up anywhere on the
ontological map, neither an existent nor a non-existent object, neither a
denizen of reality nor unreality—which, on the terms of the ontology to
which she appeals, is impossible.
Our panmetaphoricist might pursue a different tack altogether. Perhaps she will deny the premise that if the predicate “exists” cannot be used of God literally, then God lacks the property of existence. After all, she might insist, following Immanuel Kant, even if “exists” is a grammatical predicate, it is not a real predicate; that is, there is no property attributable to anything by its literal use—existence is not a property.

By way of reply, I have two things to say.

First, reasons to suppose that “exists” is not a real predicate, that existence is not a property, are bad reasons. Since, as a general rule, we should allow that grammatical predicates are real predicates unless we have good reason to think otherwise, we should allow that “exists” is a real predicate, that existence is a property.

Second, and more importantly, there is no premise in my argument according to which if the predicate “exists” cannot be used of God literally, then God lacks the property of existence. My argument contains the premise that if the predicate “exists” cannot be used of God literally, then there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate “exists” can apply to him literally. And it contains the premise that if there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate “exists” can apply to him literally, then the statement “God exists, really exists” is false, which is to say that God does not exist, not really. But each of these premises is compatible with existence not being a property; indeed, each is compatible with there being no properties at all.

It is important to note that even if “exists” is not a real predicate, there are plenty of other predicates in first-order speech that are, and they must apply literally to everything and hence God. Consider formal predicates such as “is identical with itself,” “is either a platypus or a nonplatypus,” and “is such that modus ponens is valid”. Or consider nonformal negative predicates. Surely God is not a platypus; nor is he a pentagon. But then the negative predicates “is a nonplatypus” and “is a nonpentagon” apply to God literally.
So plenty of predicates in first-order speech apply to God literally, contrary to two-domain panmetaphoricism.

At this juncture, our panmetaphorist might adopt a friendly suggestion from John Hick. In the face of points similar to those expressed in the last paragraph, Hick says that “classical thinkers who have affirmed the ultimate ineffability of the divine nature” “need not have worried”—for they are just “logical pedantries”. He continues:

Such points might however usefully have prompted them to distinguish between what we might call substantial predicates, such as “is good”, “is powerful”, “knows”, and purely formal or logically generated predicates such as “is a referent of a term” and “is such that our substantial predicates do not apply”. What they wanted to affirm was that the substantial characterizations do not apply to God in God’s self-existent being, beyond the range of human experience. They often expressed this by saying that we can only make negative statements about the Ultimate….This via negativa (or via remotionis) consists in applying negative predicates to the Ultimate—the predicate “is not finite”, and so on—as a way of saying that it lies beyond the range of all of our positive substantial characterizations. It is in this qualified sense that it makes perfectly good sense to say that our substantial predicates do not apply to the Ultimate.14

Of course, our panmetaphorist will remind Hick that although our substantial predicates cannot apply to God literally, they can apply metaphorically. With that caveat in place, she can adopt Hick’s recommendation to friends of ineffability as follows: whereas many positive formal and logically generated predicates of first-order speech apply to God literally, and whereas negative predicates do as well, this need not concern us any more than they should have worried friends of ineffability. Yes, positive formal predicates and negative predicates belong to first-order speech about God; and, yes, they apply to God literally. If we like, we can even say that the predicate “exists” applies to God literally. But none of this undermines the main thrust of panmetaphoricism, which is that our positive
substantial first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical, that none of it can apply to God literally.

Let us call the resulting version of panmetaphoricism restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism, which we can represent like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Restricted Two-Domain Panmetaphoricism</th>
<th>Can apply literally?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second-order</td>
<td>Speech about speech about God</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-order</td>
<td>Negative and positive formal speech about God</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive substantial/nonformal speech about God</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What should we make of this view?

I have two concerns.

First, some negative predicates apply to God literally only if certain positive predicates can apply to God literally. Consider the predicate “is unlimited”, which our panmetaphoricist says can apply to God literally. This predicate is incomplete: has no limits with respect to what? Well, has no limits with respect to whatever it is that might be limited, presumably. And what might be so limited? Well, properties that come in degrees, such as power, knowledge, and compassion. And now arises a thorny problem. Nothing can have no limits with respect to power, knowledge, compassion and other degreeed properties unless it really has power, knowledge, compassion, and so on. And if something really has power, knowledge, compassion, and so on, then the positive substantial predicates “has power”, “knows”, “is compassionate”, and so on apply to it literally. Therefore, these positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally, contrary to restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism.

Our panmetaphoricist can address this concern only by restricting her view once more. She must say that if the literal application of a negative predicate to something implies the possession of a property by it that can be associated with the literal application of a positive substantial predicate, then that negative predicate cannot apply to God literally.
This is a good place to recall that our panmetaphoricist intends her view to be restricted in another way. She said that our talk about God can only be metaphorical. In that case, she intends her view to be restricted to our predicates, the predicates of the various natural languages that humans have developed to stand for properties they are aware of. This leaves it wide open whether some of the positive substantial predicates in possible nonhuman languages that stand for properties of which we cannot be aware of can apply to God literally. Perhaps if we could speak with the tongues of Alpha Centaurians or angels, then we could speak of God literally—but the sad fact is that we cannot.15

My second concern is that the reason our panmetaphoricist initially offered for her position conflicts with her contention that no positive substantial predicate of ours applies to God literally. If a predicate were to apply to God literally, she said, following McFague, that would “exclude other ways of thinking and talking” about God, which is “dangerous” because it might lead us to suppose that there is just “one and only one way of understanding [God]”. But she has not avoided this (alleged) danger. She has excluded applying positive substantial predicates to God literally. Moreover, she insists that the one and only one way of understanding God is that he lacks those properties associated with the literal application of our positive substantial predicates, which excludes every religion according to which we can apply some such predicates to God literally, like all Abrahamic religions, and many more besides. You can’t get much more religiously exclusionary than that! Furthermore, her reason for thinking that positive substantial predicates don’t apply to God literally applies with equal force to the literal application of negative predicates. If a negative predicate applies to God literally, other ways of thinking and talking about him are excluded, notably, those that involve the literal application of their positive logical complements.
There is no way for our panmetaphoricist to retain her rationale for her view, at least none that I can see.

However, I think I can see how she might once again find help from Hick in developing a new rationale, one that honors at least some of the concern expressed in her initial reason. Moreover, the resulting view may well provide a more satisfying ontological basis for her position than she has heretofore expressed.

Speaking of what he calls “the Ultimate”, which is much like our panmetaphoricist’s God, Hick writes:

If we regard the major religious traditions as humanly conditioned responses to such a reality we have a reason to think that these predicates [like “is a creator” and “is a noncreator”] do not apply to it—namely,…that if they did it would have mutually contradictory attributes…. So if, in view of their fruits in human life, you regard Buddhism, advaitic Hinduism, and Taoism, as well as the theistic faiths, as responses to the Ultimate, you must postulate a reality to which these predicative dualisms do not apply, although it is nevertheless humanly thought and experienced by means of them.16

Hick’s line of thought here seems to be this: suppose you want to affirm those traditions whose members experience the Ultimate as a creator and you also want to affirm those traditions whose members experience the Ultimate as a noncreator. You can’t do so by saying both sorts of experience are veridical. For in that case, the Ultimate “would have mutually contradictory attributes”. But neither do you want to say that one is veridical and the other isn’t since you would not be regarding with sufficient equanimity the “fruits in human life” of both. So what to say? Answer: “postulate a reality to which these predicative dualisms do not apply”. That is, the Ultimate is neither a creator nor a noncreator, neither compassionate nor noncompassionate, etc.

Perhaps our panmetaphoricist can say something similar about God. She wants to affirm those traditions whose members apply “is a creator” to God
as well as those traditions whose members apply “is a noncreator” to God. She can’t do so, however, by saying all such predications apply to God literally since he would then have mutually contradictory attributes. But neither does she want to say that one predicate applies literally while its logical complement does not. That would involve siding with one tradition over another, which she is loathe to do. Even so, she recognizes that each tradition has a stake in preserving its speech about God, not least because of the great moral, social, and spiritual value for its adherents embedded in its linguistic practices. So what to say? Answer: our speech about God can only be metaphorical; or, more precisely at this stage of the conversation, and taking her cue from Hick, she can postulate that each predicate of a staked-out predicative dualism applies to God only metaphorically (where a predicative dualism is an instance of the schema “is an F or a non-F” and a predicative dualism is staked out just when different religious traditions have a stake in the application of its constituent predicates to God). Of course, as a result, certain formal predicates will not apply to God literally, e.g. staked-out predicative dualisms like “is either personal or nonpersonal”. Nor will certain negative predicates apply to God literally, e.g. “is nonpersonal”. But that’s a small price to pay considering the ample benefits.

Let’s call the resulting view hyper-restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism, which we can represent like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hyper-Restricted Two-Domain Panmetaphoricism</th>
<th>Can apply literally?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second-order Domain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech about speech about God</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-order Domain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal speech about God</td>
<td>Some yes; some no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative substantial/nonformal speech about God</td>
<td>Some yes; some no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive substantial/nonformal speech about God</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What should we make of this view?
The first thing to note about it is that the reason offered on its behalf is not in conflict with it, a definite improvement over its predecessor.

The second thing to note is that, according to the view, some predicative dualisms apply to God literally, namely the ones that aren’t staked-out by any religious tradition, e.g. “is either a platypus or a nonplatypus,” and they apply to God literally precisely because there is no third option in their application to him. But if there is no third option in their application to God, why suppose staked-out predicative dualisms are any different? Why suppose there is a third option in their case? Surely we don’t want to say that simply by virtue of the historic accident of being staked-out by some religious tradition that happened to evolve, a third option arises in the application of certain predicative dualisms to God. Surely we don’t want to say that if our species had evolved in such a way that no one ever had a stake in speaking of God as, say, nonpersonal, the predicative dualism “is either personal or nonpersonal” would have applied to him literally. It seems more sensible for our panmetaphoricist to say that no substantive human predicate applies to God literally, whether positive or negative, in which case no substantive predicative dualism does either, never mind whether or not it’s staked-out.

We can represent the view at which we have arrived like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Hyper-Restricted Two-Domain Panmetaphoricism</th>
<th>Can apply literally?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second-order Domain</td>
<td>Speech about speech about God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-order Domain</td>
<td>Formal speech about God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative substantial/nonformal speech about God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive substantial/nonformal speech about God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What should we make of this view, particularly the claim that no substantive predicative dualism can apply to God literally?

At first blush, it might seem impossible. For how could “is either a platypus or a nonplatypus” fail to apply literally to God? Surely everything, and hence God, is such that it falls into one of these two classes, the
platypuses and the nonplatypuses. On closer inspection, however, perhaps there’s more to the view than there initially appears to be. Let me explain.

Some philosophers think that virtually every predicate in a natural language is vague, with the exception of certain formal and mathematical predicates. To illustrate, consider a simple case, the predicates “is bald” and “is nonbald”. Now imagine meeting a man who counts as a borderline case of baldness, a case where no amount of empirical research or conceptual analysis can decide whether the quantity and distribution of his hair renders him bald or nonbald. In such a case, some philosophers want to say that he is neither bald nor nonbald; rather, it is indeterminate whether he is bald or nonbald, or, for those us who are fond of an ontology of things and their properties, he has both the property of being indeterminately bald and the property of being indeterminately nonbald. Consequently, the predicative dualism “is either bald or nonbald” does not apply to him literally. And the same goes for other borderline cases of nonformal and nonmathematical predicates, even, frighteningly enough, predicates like “exists,” as Tom Crisp reminded me on a road one sweltering April day somewhere between Tehran and Esfahan.

Our panmetaphoricist can say something similar with respect to God. God is like a man with respect to whom it is indeterminate whether he is bald or nonbald, only in God’s case the indeterminacy is a bit more extensive: for any substantial positive predicate F of ours, it is indeterminate whether God is an F or a nonF; for any property associated with any substantial positive predicate F of ours, God has both the property of being indeterminately F and the property of being indeterminately nonF. Thus, for example, since it is indeterminate whether God is a creator or a noncreator, neither the positive substantial predicate “is a creator” nor the negative predicate “is a noncreator” applies to God literally, and consequently neither does the formal predicate “is either a creator or a noncreator”. God, you might say, is maximally indeterminate with respect to any property our positive or negative predicates might literally signify. That’s the heart of super-hyper-restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism.
Shall we give it a clean bill of health?

Well, it’s certainly an advance on previous versions since it nicely explains what it is about God in virtue of which nearly none of our predicates can apply to him literally. Still, a couple of minor concerns remain. First, it implies that instances of “is indeterminately F” and “is indeterminately nonF” can apply literally to God, e.g. “is indeterminately a creator” and “is indeterminately a noncreator”. But these predicates are positive substantial predicates, and so some positive substantial predicates apply to God after all, contrary to the view. Second, whereas our panmetaphoricist initially explained the placement of the literal/nonliteral line with reference to the distinction between second- and first-order speech about God, she now has no comparable explanation. In fact, it seems that an appeal to this distinction is entirely gratuitous.

I leave an examination of these concerns aside, for even if our panmetaphoricist can address them adequately, two very serious concerns remain, one of which I regard as a decisive objection.

The first concern is this: the view on offer entails that no positive substantial predicate of ours applies to God more aptly than any other. For suppose that for any substantial positive predicate F of ours, it is indeterminate whether God is an F or a nonF. Then it is indeterminate whether God is compassionate or noncompassionate, and it is indeterminate whether God is a platypus or a nonplatypus. But if it is indeterminate whether God is F or nonF, then it is indeterminate whether God is F. Thus, it is indeterminate whether God is compassionate and it is indeterminate whether God is a platypus. Now, if it is indeterminate whether God is compassionate and it is indeterminate whether God is a platypus, then it is indeterminate whether there is anything about God in virtue of which “is compassionate” applies more aptly than “is a platypus”. And if it is indeterminate whether there is anything about God in virtue of which “is compassionate” applies more aptly than “is a platypus”, then it is indeterminate whether “is compassionate” applies to God more aptly than “is
a platypus”. But if it is indeterminate whether “is compassionate” applies to God more aptly than “is a platypus”, then “is compassionate” does not apply more aptly than “is a platypus”. Of course, what’s said here about the pair of predicates “is compassionate” and “is a platypus” can be said for any pair of predicates. Therefore, no positive substantial predicate of ours applies to God more aptly than any other. (Mutatis mutandis, the same argument leads to the same conclusion about positive substantial predicates and their logical complements: the view on offer entails that no positive substantial predicate of ours applies to God more aptly than its negative logical complement.)

Our panmetaphoricist might well reply: Non-sequitur. Although no positive substantial predicate of ours can apply literally to God more aptly than any other, it does not follow that no positive substantial predicate of ours can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than any other.

By way of response, I take it that a predicate can apply metaphorically to something more aptly than another only if there is something determinate about it in virtue of which it does so. That’s why, for example, “is divided by an iron curtain” applied metaphorically more aptly to the political and social condition of post-WWII Europe than “is divided by an open window”. Consequently, “is compassionate” can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than “is a platypus” only if there is something determinate about God in virtue of which that is so. There is no such thing however, according to our panmetaphoricist. She says it is indeterminate whether God is compassionate and it is indeterminate whether God is a platypus. But in that case, there is nothing determinate about God in virtue of which “is compassionate” can apply metaphorically more aptly than “is a platypus”.

Once again, our panmetaphoricist might reply: Non-sequitur. For recall that she intends her view to be restricted to the predicates of human languages. In that case, she can postulate that there are determinate properties outside our predicative ken that God has and in virtue of which “is compassionate” can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than “is a platypus”. (She could even postulate that there are such properties in virtue of which “is compassionate” can apply metaphorically to God more aptly.
than “is noncompassionate”, although that would involve siding with one religious tradition over another, which she wants to avoid.)

While this reply suffices to meet the concern, technically speaking, it comes at a considerable price. For although there surely are determinate properties outside our predicative ken, we have no idea whether their possession, or the possession of their logical complements, or the possession of either would render “is compassionate” more aptly metaphorically applicable to God than “is a platypus”. So even if it serendipitously turned out that God had some determinate properties outside our predicative ken in virtue of which “is compassionate” was more aptly metaphorically applicable than “is a platypus”, we’d be in the dark about it. In that case, we couldn’t reason about God. That’s because we can reason about something only if we have some rational basis to expect one thing rather than another from it, but we’d have nothing of the sort if, ex hypothesi, the properties in question were outside our predicative ken. Nor would we have any basis to expect to find fulfillment in relation to God. Indeed, for all we could tell, if God were to possess some of those determinate properties outside our predicative ken, he would abhor our religious, moral, social, and political ideologies and agendas; indeed, for all we could tell, he would be maximally unworthy of our devotion. If this is the sort of religion our panmetaphoricist invites us to participate in, we can hardly be judged too harshly if we decline the invitation.

The second objection—the one that I take to be decisive—is this: if our first-order substantive speech about God can only be metaphorical, then no first-order substantive linguistic expression of ours can be used of God literally, including the predicate “is personal”. But if the predicate “is personal” cannot be used of God literally, there is nothing determinate about God in virtue of which the predicate “is personal” can apply to him literally. And if there is nothing determinate about God in virtue of which the predicate “is personal” can apply to him literally, then the statement “God is personal, really personal” is false, which is to say that God is not personal,
not really. At best, panmetaphoricism implies that God is as indeterminately nonpersonal as he is indeterminately personal. As such, panmetaphoricism entails atheism. As such, panmetaphoricism is incompatible with Abrahamic religion. Since I am an adherent of Abrahamic religion, I regard this implication as a decisive refutation of panmetaphoricism.

So the panmetaphoricist turns out to be an implicit atheist. On more than one occasion, friends have said that in that case, so are Aquinas and Kant—and that consequence is as inconceivable as it is outrageous and impudent to suggest.

By way of reply, I say: if the shoe fits, wear it. I am no Aquinas scholar, but if his doctrines of analogical predication and divine simplicity imply that the predicate “is personal” can only be predicated analogically of God and man, and if that implication itself implies that the predicate “is personal” cannot apply literally to God, then God is not personal, not really—like the panmetaphoricist, Aquinas is an implicit atheist. Nor am I a Kant scholar, but if his doctrine that the-thing-in-itself is not identical with the-thing-in-itself-as-it-appears-to-us and if he identified God with the former, and if that doctrine and identification themselves imply that the predicate “is personal” cannot apply literally to God, then God is not personal, not really—like the panmetaphoricist, Kant is an implicit atheist. I carry no brief as to whether the antecedents of these conditionals are true; such exegetical matters lie beyond my pay grade. I only claim that if they are true, then Aquinas and Kant are implicit atheists.

My friends who broach the objection I am presently addressing naturally disagree; for, as they see it, the antecedents of these conditionals are true and apparently they can’t bear the thought that Aquinas and Kant are implicit atheists. They insist that one can be a theist even if one thinks that God is really nonpersonal or that he is indeterminately personal or that such “predicative dualisms do not apply” to him or some such thing. Here, I’m afraid, my friends have lost their semantic moorings. Theism is not simply the view that God exists, come what may about his nature; rather, it is the view that a personal God exists, a really personal God, not some ersatz
substitute of the sort our panmetaphoricist has to offer. And if my friends are right that Aquinas and Kant held views that implied that there is no really personal God, what hermeneutical option is there but to say that Aquinas and Kant are implicit atheists? What’s outrageous or impudent about drawing out the implications of someone’s views?

What about other notable figures, for example some of those revered in the Christian Church? Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century AD who was central in establishing what has become orthodox Trinitarianism, famously wrote:

_The simplicity of the True Faith assumes God to be that which He is, namely, incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent his proper nature, the single name being ‘Above Every Name’._

And here is Meister Eckhart:

_God is without name, for no one can comprehend anything about him._

And St. John of the Cross:

_[God] is incomprehensible and transcends all things._

If these thinkers and others like them mean to imply that the predicate “is personal” does not apply to God literally, then, since that implication entails that God is not really personal, they too are implicit atheists, despite their lofty status in certain quarters. (Again: I carry no brief on whether the antecedent of this conditional is true.)

I wrote the present essay for conferences in Tehran, Qum, and Esfahan. In that context, a question naturally arose: Do any of the authoritative writings of Shi‘ia Islam lend themselves to panmetaphoricism? For example, does Qur’an lend itself to panmetaphoricism?

John Hick says it does. After quoting the figures above as friends of ineffability, he writes:
In Islam, the notion of subhanahu likewise means that God is above all that we say of him. God is ‘beyond what they describe [attribute]’ (Qur’an 6:101; 23:91; 37:180).  

Here are two of the verses Hick cites and another famous one of the same sort:

[21.22] If there had been in them any gods except Allah, they would both have certainly been in a state of disorder; therefore glory be to Allah, the Lord of the dominion, above what they attribute (to Him).

[23.91] Never did Allah take to Himself a son, and never was there with him any (other) god—in that case would each god have certainly taken away what he created, and some of them would certainly have overpowered others; glory be to Allah above what they describe!

[37.180] Glory be to your Lord, the Lord of Honor, above what they describe.  

According to Hick, these verses imply that

- God is “above all that we say of him,”

and he takes this to mean that not any of God’s positive substantial properties is such that we can attribute it to God literally.

Is Hick right? Two comments are in order.

First, the verses Hick cites say that Allah is above all that they say of him, not, as Hick writes, that Allah is above all that we say of him. In particular, these verses refer to those people who have mistakenly attributed to Allah certain properties, e.g. that he has a son, and their point is that Allah is above or beyond or other than what they have mistakenly attributed to him. So these verses do not seem to even speak to the question of whether God is “above all that we say of him”.

Second, even if Hick’s exegesis were not mistaken, we must carefully distinguish two very different things that might be meant by the claim that “God is above all that we say of him”. Hick takes it to mean that

1. Not any of God’s positive substantial properties is such that we can attribute it to God literally.
As I’ve argued, if this is true, then no positive substantial predicate of ours can apply literally to God, in which case the predicate “is personal” does not apply to him literally, and so God is not really personal—Hick’s (1) implies the denial of Abrahamic religion and theism more generally. However, we might say “God is above all that we say of him” to express a very different thought: that God is much more than what we can say or fathom, that what we have to say does not exhaust all that he is. In that case, we would imply that

(2) Not all of God’s positive substantial properties are such that we can attribute them to God literally.

If (2) is true, however, it is left open whether some or even many positive substantial predicates of ours can apply to God literally; notably it is left open whether the predicate “is personal” applies literally.

Suppose the verses of the Qur’an that Hick quotes really do affirm that “God is above all that we say of him,” as Hick says they do, or suppose some other verses affirm this. Which of the two claims that I have just distinguished is more likely to be affirmed by them? Surely (2). For there is no indication elsewhere in Qur’an that the atheistic (1) is intended and many of the beautiful names of Allah are naturally understood as applying to him literally. Moreover, there is every indication that Qur’an was intended to be continuous with the central tenets of Abrahamic religion, according to which God is personal, really personal. So neither Hick nor the panmetaphoricist can find Qur’anic support for their position.23

But what about other authoritative Shi’ia sources? Might the panmetaphoricist find support in them? This is not the place to delve into the question in detail, but I want to consider one famous passage attributed to Imam Alī ibn Abī ālib who, for Shi’ites, apparently holds a special authority. Imam Alī said that “To know God is to know His Oneness.” (Bihar al-anwar, vol. II, p. 186). But what does it mean to say that God is one? Here is his answer:

To say that God is one has four meanings: two of those meanings are false and two are correct. As for the two incorrect meanings, one is that
one should say ‘God is one’ and be thinking of number and counting. This meaning is false because that which has no second cannot enter into the category of number. Do you not see that those who say that God is a third of a trinity [i.e. the Christians] fell into this infidelity? Another meaning is to say so and so is one of this people, namely a species of this genus or a member of this species. This meaning is also not correct when applied to God, for it implies likening something to God and God is above all likeness. As for the two meanings that are correct when applied to God, one is that it should be said that God is one in the sense that there is no likeness unto him among things. God possesses such uniqueness. And one is to say that God is one in the sense that there is no multiplicity or division conceivable in Him, neither outwardly nor in the mind nor in the imagination. God possesses such a unity. (Bihar al-anwar, vol II, p. 65)²⁴

I shan’t dwell on the unsound argument associated with the first meaning in this passage, the argument that since “that which has no second cannot enter into the category of number,” it is not the case that God is one in the numeric sense of “one”. I want to focus on the second and third meanings.

Suppose someone says that God is one species of the genus being personal while humans are another species of that genus. What do the comments on the second meaning of “God is one” in the passage above imply about what this person said? It looks as though they imply that what he said is false. For it looks as though they implicitly contain the following line of reasoning:

If God is one species of the genus being personal while humans are another species of that genus, then humans are like God. However, God is above all likeness; thus, nothing else is like him. But then humans are not like God, in which case it follows that God is not one species of the genus being personal while humans are another one.

Or suppose someone says that God and humans both have the property of being personal. What do the comments on the third meaning of “God is one” in the passage above imply about what he said? Again, it seems as though
they imply that what he said is false. For they seem to implicitly contain the following line of thought:

If God and humans both have the property of being personal, then humans are like God. However, there is no likeness unto him among things; thus, nothing else is like him. But then humans are not like him, in which case it follows that God and humans do not both have the property of being personal.

If these two arguments are implicit in the passage under discussion, then, since humans are a species of the genus being personal and they have that property, it follows from the passage that God is not personal, not really. Therefore, the passage appears to be implicitly atheistic, or at least incompatible with Abrahamic religion.

This strikes me as a problem for Shi’ites. For, on the one hand, they insist that God is personal, really personal (they are Abraham’s heirs, after all), while, on the other hand, they insist on the authority of Imam Ali in such matters, indeed his inerrancy. But they cannot insist on both of these things if the passage I have quoted is accurate and it implicitly contains the two arguments that I have identified. What follows is my attempt at a solution to this problem.

Let’s say that a kind-essence K is a set of properties S such that all and only the Ks exemplify S and, necessarily, something is a K if and only if it exemplifies S. Kind-essences mark out one kind of thing from another. Thus, for example, suppose that the kind-essence of being personal—call it personhood—is the set of properties associated with the capacity for thought and agency. All and only those things that are personal exemplify personhood and, necessarily, something is personal if and only if it exemplifies personhood. Since God is personal, God exemplifies personhood. Likewise, since Barack Obama is personal, he too exemplifies personhood. However, although personhood distinguishes both God and Obama from things that are not personal, personhood does not distinguish the kind of thing God is from the kind of thing Obama is. At a more fundamental level—indeed, at the most fundamental level—God is a divine person; God exemplifies the set of
properties we may label divinity. Divinity is God’s most fundamental kind-essence. By contrast, at a more fundamental level—likewise, at the most fundamental level—Obama is a human person; Obama exemplifies the set of properties we may label humanity. Humanity is Obama’s most fundamental kind-essence. Thus, although God and Obama both exemplify personhood, only one of them exemplifies divinity, namely God.

Now let’s return to the statement under discussion, the statement that

• Nothing else is like God,

which is an explicit premise in the two arguments I constructed above and which is explicitly affirmed in the passage under discussion (“God is above all likeness” and “there is no likeness to him among things”). To say that nothing else is like God is ambiguous. It might mean

(1) Nothing else has any of the properties God has.

If this first claim is true, then God does not have the property of being personal. (For if nothing else has any of the properties God has, then, since humans have the property of being personal, God does not have the property of being personal.) This way lies the denial of Abrahamic religion; this way lies atheism. On the other hand, to say that nothing else is like God might mean

(2) Nothing else has all of the properties God has.

If this second claim is correct, it is left open whether God has some of the properties other things have; notably, it is left open whether he has the property of being personal.

Which of these two claims is true? Surely the first. It is an instance of the (perhaps contingently) true generalization that nothing else has all the properties anything has: for any x and y, if x is distinct from y, then x and y do not share all the same properties. Moreover, since there exists exactly one God, nothing else has God’s kind-essence, divinity, and so nothing else has all of the properties God has.

In fact, drawing on the notion of a fundamental kind-essence, we might understand the claim that nothing else is like God as the monotheistic claim that
(3) Nothing else has the fundamental kind-essence of God, namely divinity.

Furthermore, we might understand the claim implicit in the passage I quoted above that

- God is not a species of any genus of which something else is a species

as the monotheistic claim that

(4) God is not a species of any fundamental kind-essence of which something else is a species.

If we understand all of the claims under discussion in the passage from Imam Ali in the ways I have suggested, we can preserve a perfectly good sense in which God is one while allowing that God is personal, really personal, in which case neither John Hick nor the panmetaphoricist can rightly claim the support of Imam Ali for their position.26

In this essay I have argued that panmetaphoricism is incompatible with Abrahamic religion. That’s because adherents of Abrahamic religion—like theists more generally—are committed to God’s being personal, really personal, whereas the panmetaphoricist denies this. The panmetaphoricist, therefore, is an implicit atheist, no matter what her practice, piety, or position might be. Moreover, I have argued that certain passages in Qu’ran and Imam Ali’s writings that might be thought to support panmetaphoricism can be understood otherwise. Whether a more thorough investigation of these texts or others deemed authoritative by Shi’ites or Muslims more generally would overturn this second conclusion falls outside the scope of this essay.27
Endnotes:

5. O Worship the King, Robert Grant, 1833, based on Psalm 104; tune: LYONS, attributed to Hayden.
7. The term “panmetaphoricism” is William Alston’s. See his xxxx as well as Rene van Woudenberg’s xxxx for critical discussion of the view.
9. Here’s Borg: “The ineffable is beyond all our concepts, even this one”. See The God We Never Knew (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1997), 48-49.
10. Cp. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). If you think nothing can speak unless it has a bodily part, say, vocal chords, then for “speak” substitute “communicate”, which has no such implication.
11. Perhaps this is what McFague meant when she said that “God is not, not just in the sense of being unavailable to us or absent from experience but as a basic aspect of the being of God”.
12. I leave aside the question of whether something unreal can really speak.
Actually, Hick speaks of formal and negative “concepts” and “properties”, but what he says about them is true only if it is also true of predicates. Hence, in order to accommodate the present terms of the discussion, I have taken the liberty to slightly modify Hick’s words in my quotation.
Note also that the two predicates Hick uses to illustrate what he means by “purely formal or logically generated” predicates belong to what I have called the domain of second-order speech. Consequently, two-domain panmetaphoricism already allows their literal application to God. On the assumption that Hick did not intend to restrict the class of “purely formal or logically generated” predicates to second-order speech about God, the purely formal and logically generated predicates indicated in the previous paragraph will count as “purely formal or logically generated” predicates in Hick’s sense of that phrase. I am encouraged in that assumption since, as we just saw in the quotations in the text, Hick allows that the predicates “has a nature” and “is self-existent” apply literally to God.
talk of concepts and properties. Note that what Hick says about negative predicates here is incompatible with what he said about them in his earlier An Interpretation of Religion, quoted above.

17. Of course, even if what it is in virtue of which we are (really) personal—which is likely related to our bodily condition—is not that in virtue of which, according to Abrahamic religion, God is (really) personal, it does not follow that God is not (really) personal, it does not follow that the predicate “is personal” does not apply to God literally. To suppose otherwise is to confuse the conditions under which we learn the literal application of a term with the conditions under which that term can literally apply. It is like confusing the conditions under which we learn to apply the predicate “is a human”—one of which is that everything to which it applies was born on earth—with the conditions under which that predicate could literally apply to something—none of which includes or implies that everything to which it applies was born on earth.

18. Is this implication affirmed here? “The first cause surpasses human understanding and speech. He knows God best who acknowledges that whatever he thinks and says falls short of what God really is”. In librum De Causis, 6—Copleston, Aquinas (Penguin: 1955), 131-32; quoted in Hick 1989, 238. Or here? “We are unable to apprehend [the divine substance] by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not…. [B]y its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches,” Summa contra Gentiles, I: 14:2-3 – Pegis 1955, 96-97), quoted in Hick 1989, 238-89.


20. Hick 1989, 238. Did he mean the notion of subanallah? I don’t know, and I shan’t get bogged down in the differences.


22. I owe this point to xxxx.

23. One worry with my conclusion here has to do with Qur’an 42:11. Here are three translations, each of which might be read as affirming that nothing else is like Allah.

Yusuf Ali: (He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves, and pairs among cattle: by this means does He multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things).

Pickthl: The Creator of the heavens and the earth. He hath made for you pairs of yourselves, and of the cattle also pairs, whereby He multiplieth you. Naught is as His likeness; and He is the Hearer, the Seer.

Shakir: The Originator of the heavens and the earth; He made mates for you from among yourselves, and mates of the cattle too, multiplying you thereby; nothing like a likeness of Him; and He is the Hearing, the Seeing.

I will have more to say about the claim that nothing else is like Allah shortly.

25. Of course, I stand under correction. If Shi’ites qua Shi’ites can allow that what Imam Ali says here is false, then what he says poses no problem for Shi’ites at all.

26. I must confess that I do not know how to understand in a way that is friendly to my conclusion the following passage from Sermon 1 of Imam Ali’s *Nahj al-balaghah*.

…The perfection of His purity is to deny Him attributes, because every attribute is a proof that it is different from that to which it is attributed, and everything to which something is attributed is different from the attribute. Thus, whoever attaches attributes to Allah recognizes His like, and whoever recognizes His like regards Him as two, and whoever regards Him as two recognizes parts for Him, and whoever recognizes parts for Him has mistaken Him….

The main problem I have with the line of thought here is that it seems to me clearly false that if one attributes something to Allah, then one must regard Allah as having (at least) two parts. To be sure, everything to which something is attributed is different from the attribute that is attributed—we must distinguish things from their attributes. But it does not follow that if a thing has an attribute, then that thing has two parts. What would the two parts be? The thing itself and its attribute, presumably. But this answer fails to distinguish the relation of having a property from the relation of having a part. These are not the same relation, nor does the former entail the latter. So why can’t Allah have attributes and yet have no parts?

27. Acknowledgements…