Abstract. Panmetaphoricism is the view that our speech about God can only be metaphorical. In this essay, I assess several variations on this view, and explain how the most plausible one implies religious anemia and atheism or nontheism.

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.¹

Jefferts-Schori’s gender-bending reference to “mother Jesus” raised more than just a few eyebrows. When an Australian reporter inquired about it, she said, “It’s a metaphor, as all language about God is a metaphor”.²

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 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.⁴

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.⁵

¹ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_76300_ENG_HTM.htm.
⁴ Ibid., 196, n. 13.
⁵ Ibid., 24.
And here’s 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.⁶

Let me be clear from the outset. I have no problem with metaphorical speech about God. Without it, religious life would be a dry ordeal indeed; without it, many great truths about God and God’s purposes and activities would not capture the imaginations and guide the lives of the faithful as well as they do. Moreover, I have no problem referring to Jesus as a mother, as Jefferts-Schori did. Those scarred by relationships with neglectful, abusive, and violent males may have no alternative to imaging, thinking, and talking about God with feminine metaphors; arguably, such metaphors are frequently much more apt, anyway. Furthermore, if we can trust the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus encouraged applying 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.⁷

So, as far as I’m concerned, let a thousand metaphorical flowers bloom!

What I do have a problem with, however, is panmetaphoricism, the view that our speech about God can only be metaphorical.⁸ In what follows, I argue that the best way to understand panmetaphoricism suffers from severe debilities. Before I get down to work, some preliminary remarks are in order.

1. Preliminaries
First: a word about 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 or when one uses a term in accordance with an explicitly stipulated meaning, one uses it literally. When one uses a term but not in accordance with one of its standard or stipulated 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 mean to imply that none of our talk about God can be literal. I agree with them: if our talk about God can only be metaphorical, then none of it can be literal. This implication is important to them; it is likewise important to me.

⁶ God the Problem (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 95.
⁷ Matthew 23:37.
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. 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 literally to God.

Fourth, if a predicate applies to a thing literally, then there is something about it in virtue of which it does so. Since I prefer an ontology according to which there are things and their properties, in what follows I will often express this thought 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.\footnote{I borrow the above four points from William Alston, “Irreducible Metaphors in Theology,” and “Can We Speak of God Literally?,” in \textit{Divine Nature and Human Language} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17-38 and 39-63.}

Fifth, contemporary panmetaphoricists tend to defend their view on the grounds that if a predicate of ours were to apply literally to God, then, as McFague put it in the quotation above, that would “exclude other ways of thinking and talking” about God, and that’s “dangerous”. For then we might be led to suppose that there is just “one and only one way of understanding [God]”. But, obviously enough, there are a lot of different ways of understanding God. I’ll have more to say about this line of thought later.

\section*{2. Panmetaphoricism is self-refuting}

Panmetaphoricism possesses an unenviable property: if it is true, then it is false. For if our speech about God can only be metaphorical, then the predicate “can be talked about by us only metaphorically” applies to God literally, in which case it is false that our speech about God can only be metaphorical. 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, including the predicate “can be talked about by us only metaphorically”. What should we make of this strictly consistent panmetaphoricism?

Consider an analogy. Marcus Borg says that God is ineffable, by which he means 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: that one doesn’t either.\footnote{“The ineffable is beyond all our concepts, even this one”. \textit{The God We Never Knew} (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1997), 48-49.} In Borg’s case, strict consistency results in contradiction. For if none of our concepts apply to God, then at least one of our concepts does not apply to God, in which case our concept of a concept not applying to something must apply to God, and so some of our concepts apply to God, contradicting the initial claim that none do. In Borg’s case, self-refutation tracks strict consistency.

Something similar holds for the strictly consistent panmetaphoricist. She says that no predicate of ours can apply literally to God. When we remind her of the predicate “cannot be talked about literally by us,” she replies, “And that one doesn’t either”. But if that’s the case, there must be something about God in virtue of which no predicate of ours can apply literally to God, not even the predicate “cannot be talked about literally by us”. It isn’t just magic, or an inexplicable brute fact. But then we can introduce a new predicate into our lexicon—say, “is
illiterable”—and we can stipulate that it signifies literally whatever that something is, in which case some predicate of ours can apply literally to God after all. As with Borg, so with the strictly consistent panmetaphoricist: self-refutation tracks strict consistency.

Our panmetaphoricist has no reasonable recourse, it seems to me, 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 with 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 so on, as well as equivalent speech, for example utterances of “God is such that our speech about God can only be metaphorical” and “God is such that our speech about God cannot be literal”. 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. As a consequence, 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—and thereby avoid self-refutation.

McFague alludes to another reason to distinguish two domains of speech about God when she sensibly observes in the second 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’. Of course, how we should characterize the referent is up for grabs. Nevertheless, when we take ourselves to speak metaphorically of God, we presuppose that the predicate “can be referred to by us with our words” applies literally 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 “can be referred to by us with our words” applies literally to God. The distinction between first- and second-order speech about God allows her to make this sensible presupposition since she can locate utterances of “God can be referred to by us with our words” in the second-order domain of speech about God because it is equivalent to “Our words can be used by us to refer to God”.

3. Two-domain panmetaphoricism
To distinguish the initial wholly unrestricted version of panmetaphoricism from our restricted second version, let’s call the latter two-domain panmetaphoricism, which we can represent like this:

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Two-domain panmetaphoricism</th>
<th>Can only apply metaphorically?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second-order domain</td>
<td>Speech about speech about God</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-order domain</td>
<td>Speech about God</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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Although two-domain panmetaphoricism avoids self-refutation, serious concerns remain.
One concern is this: 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 speech of ours can be used literally of God, 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 God literally, in which case the statement “God exists, really exists” is false—which is to say that God does not exist, not really. Panmetaphoricism entails atheism. As such, it is incompatible with Abrahamic religion.

I can imagine someone demanding proof that, according to Abrahamic religion, God exists, really exists. How might we answer? As follows: according to Abrahamic religion, God speaks, really speaks; and nothing can really speak unless it really exists.\(^{11}\) If our examiner demands proof that, according to Abrahamic religion, God really speaks, we should direct her to the Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim scriptures, and to the testimony of garden-variety Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the ages, which attest to God’s speaking, really speaking. No doubt, our panmetaphoricist will charge that we’re just exhibiting the “presumptuous insistence in Western religious thought on the presence of the divine,” as McFague puts it. What might we say in reply? Guilty as charged. McFague has never been more right than when she observes that Western religious thought insists on “the presence of the divine,” the real presence, not some ersatz substitute of the sort many contemporary theologians serve up.

Suppose our panmetaphoricist accepts the implication that, on her view, God does not really exist. She might yet argue that Abrahamic religion is compatible with that implication. True enough, she might say, God does not really exist. After all, as McFague says, “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”. Even so, she might continue, it does not follow that there is no God. And what is essential for Abrahamic religion is not that God exists but that there is a God.

How could it be that God does not 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 were compatible with statements of the form there is an \(x\). That’s because 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 a nonexistent object, that God is not a denizen of reality but unreality. Perhaps God is an imaginary object like the Fountain of Youth or unicorns; or perhaps God is an impossible object like a squircle 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. Abrahamic religion is compatible with panmetaphoricism.

We might well be unimpressed. For starters, we might deny the distinction between objects that exist and those that do not, we might deny the distinction between the 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 to God. For example, we might endorse Meinong’s ontology but insist that God is an existent object, a denizen of reality, unlike the Fountain of Youth and squircles.

But there lies a deeper difficulty in the neighborhood. According to the reply to the objection, the predicates that signify these ontological categories—for example, in the case of

\(^{11}\) Cp. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). If you insist that nothing can speak unless it has a bodily part, say, vocal chords, then for “speak” substitute “communicate”, which has no such implication.
Meinong, “is a non-existent object,” “is an imaginary object,” “is an impossible object,” and the like—apply literally to God, even if God is unreal. In that case, some first-order speech can apply to God literally. If our panmetaphoricist replies that her use of these predicates is metaphorical, she will fail to explain how it is that even though God does not exist, there is a God. For, on the ontology she invokes for that explanation, if those predicates don’t apply to God literally, God won’t show up anywhere on the ontological map, not as an existent or a non-existent object, not as a denizen of reality or unreality—which, on the terms of the ontology she invokes, is incoherent.

Our panmetaphoricist might pursue a different tack altogether. Perhaps she will deny that if the predicate “exists” cannot be used of God literally, then God lacks the property of existence. She might insist that, even if “exists” is a grammatical predicate, it is not a real one; there is no property attributable to anything by its literal use since existence is not a property.

By way of reply, it seems to me that reasons to conclude that “exists” is not a real predicate are dubious, and the same goes for reason to conclude that existence is not a property. Since, as a general rule, we should allow grammatical predicates to be real predicates unless we have good reason to think otherwise, we should allow that “exists” is a real predicate and existence a real property. More importantly, however, 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 God literally, and it contains the premise that, if that’s the case, then the statement “God exists, really exists” is false. But these premises are compatible with existence not being a property; indeed, they are compatible with there being no properties at all.

It seems that even if “exists” is not a real predicate, there are plenty of other real predicates in first-order speech that apply literally to everything and hence to 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 substantive negative predicates. One would expect that, just like you and me, the negative predicates “is a nonplatypus” and “is nonpentagonal” apply to God literally. So it seems that plenty of predicates in first-order speech apply to God literally, contrary to two-domain panmetaphoricism.

At this juncture, our panmetaphoricist might adopt a friendly suggestion from John Hick. In light of remarks 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” since these points 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

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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.\textsuperscript{13}

Of course, our panmetaphoricist will want to remind Hick that although our substantial predicates cannot apply to God \textit{literally}, they can apply \textit{metaphorically}. With that caveat in place, she can adopt Hick’s recommendation as follows: whereas many purely formal and logically generated predicates of first-order speech apply to God literally, and whereas negative substantial predicates do as well, this need not concern us any more than the friends of ineffability. Yes, formal predicates—all those “logical pedantries,” as Hick calls them—belong to first-order speech about God, as do negative substantial predicates; and, yes, they apply to God literally. And we can say the same for “exists” too. But none of this undermines the main thrust of panmetaphoricism, which is that our \textit{positive substantial} first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical, that none of it can apply to God literally.

\textbf{4. Restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism}

We began with panmetaphoricism, the view that all of our speech about God can only be metaphorical, which implies that none of our speech applies literally to God. Self-refutation and McFague’s “presumption of metaphorical discourse” led us to restrict the view to first-order speech about God. Incompatibility with Abrahamic religion and Hick’s remarks about formal speech and negative substantial predicates led us to further restrict the view to positive substantial speech about God. Call the result \textit{restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism}, which we can represent as follows:

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\hline
 & \textbf{Restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism} & Can only apply metaphorically? \\
\hline
\textbf{Second-order domain} & Speech about speech about God & No \\
\hline
\textbf{First-order domain} & Formal speech about God & No \\
& Negative substantial speech about God & No \\
& Positive substantial speech about God & Yes \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
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\textsuperscript{13} John Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion} (London: MacMillan, 1989), 239. 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 slightly modified 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 the domain of second-order speech. 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 such. 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.
I have several concerns about restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism. Meeting those concerns will, oddly enough, give us reason to lift the restriction of metaphoricity to positive substantial speech. As a result, we’ll have a clearer view of the God of panmetaphoricism.

My initial concern is that some negative predicates can apply to God literally only if certain positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally. Consider the predicate “is unlimited,” which our panmetaphoricist, following Hick, says can apply to God literally. This predicate is incomplete: has no limits with respect to what? Presumably, has no limits with respect to whatever it is that might be limited. And what might that be? Well, properties that come in degrees, such as power, knowledge, and compassion. But there’s the rub. Nothing can have no limits with respect to power, knowledge, compassion and other degreed properties unless it really has power, knowledge, compassion, and the like, in which case the positive substantial predicates “has power”, “knows”, “is compassionate”, etc. apply to it literally. Therefore, if negative predicates can apply to God literally, then many positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally as well.

My second concern is that the reason McFague offered for panmetaphoricism conflicts with our panmetaphoricist’s contention that no positive substantial predicate of ours applies to God literally. If a predicate were to apply to God literally, she said, 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 herself 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 God 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. 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 God are excluded, notably, those that involve the literal application of their positive logical complements.

It seems to me that our panmetaphoricist cannot sensibly retain McFague’s rationale for her view. However, she might once again seek succor from Hick to develop a new rationale, one that honors the spirit of McFague’s rationale. 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.14

Hick’s line of thought here seems to be this: suppose you want to affirm those traditions whose members experience the Ultimate as personal as well as those whose members experience the

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Ultimate as nonpersonal. You can’t do so by saying both sorts of experience are veridical. For then the Ultimate “would have mutually contradictory attributes”. But neither do you want to say that just one is veridical 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 personal nor nonpersonal, neither a creator nor a noncreator, neither compassionate nor noncompassionate, etc.

Perhaps our panmetaphoricist can say something similar. She wants to affirm those traditions whose members apply “is personal” to God as well as those whose members apply “is nonpersonal”. She can’t do so, however, if she says that all such predicates apply to God literally since God would then have contradictory attributes. But neither does she want to say that one predicate applies literally while its logical complement does not. That would involve taking sides with one tradition over another. Moreover, she recognizes that each tradition has a stake in preserving its speech about God because of the moral, social, and spiritual value embedded in the linguistic practices of its adherents. So what to do? Answer: our speech about God can only be metaphorical. Or, more accurately at this point in the dialectic: we 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 F or nonF” and a predicative dualism is staked out if and only if different religious traditions have a stake in applying each of its constituent predicates to God.

To sum up: restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism allowed some negative substantial predicates to apply literally to God that, on further reflection, must apply only metaphorically; specifically, (i) those negative substantial predicates whose literal application implies the literal application of positive substantial predicates and (ii) those negative substantial predicates that partly constitute a staked-out predicative dualism. Moreover, restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism allowed some formal predicates to apply literally to God that, on further reflection, must apply only metaphorically—namely staked-out predicative dualisms. Consequently, the restriction of metaphoricity to positive substantial speech about God must be lifted. Furthermore, unlike McFague’s rationale for panmetaphoricism, my Hickian rationale for a less restricted panmetaphoricism does not conflict with the position for which it is offered. Finally, the less restricted panmetaphoricism on offer recovers some of the “pan” in panmetaphoricism that restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism gave up. This is good news for our panmetaphoricist.

I now want to argue that she should recover even more of the “pan” in panmetaphoricism. To see why, note that the recovery project as it stands still allows some predicative dualisms to apply to God literally, namely those not all of whose constituent predicates are staked-out by some religious tradition. For example, since no tradition has a stake in thinking of God as a platypus, it allows the negative substantial predicate “is a nonplatypus” to apply literally to God, and consequently it allows the staked-out predicative dualism “is either a platypus or a nonplatypus” to apply literally as well. Here a difficulty begins to emerge.

For given what some traditions have actually deemed special foci of God’s relation to the natural order, it is not all that far-fetched to consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved in such a way that some culture had a stake in thinking of God as specially related to platypi—say, by becoming one of them—and so had a stake in applying “is a platypus” to God. Or consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved in such a way that no religious tradition had a stake in thinking of God as personal and so had no stake in applying “is personal” to God. In the first case, restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism implies
that “is a nonplatypus” would not have applied literally to God; God would not have had the
property of being a nonplatypus, although he actually does have it. In the second case, it implies
that “is nonpersonal” would have applied literally to God; God would have had the property of
being nonpersonal, although he actually does not have it. But surely we can’t be expected to
concede that simply by virtue of the historic accident of “is a platypus” not being staked-out, “is
a nonplatypus” applies literally to God; surely we can’t be expected to concede that simply by
virtue of the historic accident of “is personal” being staked-out, “is nonpersonal” does not apply
literally to God.

Think of it this way. On restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism, sometimes there’s a
third option to God’s being F or non-F, namely in those cases where, due to historical
contingencies, different religious communities have a stake in whether each constituent of the
predicate “is either F or non-F” applies to God. But whether or not there’s a third option has to
do with God, surely, and not the chanciness of terrestrial evolution in general or human
biological or cultural evolution in particular. In that case, the sensible thing for the
panmetaphoricist to say seems to be that none of our substantive predicates apply to God
literally, whether positive or negative, in which case no substantive predicative dualism applies
to God literally—full stop. Of course, she might yet say that some of our first-order formal
speech can apply literally to God. For example, she can still say that God is identical with God,
that God exists, that God is such that modus-ponens is valid, and so forth—all literally. But other
than that, first-order speech about God is metaphorical across the board.

5. Partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism
If I’m right, then the two-domain panmetaphoricist should not restrict metaphoricity to positive
substantial speech about God. Call the resulting view partly recovered two-domain
panmetaphoricism, which we can represent like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism</th>
<th>Can only apply metaphorically?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second-order domain</td>
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<td>Speech about speech about God</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal speech about God</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative substantial speech about God</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive substantial speech about God</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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At this point, we might well wonder whether the recovery will put the panmetaphoricist
back on the sickbed. For how could God fail to fall into one of the mutually exclusive and jointly
exhaustive classes expressed by a predicative dualism? After all, everything is either a platypus
or a nonplatypus. Everything is either personal or nonpersonal. How could it be otherwise? These
are important questions, one our panmetaphoricist must answer if we are to accept her view. So,
then, how can it be that God is neither a platypus nor a nonplatypus, neither personal nor
nonpersonal, and so on? How could there be a third option?
The only plausible answer to this question can be illustrated with a homely example. Consider the predicate “is bald”. Now imagine a man who is a borderline case of baldness, a man who is such that no amount of empirical research or conceptual analysis can decide the question of whether the quantity and distribution of his hair renders him bald. In such a case, some philosophers—in particular those who characterize vagueness as metaphysical rather than epistemic or linguistic—will say that there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether he has the property of being bald. Or, to express the view without talk of properties, these philosophers will say that there is no determinate fact of the matter in virtue of which the predicate “is bald” applies literally to him. Thus, the proposition that he is bald is neither true nor false. Likewise, the proposition that he is either bald or nonbald is neither true nor false. In our panmetaphoricist’s vocabulary, the predicative dualism “is either bald or nonbald” does not apply literally to him. Why? Because there is no determinate fact of the matter about him such that in virtue of that fact “is bald” or “is nonbald” applies literally to him. And the same goes for most other positive and negative substantial predicates in a natural language. We can imagine borderline cases of their application and get similar results.

Here our panmetaphoricist might well take note. For what these philosophers say about our borderline case of a bald man and the predicate “is bald,” she can say about God and every substantial predicate of ours. For every substantial predicate “is F” of ours, there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God has the property of being F. Or to express the view without reference to properties, for any substantial predicate “F” of ours, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact “is F” applies literally to God. Thus, for any proposition of the form God is F, where “is F” is a substantial predicate, it is neither true nor false that God is F. Likewise, for any proposition of the form God is either F or nonF, where “is F” is a substantial predicate, it is neither true nor false that God is either F or nonF. Thus, for example, the predicative dualism “is either personal or nonpersonal” does not apply literally to God since there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact “is personal” or “is nonpersonal” applies literally to God. At best, we can only apply substantial predicates to God metaphorically.

This way of understanding panmetaphoricism strikes me as a significant advance since it nicely explains what is otherwise left unexplained, namely why our substantial predicates cannot apply to God literally, whether positive or negative. There simply is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which they could apply. When it comes to substantial predication, we are left with metaphor alone, which is exactly what our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist wants to say.

Might the two-domain panmetaphoricist fully recover her position? Might she extend what I have suggested that she say about substantive predication to formal speech about God? Maybe. At any rate, philosophers who say vagueness is metaphysical also say that identity and existence are vague. Suppose they’re right. Then our two-domain panmetaphoricist might insist that the same goes for God. There is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God has the property of existence or self-identity. Or, to express the view without reference to properties, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact “exists” and

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“is self-identical” apply literally to God. Thus, the propositions that \textit{God exists} and \textit{God is self-identical} are neither true nor false. Likewise, the predicative dualisms “is either existent or nonexistent” and “is either self-identical or non-self-identical” do not apply literally to God since there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact “is existent” or “is nonexistent” and “is self-identical” or “is non-self-identical” can apply literally to God. At best, we can only apply predicates of existence and identity to God metaphorically. We might well suspect that, if there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which predicates of existence and identity can apply literally to God, then there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which any other formal predicate can apply literally to God. There just isn’t enough determinately there, so to speak, for them to latch onto. If our suspicions are correct, then our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist will have made a full recovery: our first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical.

But won’t our fully-recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist still be subject to our earlier objection, according to which, 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 God literally, in which case the statement “God exists” is false—which is to say that God does not exist? And so won’t we have to conclude that her view entails atheism? In short, the answer is “no”. For on the current view of our fully-recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist, the inference from “there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate ‘exists’ can apply to God literally” to “the statement ‘God exists’ is false” is invalid. That’s because, on her current view, although there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which “exists” can apply to God literally, and although, as a consequence, the statement “God exists” is not true, it is also the case that there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which the statement “God exists” is false, in which case it does not follow from what she says that God does not exist. Our fully-recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist is not an atheist.

Let’s return to partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism. I have two concerns about it, both of which strike me as fatal.

My first concern is that since, according to it, none of our substantial predicates can apply literally to God, it follows that no substantial predicate of ours applies to God more aptly than any other. You say God is compassionate and a nonplatypus; I say God is a platypus and noncompassionate. According to our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God that could settle the question of whose substantial predicates more aptly apply, yours or mine.

She might well reply: although no substantial predicate of ours can apply \textit{literally} to God more aptly than any other, it does not follow that no substantial predicate of ours can apply \textit{metaphorically} to God more aptly than any other.

By way of response, a predicate can apply metaphorically to something more aptly than another only if there is a determinate fact of the matter 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”. Absent any such explanation, there is no basis for preferring one metaphor over another. Likewise, “is compassionate” can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than “is a platypus” or “is noncompassionate” only if there is a determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which that is so. There is no such fact, however, according to our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist. The point here applies generally, of course. As a consequence, any expectation we might have otherwise had of God being more aptly metaphorically described one way rather
than another is vitiated, in which case any prospect of reasoning about God goes out the window as well, as does any expectation of finding fulfillment in relation to God or participating in a form of life centered on God. To put it metaphorically: panmetaphoricism entails religious anemia, or worse.

My second concern is that, if there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God is personal, then the statement “God is personal, really personal” is not true, strictly and literally, in which case the statement “God exists, really exists” is not true, strictly and literally, in which case God does not exist. Partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism entails atheism. As such it is incompatible with Abrahamic religion. Of course, as we’ve seen, there’s a case to be made for our two-domain panmetaphoricist to move to the fully recovered version of her position and, if she does, we won’t be able to infer that she is an atheist. But we will still be able to infer that she’s a nontheist. And nontheism, as we might call the implication she affirms, is every bit as incompatible with Abrahamic religion as atheism.

6. Can panmetaphoricists find comfort in good company?
On more than one occasion, some friends have said that if my argument that two-domain panmetaphoricism entails atheism or nontheism is sound, then Aquinas and Kant are implicit atheists or nontheists as well. And that result “is simply outrageous,” they say.

By way of reply, I say: if the shoe fits, wear it. For if, as my friends insist, Aquinas’s doctrines of analogical predication and divine simplicity imply that the predicate “is personal” can only be predicated analogically of God and humans, and if, as my friends insist, that implication itself implies that the predicate “is personal” cannot apply literally to God, then God is not personal, not really. In that case, like the two-domain panmetaphoricist, Aquinas is an implicit atheist or nontheist.

Are the antecedents of the just-mentioned conditionals true, as my friends insist? Naturally, scholars disagree; and I’m not about to launch into the matter here. John Hick, however, thinks Aquinas clearly endorses the view that God is beyond our “predicative dualisms” and cites these texts as evidence:

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.17

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.18

Whether Hick is right to interpret Aquinas as an ally, I leave to Thomists to decide.

As for Kant, if he identified God as a thing-in-itself and not as a thing-in-itself-as-it-appears-to-us, and if that identification implies that the predicate “is personal” cannot apply literally to God, then God is not personal, not really—like the two-domain panmetaphoricist, Kant is an implicit atheist or nontheist. Of course, scholars disagree over whether the antecedents of these conditionals are true. I leave the matter to Kantians to decide.

17 In librum De Causis, 6—Copleston, Aquinas (Penguin: 1955), 131-32; quoted in Hick 1989, 238.
Of course, Aquinas and Kant are not alone. As Hick points out, some of the Church Fathers and mystics can be interpreted along these lines. For example, Gregory of Nyssa 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’. 19

And Meister Eckhart writes in his *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*: “God is without name, for no one can comprehend anything about him”. St. John of the Cross seems to agree when he speaks of God as one “[w]ho is incomprehensible and transcends all things”. 20 As with Aquinas and Kant, I say that 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 or nontheists, despite their lofty status in certain quarters.

My friends who broach the objection under discussion say that the antecedents of these conditionals are true and yet Aquinas, Kant, Gregory, Eckhart, John and multitudes of likeminded philosophers, theologians, and mystics are not implicit atheists or nontheists. Their reason is that one can be a theist even if one thinks that God is really nonpersonal or even if one thinks that there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God is personal.

It seems to me, however, that my friends have lost their semantic moorings. Theism is not 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 that McFague, Kaufmann, Hick or anyone else has to offer. Thus, no matter what the pedigree of a person may be, if his or her views imply that God is not really personal, or that there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God is personal, what option is there but to interpret him or her as an implicit atheist or nontheist? What’s so outrageous about correctly drawing out the implications of someone’s views?

It goes without saying that, according to Abrahamic religion, there are some respects in which God is unlike everything else. And, it goes without saying that, according to Abrahamic religion, God, in God’s entirety, so to speak, is beyond our comprehension, our conceptual and linguistic nets. But these platitudes are at home with saying that God is personal, really personal, and that many of our substantial predicates can apply literally to God. Panmetaphoricism goes way beyond these platitudes. For to say with Bishop Jefferts-Schori and others that “all language about God is a metaphor,” and so none is literal, is to say something that implies atheism or nontheism. No adherent of Abrahamic religion, therefore, should endorse panmetaphoricism. 21

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20 Eckhart and John are both quoted in Hick 1989, 238.
21 Acknowledgements....