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 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 (33)

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

---

¹ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_76300_ENG_HTM.htm.
⁴ Ibid., 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.\(^5\)

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.\(^6\)

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 his purposes and activities would not capture our imaginations and guide our lives as well as they do. Moreover, I have no problem with people referring to Jesus metaphorically as a mother, as Jefferts-Schori did. 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. It might well be wise for those of us who bear the scars of such relationships to use feminine metaphors in our thinking and talking about God. Furthermore, if we can trust the Gospel of Matthew, 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; let a thousand metaphorical flowers bloom! Or so I say.

What I do have a problem with, however, is panmetaphoricism, the view that our speech about God can only be metaphorical.\(^7\) In what follows, I argue that the best way to understand panmetaphoricism suffers from severe debilities. But before I get down to work, some brief remarks are in order.

1. Preliminary remarks
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, 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.

---

\(^5\) Ibid., 24.
\(^6\) God the Problem (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 95.
Second, panmetaphorists 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. 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; in what follows, it will be important to me.

Third, when panmetaphorists 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.  

Fifth, contemporary panmetaphorists 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.

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. But in that case, our talk about God cannot only be metaphorical, contrary to panmetaphoricism. Panmetaphoricism is self-refuting.

The strictly consistent panmetaphorist 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, Canon Theologian of the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon, says that God is ineffable, 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 that one doesn’t 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.

---


9 “The ineffable is beyond all our concepts, even this one”. The God We Never Knew (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1997), 48-49.
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; but if our concept of a concept not applying to something must apply to God, then, naturally enough, it does, and so some of our concepts apply to God, contradicting the initial claim that none of them 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, from which it follows that 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 the like, as well as equivalent speech, for example utterances of “God is such that our speech about him can only be metaphorical” and “God is such that our speech about him 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 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 to God literally. The distinction between first- and second-order speech about God allows her to make this sensible presupposition. For she can locate utterances of “God can be referred to by us with our words” in the second-order domain of speech about God since 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; we can represent it like this:
Two-domain Panmetaphoricism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Speech about...</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>Speech about God</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 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 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. What would be my answer? This: according to Abrahamic religion, God speaks, really speaks; and nothing can really speak unless it really exists. And if my hypothetical examiner were to demand proof that, according to Abrahamic religion, God really speaks, I would 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 I’m just exhibiting the “presumptuous insistence in Western religious thought on the presence of the divine,” as McFague so nicely puts it. What do I have to 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 and not some ersatz substitute of the sort contemporary theologians serve up.

Perhaps our panmetaphoricist will accept the implication 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. Perhaps this is what McFague had in mind 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”. But 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 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 were compatible with statements of the form there is an x. After all, the

10 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.
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 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.

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

If our panmetaphoricist replies that she means for her use of these 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, 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, reasons to suppose that “exists” is not a real predicate and existence is not a property are arguably dubious. 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 “exists” to be a real predicate, we should allow existence to be a 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 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. But these premises are compatible with existence not being a property; indeed, they are 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 real predicates in first-order speech that must 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. Surely, just like you and me, the negative predicates “is a nonplatypus” and “is

nonpentagonical” apply to God literally. 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 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.12

Of course, our panmetaphoricist will want to 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 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 *positive substantial* first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical, that none of it can apply to God literally.

4. Restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism

We began with panmetaphoricism, the view that our speech about God can only be metaphorical, which implies that none of our speech applies literally to God. Self-refutation and McFague’s presupposition of metaphorical discourse gave us reason 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 gave us reason to further restrict the view to positive

---

12 John Hick, *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 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. 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.
substantial speech about God. Call the result restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism, which we can represent as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>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>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative substantial speech about God</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive substantial speech about God</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have several concerns about restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism. Meeting those concerns will 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. And there’s the problem. 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. And if something really has power, knowledge, compassion, etc., then 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, contrary to restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism.

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 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 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. You can’t get much more religiously imperialistic 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.
Our panmetaphoricist cannot sensibly retain her rationale for her view. However, she might once again find help from Hick in developing a new rationale, one that honors the spirit of her initial 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.  

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 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 predications apply to God literally since he 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 precisely at this stage in the conversation: 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 the application of both 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: (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. The upshot, then, is that the restriction of metaphoricity to positive substantial speech about God must be lifted. I should think that this...

---

is a good thing from the panmetaphoricist’s point of view: the rationale on offer for her position does not conflict with it and it recovers more of the “pan” in the panmetaphoricism with which she began.

I now want to argue that she should recover even more. To see why, note that the recovery project as it presently 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 “is either a platypus or a nonplatypus” too. And 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, the view presently on offer implies that “is a nonplatypus” would not have applied literally to God; God would not have had the property of being a nonplatypus, although in fact he does. In the second case, the view presently under discussion implies that “is nonpersonal” would have applied literally to God; God would have had the property of being nonpersonal, although in fact he does not. 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 communities have a stake in each constituent of the predicate “is either F or non-F” applying 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 is 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 himself, 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. Recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism
I have argued that the restricted two-domain panmetaphoricist should lift her restriction on metaphoricity to positive substantial speech about God. Let’s call the resulting view recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism, which we can represent like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recovered 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>
</tbody>
</table>
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 could 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?

I think that best answer begins 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—for 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 substantive predicates in a natural language. We can imagine borderline cases of their application and get similar results.

And 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 “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 “F” applies literally to him. Thus, for any proposition of the form God is F, it is neither true nor false that God is F. Likewise, for any proposition of the form God is either F or nonF, it is neither true nor false. 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 him such that in virtue of

---

that fact “is personal” or “is nonpersonal” applies literally to him. At best, we can only apply substantial predicates to God metaphorically or in some other non-literal fashion.

This way of understanding panmetaphoricism is an advance. It nicely explains why our substantial predicates cannot apply to God literally, whether positive or negative. For there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which they could apply to him. God himself is maximally indeterminate with respect to every property our substantial predicates signify. God himself is maximally indeterminate with respect to anything that might render some substantial predicate of ours literally applicable to him. We are left with metaphor alone. Or so our panmetaphoricist says.

Although this way of making sense of panmetaphoricism is an advance, I have two serious worries about it, both of which strike me as fatal.

My first concern is based on the fact that on this understanding of why none of our substantial predicates can apply literally to God, no substantial predicate of ours applies to him more aptly than any other. You say God is compassionate and a nonplatypus; I say God is a platypus and noncompassionate. According to our panmetaphoricist, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God that could settle the question of whose predicates more aptly apply, yours or mine.

Our panmetaphoricist might well object: although no substantial predicate of ours can apply literally to God more aptly than any other, it does not follow that no substantial predicate of ours can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than any other.

But, by way of reply, 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 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 does any expectation of finding fulfillment in relation to him or a form of life centered on him. To put it metaphorically: panmetaphoricism entails religious anemia.

The second serious concern that I have 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, in which case the statement “God exists, really exists” is not true either. Something similar applies to every version of panmetaphoricism, included our initial unrestricted version: if our speech about God can only be metaphorical, then none of it literally applies to him, including the predicate “is personal,” in which case there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate “is personal” applies to him literally, and so the statement “God exists, really exists” is not true. Panmetaphoricism entails atheism.

6. Can panmetaphoricists find comfort in the company of Aquinas, Kant, and others? On more than one occasion, some friends have said that if my argument that panmetaphoricism entails atheism is sound, then Aquinas and Kant are implicit atheists as well. And that result is simply outrageous.
By way of reply, I say: if the shoe fits, wear it. I am no Thomist or scholar of Aquinas, but if, as my friends insist, his 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 panmetaphoricist, Aquinas is an implicit atheist.

Are the antecedents of the just-mentioned conditionals true? I have no idea. As I intimated, I am in no position to have an opinion on the matter. 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.15

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.16

Whether Hick is right to interpret Aquinas as an ally, I leave to others 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 panmetaphoricist, Kant is an implicit atheist. As with Aquinas, I carry no brief as to whether the antecedents of these conditionals are true.

Of course, Aquinas and Kant aren’t 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’.17

And Meister Eckhart famously said 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 writes of God as one “[w]ho is incomprehensible and transcends all things”.18 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.

---

15 In librum De Causis, 6—Copleston, Aquinas (Penguin: 1955), 131-32; quoted in Hick 1989, 238.
17 Against Eunomius, I: 42; [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.toc.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.toc.html).
18 Eckhart and St. John of the Cross are both quoted in Hick 1989, 238.
My friends who broach the objection under discussion say that the antecedents of these conditionals are true and yet Aquinas and Kant and Gregory and Eckhart and St. John of the Cross and multitudes of likeminded philosophers, theologians, and mystics are not implicit atheists. Their reason is that one can be a theist even if one thinks that God is really nonpersonal or that there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God is personal.

On this point, I must insist 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, if Aquinas, et al held views that implied that there is no really personal God, what option is there but to interpret them as implicit atheists? What’s so outrageous about that?

It’s time to draw these reflections to a close. It goes without saying that God is unlike everything else and that he is beyond our comprehension and 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 apply literally to him. Panmetaphoricism goes way beyond these platitudes. For to say with Bishop Jefferts-Schori and others that “all language about God is a metaphor” is to say something that implies atheism. No adherent of Abrahamic religion, therefore, should endorse panmetaphoricism.

APPENDIX

I initially wrote this paper for three conferences in Iran in Spring 2010. In that context, it was important for me to address the question of whether any of the authoritative sources of Shi’ism were implicitly atheistic. Now, interestingly enough, John Hick never appeals to the Hebrew Bible or the Christian New Testament for textual support of the idea that the Ultimate, or God, is beyond all “predicative dualisms”. That’s because there is no such thing to be found in those sources. The Qur’an, however, is another matter. After quoting the figures I mentioned above as friends of ineffability, Hick 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).

As it turns out, Qur’an 6:101 has nothing at all to do with ineffability. However, the other two verses do, as does another famous one like them:

[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

\[\text{19} \] Hick 1989, 238. Did he mean the notion of *subanallah*? I don’t know, and I shan’t get bogged down in the differences.
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.\(^2\)

According to Hick, these verses imply that “God is above all that we say of him,” and he takes this to mean that none of our substantial predicates can apply to God literally. Is Hick right? Not at all, for two reasons.

First, Hick’s exegesis is inaccurate. The verses Hick cites say that Allah is above all that they say of him and not, as Hick writes, that Allah is above all that we say of him. In particular, these verses refer to those 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 even speak to the question of whether, in general, “God is above all that we say of him”.\(^2\)

Second, even if Hick’s exegesis were accurate, 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) None of our positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally.

As I’ve argued, if (1) is true, then the predicate “is personal” does not apply to God literally, and so God is not really personal—Hick’s (1) implies atheism. However, we might take “God is above all that we say of him” to express a very different and common thought, that God is much more than what we can say or fathom, that what we have to say does not come close to exhausting all that he is. In that case, we would mean that

(2) Not all of our positive substantial predicates can apply 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 Qu’ran 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 anti-Abrahamic and 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.

Nevertheless, other verses of Qur’an might be read in such a way as to endorse what the panmetaphoricist and Hick have in common: Qur’an 42:11 is chief among them:

\textit{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:

\(^{20}\) \texttt{http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/}. The translations in the text are Shakir’s.

\(^{21}\) I owe this point to my audience in Qum.
there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things).

_Pickthtal:_ 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.

Picking up on this verse’s theme, Imam Ali—the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, considered by Shi’ites to be the authoritative successor to the Prophet—writes that “God is one in the sense that there is no likeness unto him among things. God possesses such uniqueness”. 22 One might argue that if “there is no likeness unto God among things,” if “there is nothing whatever like unto Him,” then none of our positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally. For after all, if some of them did apply to him literally—say, for example, the predicate “is personal”—then there would be a likeness unto God among things, there would be something like unto him.

It seems to me that this argument is mistaken. Specifically, it does not follow from the fact that if God is really personal, then, given that humans are really personal as well, there would be a likeness unto God, something like unto him. To see why, let’s say that a kind-essence $K$ is a set of properties $S$ such that all and only the $K$s 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 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 nonpersonal things, personhood does not distinguish the kind of thing God is from the kind of thing Obama is. However, at a more fundamental level—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—the most fundamental level—Obama is a human person or perhaps a creaturely person. Like every human or personal creature, Obama exemplifies the set of properties we may label humanity or personal creatureliness, his most fundamental kind-essence. Thus, although God and Obama both exemplify personhood, only one of them exemplifies divinity, namely God. God is the only divine person. Or, to put it another way: “God is one in the sense that there is no likeness unto him among things. God possesses such uniqueness”.

Neither this particular statement of Imam Ali’s, nor Qur’an 42:11, can be used as decisive textual support for the claim that, according to authoritative Shi’ite texts, none of our positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally. But perhaps other authoritative texts can. I have two such statements in mind.

The first one is contained in the passage from which I drew out the statement I commented on above. In this passage, Imam Ali answers the question, what does it mean to say that God is one?

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.

On the face of it, Imam Ali’s comments on the second (false) meaning, which I have italicized for the sake of convenience, seem to implicitly contain the following line of thought:

If God is one member of the kind being personal while each human is another member of that kind, 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 member of the kind being personal while each human is another one.

If this argument is implicit in the passage I quoted from Imam Ali and if the translation is accurate, then, since each human is a member of the kind being personal, it follows that God is not really personal—an undesirable result for an Abrahamic religion.

The second passage is contained in 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 argument contained in this passage strikes me as weak. For one can attribute something to Allah without regarding him as having parts. To be sure, everything to which something is attributed is different from the thing 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 parts. At any rate, on some ontologies, the relation of having a property is not the relation of having a part, nor does the former entail the latter. Thus, on those ontologies, Allah can have attributes and yet have no parts.

But even so, it looks as though, according to Imam Ali, we should “deny Him [that is, God] attributes”. Of course, we should do that only if God has no attributes. But if God has no attributes, then he does not have the attribute of being personal, really personal. And so we arrive at atheism.

23 Ibid.
I’m not sure what to say about these two passages from Imam Ali, but I have a suggestion, one that relies on the earlier notion of a fundamental kind-essence.

As for the first passage, perhaps we could lean hard on the demonstratives it contains and say that Imam Ali’s point is that nothing we can demonstratively refer to—not one of this species, nor one of this genus—is such that it shares its fundamental kind-essence with God. In that sense, God isn’t one of them. If this is Imam Ali’s point, then it is a way of expressing strict monotheism. It is also compatible with God’s being personal, really personal.

As for the second passage, perhaps we can distinguish attributes, on the one hand, from fundamental kind-essences and those properties entailed by those essences, on the other hand. If we add that the two classes are mutually exclusive, then we can deny that God has attributes without denying that God is personal, really personal, since being really personal is entailed by God’s fundamental kind-essence, divinity.

I say these are “suggestions”. Of course, it’s really none of my business to say how Imam Ali’s words or Qur’an should be understood. It is, however, the business of Shi’ite theologians. I wonder how they might understand these passages so that the seeming implication of atheism is averted.