

AVOID ALL CONTRADICTIONS: A SURREJOINDER TO JOHN DAHMS

Norman L. Geisler*

Dahms complains that I have "misrepresented" his view. "Misunderstood" would have been a more generous term. Even so, Dahms seems to forget that communication is a two-way street. Perhaps he could have made his points more lucidly. Other philosophers and theologians with whom I spoke about his article expressed the same bewilderment about Dahms' claims as did I. Indeed, Dahms confesses to be the only one he knows who holds his basic position. One is inclined to agree with him on this point.

I. WHAT I WOULD NOW UNDERSTAND DIFFERENTLY

In view of Dahms' response, there are no central points of his view that I now understand differently. A couple of minor points have been clarified. First, I did not understand his use of the "rationally inescapable is the real" in connection with allegedly deriving irrational numbers from rational ones. Incidentally, Dahms still does not understand that I never taught that "the rationally inescapable is the real." He even said, contrary to my own clear denial, that I must have changed my mind! ¹ It is nigh unto impossible to carry on meaningful and helpful communication with someone who tells you what you meant by what you said when you know what you did and did not mean by what you said.

Second, I did not understand Dahms' assertion about the self-defeating nature of some true statements about reality. I now do understand it as he clarified it in his second article. But neither of these clarifications is crucial to the real debate, as we shall soon see. In short, Dahms' response did not add to my understanding of any significant point of his first presentation.

II. WHAT I WOULD NOW SAY DIFFERENTLY

Another helpful way to forward the dialogue is to indicate in what ways I would change my views or statements in view of Dahms' restatement of his views. The answer to this is simple: in no substantial way, and in only one accidental way. I should not have said a musical contradiction is where a piece "calls for" two different notes. I should have said a musical contradiction is where two different notes *are* actually one and the same note.

Of course, in view of what Dahms said I would want to sharpen my criticisms,

*Norman Geisler is professor of philosophy of religion at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

¹Telling a living author what he must have meant is a bold form of redaction criticism. When the redactionist is wrong, as Dahms is in this case, it illustrates the danger of this kind of approach to the truth of the NT. I am alive and can set the record straight, so that no redactionist can tell me what I must have meant. Peter and Paul are dead and, hence, their writings are at the mercy of those who would legislate meaning rather than listen to it.

but I do not see any criticisms that I would change. It seems to me that they all still apply and that he has not really *answered* them; he has simply *replied* to them. Often he brushed them aside by claiming I misunderstood him; at other times he claimed not to understand my point.

III. WHAT IS CLEAR: THERE ARE DIFFERENCES

Now let us proceed to spell out as clearly as possible the difference between Dahms' view and mine. First, Dahms claims logic has only limited applicability to reality; I claim it has unlimited applicability. Second, Dahms claims there are some contradictions in God; I claim there are none. Third, Dahms claims aesthetic feelings play a determinative role in discovering truth; I deny this. Fourth, Dahms claims there is actually no difference between apparent and real contradictions; I claim there is a real difference between them. Fifth, Dahms holds, as Kant did, that we cannot know the *Ding an Sich* (thing-in-itself); I claim we can know it or else we are left in complete agnosticism about reality. There are other differences, but these are sufficiently clear to convince the careful reader that the dispute here is not merely a verbal one.

IV. CONTRADICTIONS AT THE HEART OF DAHMS' POSITION

For the sake of fairness and clarity I will summarize Dahms' position in his own words. The quotations will be numbered in couplets so as to indicate how Dahms' view is internally incoherent and contradictory.

1a. Dahms claims: "According to my position logic does apply to all our *statements* about reality" (p. 142). And yet he writes:

1b. "A true statement about 'being' or 'essence' may contradict a true statement about 'becoming' or 'existence'" (pp. 137-138).

Comment: In both cases Dahms is speaking about *statements*, and in one case (1a) he claims logic *always* applies and in the other case (1b) he holds logic does not necessarily apply. Is this not an incoherency or contradiction in the very statement(s) of his position?

2a. Dahms says logic applies to all statements about reality (see 1a), and "reality is always characterized by being, but also by *becoming*" (p. 143). In contrast to this he holds that:

2b. "It (logic) is thoroughly reliable when dealing with the nominal (being) but not when dealing with the verbal (becoming) or the aesthetic" (p. 147). Again, "it is in connection with 'becoming' . . . that logic-fails us" (p. 140).

Comment: Dahms cannot have it both ways. If *all* our statements about *all* of reality (being and becoming) are controlled by logic, then logic cannot fail us when dealing with becoming or with any aspect of reality. Again Dahms seems to flatly contradict himself.

3a. Dahms claims that logic is not reliable when dealing with the aesthetic (2b above), and yet he claims that:

3b. "One can and must use propositions in discussing the existential and aesthetic and must construct those propositions according to the laws of logic" (n. 24).

Comment: Here again Dahms makes *statements* about the aesthetic (and he says logic applies to *all* statements, 1a) that seem diametrically opposed. Either

logic is or is not reliable when speaking about the aesthetic. Dahms cannot have his logical cake and eat it too.

4a. Dahms claims: "My epistemology insists that logic be rigorously applied when 'being' is considered, and all reality is characterized by being" (p. 140). Despite this, Dahms holds that we cannot know being in itself:

4b. "There is no way by which the mind alone can press beyond the apparent to the *Ding an Sich*" (p. 139).

Comment: First, how can Dahms know there is a difference between being-in-itself and being-for-us *unless there is some way to know being-in-itself*? Second, he cannot have it both ways. If the mind and logic can know "being," then how can he turn around and deny the mind can know it? Third, Dahms here implies he can distinguish the real (i.e., being-in-itself) from the apparent (being-to-me), which he later denies in the same paragraph (see next point).

5a. Dahms denies that one can know reality, claiming that we can know only appearance (4b). However, he also claims that:

5b. "In the strict sense all contradictions are only apparent contradictions" (p. 139).

Comment: In order for 5b to make sense it must entail the ability to distinguish between the real and the merely apparent in the realm of contradictions, which is what 5a (4b) seems to deny we can do.

6a. Further, Dahms holds that logic applies to *all* our statements (1a), and yet he insists that:

6b. "To suggest that one cannot understand some things that are not logical is to beg the epistemological question" (p. 139).

Comment: How, may we ask, are we to understand statements that are logically contradictory? "Logically contradictory" means, by definition, that both cannot be true or that if one is true the other is false. How, then, can one *understand* contradictions as both being true? Nonsense is nonsense no matter how often it is repeated or how fervently it is held.

7a. Dahms believes logic always applies to our statements about reality (1a). Nevertheless he doggedly insists that:

7b. "There are times when true statements about reality are found to be logically contradictory" (p. 142).²

Comment: No wonder Walter Kaufmann once quipped about why philosophers do not laugh. It is because, said he, they are teaching what does not make sense to them to people to whom it does not make sense either—and that is not funny. If logic *always* applies to *all* statements about reality, then it must apply to Dahms' two allegedly true statements about the Trinity too. This means that one of them must be false.

²Strangely enough, Dahms appears to give away his point by admitting that there is a difference between real and apparent contradictions when he insists that one must "remove the appearance of a contradiction" in order to show that it is not a real contradiction. Incidentally, it is no wonder that Dahms has a problem with the concept of contradiction. One does not have to remove the *appearance* of contradiction to show that two statements are not really contradiction. The burden of proof is on the one who would claim it is *really* a contradiction to show that one statement logically excludes the other—that is, that both cannot be true when their terms are understood to have the same meaning. In short, all one needs to do to show that the alleged contradiction is only apparent and not real is to show that what one affirms the other does not deny—that is, that both could be true. If Dahms had correctly understood what a logical contradiction is, then he would see that none of his examples demonstrate a real contradiction.

It is possible that Dahms might reply by claiming that logic applies to *each* of the two contradictory statements but not to *both* taken together. That is, *each* statement may be externally noncontradictory but yet mutually exclusive of the other. If so, then (1) we cannot take seriously his claim that it applies to *all* statements about reality; and further, (2) one can always make a third statement that combines both of them and that would be contradictory. In this case we would have found not only a contradictory statement (of which Dahms claims there are none) but Dahms' system would collapse into incoherence since there would be a statement in his system that is contradictory.

8a. Dahms holds that we cannot know the difference between a real and an apparent contradiction (5b), and yet he contends:

8b. Geisler wrongly "assumes that contradictions are all of the same kind" (p. 148).

Comment: What is the point of this criticism if one cannot distinguish between different kinds of criticism? Indeed, what is the whole point of Dahms' reply to me unless he really believes there is a difference between my showing his view is *really* contradictory or false as opposed to showing it is only apparently so? In other words, the very fact that Dahms spent so much effort trying to show that there are no real contradictions in his views belies the fact that he does believe there is a real difference between the apparent and the real.

9a. Dahms further insists that *all* our statements must be noncontradictory, even those about becoming (1a and 2a), and yet he admits:

9b. "I do imply that there are *some* things about a Trinitarian view of God that are contradictory" (p. 143). For "God is characterized not only by 'being' but also by what is at least analogous to 'becoming'" (n. 17).

Comment: Obviously one cannot have it both ways. If *all* statements about all reality, being and becoming, must be noncontradictory, then it is senseless to simultaneously claim that *some* statements are not subject to the law of noncontradiction.

10a. Dahms insists: "I do 'admit that logic does apply to all reality *insofar as it can be thought or expressed in words*'" (p. 143). He adds that *all* reality includes being as well as becoming (2a above). However, Dahms proceeds a few lines later to say:

10b. "The intellect can only deal with the abstract, it can only deal with *one* component of reality," which is not the "particularity of an existential person," which elsewhere he identifies as the "concrete" or "becoming" (p. 143; italics mine).

Comment: I leave it to the reader to make sense out of how logic, which is the *sine qua non* of all thinking and statements, can apply to *all* reality, being and becoming, and yet universally only apply to one aspect of it—namely, being.

In summation, Dahms' dilemma is this: (1) He admits logic controls all *statements*, and yet (2) he both admits contradictory statements can be true and makes contradictory statements of his own that he holds to be completely true. To put it bluntly, this is asking one to believe the absurd.

V. WHAT I WOULD REPEAT WITH EMPHASIS

In view of Dahms' response, there are several things that demand emphasis.

1. *The Self-Defeating Nature of Dahms' Position.* Dahms uses logic in the

very same way in which he denies it can be used. He says logic does not apply to all of becoming but only to all of being, but that very statement is offered as a logical (noncontradictory) statement about all of becoming (as well as about being). He says that all being is intelligible but not all becoming is intelligible. But that very statement is offered as an intelligible statement about all of becoming. For even the allegedly unintelligible aspects of becoming are covered by Dahms' statement (my words) that "there are aspects of becoming that are not intelligible." How could Dahms possibly *know* these aspects are not intelligible unless he somehow understands enough about them to make this kind of statement? How could one even know what Dahms means by the statement unless becoming is intelligible?

Dahms vainly hopes to excuse himself by claiming that any statement he makes about becoming, existence or the concrete is "a statement about becoming in the abstract" (p. 142), but this is the grossest form of special pleading. First, how can he be granted this special exception from inconsistency, and not every non-Christian who wishes to beg the same exceptions from contradictions in his view? If contradictions do not eliminate a view from the realm of truth, then there is no way by human reason to refute anything said by a pagan, pantheist or heretic. Indeed, there is no way to fulfill the Biblical command to "test" for "truth" over "false" prophets (1 John 4:1-6; Matt 24:24). Second, it is utterly meaningless for Dahms to plead that his statement about the concrete is about the concrete in the abstract. And to beg that "since the intellect can only deal with the abstract, it can only deal with one component of reality" (p. 143) is a radical form of agnosticism of which we will speak later.

2. *Dahms' Inability to Demonstrate a Paradox.* Dahms pleads that there are many kinds of "contradictions" (no doubt the word can be used in different ways) but forgets that this whole discussion is about a certain kind of contradiction—namely, *logical contradiction*. Nowhere does Dahms demonstrate a *logical contradiction* in any two or more truths essential for an evangelical Christian to hold. All of his examples are easily explained as *conflicts* without logical contradiction or as *confusions* on his part.

As to his alleged mathematical and Zenoian antinomies, a modern mathematician has correctly observed that

the four paradoxes are, of course, easily answered in terms of the concepts of the differential calculus. There is no logical difficulty in the *dichotomy* or the *Achilles*, the uneasiness being due merely to failure of the imagination to realize, in terms of sense impressions, the nature of infinite convergent series.³

Bertrand Russell, whom Dahms uses in a questionable way to support his contention of paradoxes, clearly wrote some years later:

Such peculiarities have seemed to many to contradict logic, but in fact they only contradict confirmed mental habits. The whole difficulty of the subject lies in the necessity of thinking in an unfamiliar way.⁴

As to Dahms' alleged religious paradoxes, we have already shown that they are not *logical* contradictions but at best only *conflicts* due to our finite perspec-

³C. B. Boyer, *The History of the Calculus and Its Development* (New York: Dover, 1959) 24-25.

⁴B. Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1922) 187.

tive or *confusions* due to misdefinitions. For example, contradictions in the Trinity and the incarnation occur only if one insists that a nature is a person or a person is a nature. If there are three really distinct and different persons in one nature, this is not a logical contradiction. It is only a logical contradiction to say there are really three natures but only one nature or three persons but only one person in the Godhead. I repeat again that Dahms does not seem to know what a logical contradiction really is. This he proves in several ways: (1) He insists that things we do not know *how* to reconcile are contradictory (but a contradiction is something that is irreconcilable in principle, not simply something unreconciled in practice); and (2) he claims there is no difference between *apparent* and *real* contradictions. If this were so, then of course any alleged contradiction or conflict will *ipso facto* be a real one (and any real contradiction would be only apparent).

As to the fall of Satan and the death of Christ as alleged contradictions (which I did not reply to because Dahms did not even make a credible attempt at demonstrating them to be contradictions), it will suffice to point out that here too we have no real logical contradiction. Dahms' error here is apparently that he supposes that in order for a free creature to sin he must have something "in his environment encouraging him to rebel."⁵ But a *self-caused* free action does not need any *outside* cause. If Lucifer's free act was the *first* cause of sin, then it is meaningless to ask, "What caused the first cause to do it?" There is no cause of the first cause of an *act* of sin any more than there is a cause of God's *being* (since God *is* the first cause of all *being* just as free choice is the cause of *becoming*). Dahms creates his own false dilemma by asking a meaningless question—namely, what caused the first cause (that is, what caused Lucifer's free choice to sin). He may as well ask a bachelor when he stopped beating his wife.

As to the so-called contradiction of the cross, here again Dahms manufactures the antinomy by misunderstanding. He claims that "if the Father loves the Son, he could not have sent him to endure the shame and suffering of Calvary."⁶ First of all, the Son also came voluntarily. Second, the Bible informs us that both greater good and glory come via the cross (Rom 5:20; Heb 2:14). Dahms insists against experience and good reason that "this makes sin necessary to God and, therefore, ultimately good."⁷ This we did answer by Scripture (Gen 50:20), which Dahms ignored. The fact remains that God can *use* evil to bring about good without making the evil good, as numerous Scripture passages and human experience attest (e.g., Rom 8:28; 5:20).

3. *The Danger of Existential Relativism in Ethics.* It seems clear from Dahms' response that his position in ethics is indistinguishable from Joseph Fletcher's situation ethics for several reasons. First, if thought can "grasp the concept of humanity" but "the particularity of an existential person eludes it" then it follows that no intellectually knowable or storable proposition (i.e., law) really fits the existential particularity of every ethical situation. This is precisely what Fletcher claimed.⁸ Dahms' claim that words, logic and thought apply *only*

⁵J. V. Dahms, "How Reliable Is Logic?", *JETS* 21/4 (December 1978) 372.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸J. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), chap. 8.

to the nominal (abstract knowing) but not the verbal (concrete existing) illustrates this point as well. If this were so, then no ethical proposition (command) could be any more than an abstract generalization that does not really fit the concrete situations of life that it purports to cover. Indeed, Dahms' position implies a radical form of nominalism that has grave theological consequences of which we will speak later.

4. *The Implications for Inerrancy Reemphasized.* Despite Dahms' claim that he is completely orthodox (which he does not spell out) and his insistence on a "rigorous application of the law of noncontradiction to *all* the statements of the Bible," one must question how seriously this can be taken and how consistently Dahms applies it. If logic is to be applied to all statements, then: (1) How can Dahms claim elsewhere that two contradictory statements can *both* be true (7b above)? (2) Further, what sense can we make of his original claim that a *limited* (not universal) application of logic will give us new "gain" and "ease" in reconciling difficult Biblical passages, unless Dahms really believes that there are contradictory truths taught in the Bible? ⁹ In point of fact there would be no "ease" or "gain" at all if we still have to worry about understanding the Bible so that *no* two statements can contradict each other.

5. *The Fundamental Problem with the Limited Application of Logic.* Dahms rejects the view that "logic is applicable to all of reality all of the time." But since Dahms admits that logic applies to all *statements* about reality, then it follows that logic must not necessarily apply to some of reality at least some of the time. But there are two fundamental problems with this view: (1) It is self-defeating to claim that "there is an aspect of reality (say, becoming) to which logic does not apply," for this very statement assumes that "becoming" is a noncontradictory, intelligible reality; and (2) how could one possibly know when and to what reality logic does or does not apply? What rationally objective criteria can be used? They cannot be criteria that use the laws of logic, for this would beg the question. And if they do not necessarily involve logical criteria, then how can they be rational? The door is wide open to subjectivism. It will not do to say that the aesthetic is "objective." How can something be objective when it is not even subject to the most elementary cognitive criteria of consistency or noncontradiction? Dahms' position is no better than that of Karl Barth, who also denied the universal applicability of logic. Barth was once asked by a student how he used logical arguments to develop his doctrine of the Trinity. He replied, "I use logic when it helps me." ¹⁰ But this is precisely what cannot be done with logic. Either it controls all our thoughts about reality all the time or we are left with some thoughts and statements about reality that are contradictory.

There are two serious (I think insurmountable) problems with the attempt to use logic only some of the time. First, if some contradictions are allowable, why not others? If we Christians can have contradictions in our beliefs, why not Mormons, atheists and anyone else? How can we ever again claim a view is false

⁹J. V. Dahms, "Reliable," 380.

¹⁰Dahms offers the unlikely (and unjustifiable) plea that his contradictions are acceptable and Barth's are not because Barth holds contradictions for the wrong reason (see *ibid.*, p. 375 n. 34). A contradiction is a contradiction no matter what the reason. Special pleading would justify one's saying his sin was acceptable because it was done for a different reason than that of others.

because it has "contradictions" (*antitheseis*), as the Bible says we should?¹¹ Second, contradictory beliefs do not even make sense. On Dahms' view the basic Christian beliefs (e.g., the Trinity, incarnation, fall, atonement) are all reduced to nonsense.

6. *The Danger of a Noncognitive Aesthetic Basis for Epistemology.* By Dahms' own admission, logic has only a limited role in his epistemology. Some true statements are mutually contradictory. The contradiction between statements is "resolved" by an appeal to the aesthetic, a move Kant saw necessary once he too had given up the intelligibility of reality. Dahms pleads for objectivity in the realm of aesthetics but does not provide any clue as to how this is possible. Indeed, even if there is aesthetic objectivity it will not help Dahms' thesis for several reasons. If aesthetic feelings are to serve an *epistemological* function, as Dahms claims they do, then these feelings too must be subject to the law of non-contradiction. For by Dahms' own admission logic must control *all* our cognitive processes, and epistemology is certainly a cognitive function. It is meaningless to claim there are nonknowing kinds of knowing or nonlogical kinds of intelligibility. But this is precisely what Dahms' aesthetic kind of "knowing" would have to be.

7. *The Danger of Subjectivity.* Dahms pleads that his view is not *purely* subjective, but he forgets that (1) he uses logic in only a limited sense and that (2) when he moves to the aesthetic it is not a rational objectivity that he finds there. His claim that the aesthetic is just as objective as logic is grossly exaggerated. There may be an objective *element* in the aesthetic, but beauty is also a relative matter. Logic, by contrast, is fixed by clear and precise laws that do not approach anything like aesthetic subjectivity.

Further, Dahms seems to make the same mistake that the modern subjectivists, experientialists and enthusiasts do—namely, he makes the noncognitive, nonpropositionalizable realm of feeling the final test for the truth of a system. Indeed, he seems to imply that the Holy Spirit works (only?) through this subjective realm (see p. 135).¹² Once one designates the locus of the Spirit's illuminating operation anywhere apart from the propositional text of Scripture and apart from the epistemological control of the law of noncontradiction, there is no rational way to stop the flood of false doctrine, heresy and absurdity that may pour through it. It is simple diversion of the issue for Dahms to claim "rigorous" use of logic and "objectivity" in the aesthetic sphere. In the final analysis such an approach leaves logic behind and launches out on the sea of contradiction with no cognitive rudder and no rational anchor. One does not have to be a prophet to see where students who consistently apply this kind of epistemology will eventuate.

VI. MORE SERIOUS PROBLEMS THAT HAVE SURFACED

In view of Dahms' response to my article, at least two more serious problems emerge that were not brought to my attention by his first article.

1. *The Problem of Agnosticism.* It now becomes clear that Dahms leans toward Kantianism. Dahms surprisingly confesses that he believes it is impossi-

¹¹ Tim 6:20 does not say to avoid only *some* contradictions, as Dahms would have it. *All* contradictions are a "science falsely so-called."

¹²Cf. also J. V. Dahms, "Reliable," p. 376.

ble to know reality in itself. He writes: "There is no way by which the mind alone can press beyond the apparent to the *Ding an Sich*" (p. 139). This is precisely what Kant claimed in Kant's own words. In view of Dahms' acceptance of the radical Kantian bifurcation between thing-in-itself (reality) and thing-to-me (appearance) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is no wonder that Dahms comes to his amazing conclusions. Beside the fact that Kant's disjunction has been long refuted as self-defeating,¹³ it is strange that a Christian would want to buy into this kind of agnosticism.

2. *The Problem of Nominalism*. It has become clear through the discussion that Dahms is also a nominalist. This could have been implied from his disjoining of the empirical and logic with his distrust of the latter. (Cf. p. 137, where Dahms says, "What logic tells me contradicts what empirical observation tells me.") Dahms' nominalism becomes clearer, however, when he disjoins concepts from reality, saying that "if the intellect were the sole organ of knowledge," man's "only knowledge of apple pie would be the knowledge of conceptions about it" and "his only knowledge of love would be the knowledge of conceptions about it" (p. 143).

VII. OUT OF THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE?

Many of Dahms' responses to my criticisms are at least as bad as (if not worse than) the original position I criticized.

1. *Modalism or Tritheism?* In response to my criticism about his possible modalism, Dahms seems to lean toward tritheism by claiming that the three persons in the Godhead "must be ontologically different in some way" (p. 139). His illustration of the union of Father and Son by two bodies united in marriage (see p. 133) certainly does not alleviate the problem. Ontological differences are differences in *being* (*ontos*), but there is only one being in God, not three. At the very least, Dahms seems willing to sacrifice the simplicity of God for some kind of (modal?) multiplicity in God. He says, "I am puzzled as to how Geisler can say that God is 'simple . . . has no composition' . . . and yet is a Trinity" (n. 11).

2. *Dualism?* Repeatedly Dahms criticizes any view with dualist tendencies but fails to see his own rather radical dualism between being and becoming. The former is nominal and the latter is verbal, he says. Being calls for logic all the time; becoming does not. Being is conceptual and abstract; becoming is existential and concrete, etc., Dahms insists. But what is this but a dualism within reality between being and becoming? Dahms could respond by claiming that being is only potential and becoming is actual. If so, then he leans toward process theology.

3. *Process Theology?* Many of Dahms' responses do indeed stress the nature of reality as characterized by process (i.e., as "becoming"). "Being" for Dahms seems to be only abstract, formal, nominal. It is not the way things really are. If this is so, then Dahms would seem to be Bergsonian¹⁴ or Whiteheadian in his

¹³See R. Flint, *Agnosticism* (New York: Scribner's, 1903), chap. 4; S. Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism* (Chicago: Moody, 1957), chaps. 1 and 2.

¹⁴Dahms seems to admit that he is Kantian and Bergsonian; see J. V. Dahms, "Reliable," p. 377 n. 40.

metaphysics in the sense that the *actual* is in process and only the *potential* or abstract is permanent. If this is the case, then Dahms inherits a host of difficult problems in his theology (see my *Christian Apologetics*, chap. 11).

4. *How to Save One from Liberalism.* Despite his disclaimer Dahms did speak approvingly of the Arians, saying that they “are more logical than orthodox Christians.”¹⁵ He further suggests that the way to save (thinking?) orthodoxy from going liberal is to admit that there are contradictions in Christian doctrines. He claims that “many conservatives have turned liberal or neo-orthodox simply because they became convinced that some of the important doctrines of orthodoxy involve logical contradictions” (pp. 139-140). Is Dahms arguing that the way to save these scholars who want to use their reason is by saying, “You do not have to leave orthodoxy because of contradictions in our teachings. Stay with us and believe the irrational”? He certainly cannot be saying that they should give up one of the contradictory premises, because that is what he condemned a few pages later (p. 143). What, then, could he possibly mean?

5. *Nonabsolutism or Total Relativism.* Dahms’ comment about “absolutist” ethics in his first article seems mild now in view of his second article. In view of his nominalism (see above) and agreement with the basic premise of Joseph Fletcher’s situationism, it is clear that Dahms cannot have any universal and absolute ethical laws. His position is not just against absolutism; it involves a clear-cut situationism (p. 134). Dahms claims to have an absolute, but he does not (and cannot, if he is consistent with what he says in the rest of the article) spell out just what this absolute is. In fact, any propositionalizing of it would be only “abstract” and “conceptual” and would not be an absolute statement relating to a class of ethical actions at all. At the heart of it, Dahms’ position cannot consistently be different from Fletcher’s view.

6. *Understanding Apart from the Mind?* Dahms emphatically rejects the view that “the intellect is the only organ of understanding.” This he does in order to hold that “a true statement about ‘being’ or ‘essence’ may contradict a true statement about ‘becoming’ or ‘existence’ and that such a contradiction is understandable” (pp. 137-138). What does he gain for Christianity by this move? Allegedly, he gains “understanding” of contradictions—whatever that may mean. Actually, all he gains is a mindless faith (cf. his n. 16). He gains a faith that must sacrifice its mind to nonrational feeling every time it finds an apparent contradiction in its beliefs.

VIII. FOR THE RECORD

Dahms makes many false assumptions (or assertions) about my views. Let me set the record straight:

1. I do *not* believe that the rationally inescapable is real. I did not hold this in any of the books Dahms cited or in anything I have ever published. I am not a rationalist, and I do not accept the validity of any allegedly logically inescapable arguments such as the ontological argument. I do, of course, believe God has given and expects us to use our reason (as well as our senses, heart, will, etc.) so that we do not believe in absurdities.

2. I do not assume that all “contradictions” are of the same kind (nn. 11, 15).

¹⁵Ibid., p. 374.

I believe, for example, that there are real ones and apparent ones and that they are really different. Dahms says he does not.

3. I do not believe that *only* the intellect is involved in the knowing process. I believe that the whole person (with senses, feelings and whatever) is involved. What I do not believe is that any truth claims, thoughts, knowledge, or statements with cognitive value can be both contradictory and yet true. Dahms does believe this.

4. Contrary to Dahms' claim, I *am* aware of the problem of the unity of being and becoming and have written about it in the very book from which Dahms quotes me out of context (n. 18).

5. I do not believe God needed evil to be good or to do good or in any other way for himself (n. 6). I believe God *used* evil to bring about a greater good *for us*. I believe this evil world to be the best way God can produce the best world achievable, granted the sinfulness of man.

6. I do not believe logic (noncontradiction) unites all truth (n. 7). Logic alone shows only what is possibly true, not what is actually true.¹⁶ Logic does not *unite* all truth, but I certainly believe that it does *divide* all falsity from truth. Dahms does not.

IX. CONCLUSION

There are a number of other interesting topics that arise out of this discussion but that it is not possible to discuss here. Let me emphasize what I see as the basic issue and its importance for orthodox Christianity. It is this: Does the law of noncontradiction reign sovereignly and universally over all *thinking* and *speaking* about God, or can one legitimately hold that two or more statements can be logically contradictory and still *both* be true? If they can, as Dahms claims, then the following disastrous consequences follow:

1. We can believe the absurd (and so can anyone else) as long as we have a way to "unite" (?) these contradictory beliefs in our (aesthetic) feelings.

2. We can somehow "understand" what is contradictory and absurd. By this token the mystic coincidence of opposites can be true too. In fact, if Dahms is correct the ultimate "understanding" goes not only beyond all reason but against it. It is not a mystery (as almost all Christians have held) but an absurdity (as almost no Christians have held).

3. If Dahms is right, then there can be double truths—a heresy long ago condemned by the Christian Church. For according to Dahms two contradictory statements can both be true.

4. I do believe in tests for truth other than noncontradiction and spend whole chapters on it in the very book (*Christian Apologetics*) to which Dahms refers. I speak of "systematic consistency" and "undeniability" as tests for truth.

A logical contradiction by definition means that if one statement is true the denial of it must be false; both cannot be true. And yet Dahms wants to claim that there are logical contradictions between some true statements. Whatever else one might say in favor of Dahms' position, it is clearly confused.

¹⁶N. L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), Part I.