

An Independent Scholar: Lawrence Moonan's Legacy

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Abstract

Lawrence Moonan (1937–2013) pioneered the study of the medieval Scottish philosopher Lawrence of Lindores; he published a major work on the notion of divine omnipotence in early scholasticism; and he kept worrying that in these post-Deistical times many philosophers and theologians have forgotten what it is like to think of God as strictly infinite.

Keywords

Lindores, existence-theism and character-theism, Hume, Aquinas, *Dei Filius*

§1. Obituary

One of the last things published by Lawrence Moonan was a letter in *The Tablet*, 2nd July 2011, contributing to correspondence on the ‘wow factor’, recalling *ouai* in the text of Mark 15:29 (*vah* in the Vulgate), where it occurs in mockery of Jesus: “Cornelius a Lapide, the seventeenth-century commentator (and teacher of St John Ogilvie) associates it and Matthew 27:40 with the Flemish equivalent of ‘fie’, as in ‘Fie, for shame!’ and with the Hebrew expression *huach*. Peter Glare’s Oxford Latin Dictionary, however, records *vah* not only for ‘any of various emotions ... pain, dismay, vexation etc.’ and ‘contempt for a person or idea’, but also for simply ‘admiration, surprise’” — dated from Kirm, Argyll, displaying something of Dr Moonan’s characteristic erudition and wit.

Lawrence Moonan was born in 1937, at Bonnybridge, four miles west of Falkirk in Scotland, a town of some 7000 people, near the best preserved Roman fort on the Antonine Wall, much more famous (however) for some 600 reports of UFOs in the 1990s. He studied for the priesthood at Drygrange, the Saint Andrews and Edinburgh archdiocesan seminary, near Melrose (closed 1986). Ordained priest

in 1960 he was sent to the Catholic University of Louvain where he completed his doctorate in 1966, supervised by Fernand Van Steenberghe (1904–93), perhaps the greatest Louvain Thomist of the day. After a stint in parish ministry, he went to Oxford, where he graduated B Phil in 1971, already established as the most prestigious qualification in the local brand of philosophy, tutored by A.J. Ayer (1910–89) and R.M. Hare (1919–2002). The following year he took up a post in the philosophy department at Bolton Institute of Technology (since 2005 the University of Bolton), where he taught until 1985. By then married to his good friend Patricia Collins, he settled in Oxford where he did some tutorial teaching for Balliol, Blackfriars and St Hilda's. He gave some lectures, including a series in 1988 entitled 'Divine power, eternal truths, and related matters: some medieval perspectives on a Cartesian problem', an example of how he sought to examine problems in modern philosophy in the light of solutions offered by medieval scholastics (Oxford in the light of Louvain so to speak). When they moved to Argyll Lawrence and Pat made frequent visits to the Continent, connected sometimes with medievalists' conferences or with checking a manuscript. It was easy from his retreat at Kirn to have a day in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, or occasionally in Edinburgh at the National Library. He died on 14 March 2013 after a short illness; the requiem took place at Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception & St Mun's in Dunoon, followed by interment at Cowal.

§2. Lawrence of Lindores

Nobody graduates DPhil at universities like KUL until the thesis appears in print. Thus, in 1966, the mandatory copies of Moonan's dissertation, running to over 700 pages, were printed by the Université Catholique de Louvain: *Lawrence of Lindores (d. 1437) on 'Life in the Living Being'*: a study of how Lawrence of Lindores saw the concept of *anima* in Aristotle's *De Anima*. (There is a copy in the University of St Andrews library.) Moonan seemingly never tried to rework the dissertation as a book. He published a very useful summary.¹ From his Louvain days his ambition was to make Lawrence's work, consisting entirely of two commentaries on Aristotle, available to scholars, perhaps even to establish him as a significant Scottish philosopher. Lawrence's writings on Aristotle were read into the Renaissance but somehow never benefited from the invention of the printing press. Interest in the manuscripts was aroused again only in the 1920s by Konstanty Michalski (1879–1947), at Cracow, one

¹ *Classica et Mediaevalia* 27 (1969): 349–374

of the scholar-priests sent to Sachsenhausen during the German occupation of Poland. In his *DNB* entry on Lindores (2004) Moonan remarks that his work 'cannot yet be safely assessed': editions of the commentaries on the *Physics* and *De Anima* 'are in progress' (not, I think, directly involving himself), but 'a systematic and comprehensive exposition of his thought is not yet available'.² Over the years Moonan examined the manuscripts, in Poland, Austria and Germany (none anywhere in Britain). His annotated catalogue, it is safe to say, will not be surpassed.³

Lawrence/Laurence first appears as Laurentius de Londerio, incepting as *magister artium* at Paris in 1393. He must have been born about 1373, presumably at Lindores, a village in Fife, noted back then for the Tironensian abbey of which substantial ruins survive. The commentaries on Aristotle are the fruits of lecturing in the arts faculty at Paris in the 1390s. He returned home probably about the turn of the century. He is recorded back in Scotland in 1408, rector of the parish at Creich, near St Andrews, the only benefice he ever held. He has quite a prominent position in Scottish history, first as the holder of key posts in the establishment of the University of St Andrews (founded 1410), and secondly as Papal Inquisitor (under the Avignon jurisdiction), authorizing the execution of James Resby, a priest from England, in 1407, and Pavel Kravar, a physician from Bohemia, burnt at St Andrews in 1433, for Wycliffite and Hussite proclivities respectively. Despite royal and episcopal pressure to have Robert Harding, an English Franciscan theologian burnt to death, Lawrence delayed so persistently that he allowed him to die of natural causes in 1419.

According to the records Lawrence lectured on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard at St Andrews. Though a qualified theologian he seems to have taught mostly in the arts faculty. The Aristotle commentaries, composed in Paris by 1400, were widely read in Continental universities, right through the 15th century; and were the source for Copernicus (1473–1543) of his knowledge of medieval physics. The manuscripts had migrated to Prague by 1406 and were soon being studied in Cracow (Copernicus's alma mater), then Leipzig, Erfurt, Vienna and Freiburg.

It seems likely, or anyway so the story goes, that Lawrence of Lindores's commentary on the *Physics* communicated the ideas of Jean Buridan (c. 1300–after 1358), a philosopher at Paris in the immediately preceding generation. Buridan developed the concept of *impetus*, anticipating modern ideas of inertia and momentum, a theory that was adapted to explain celestial phenomena in terms of

² 'Lindores, Lawrence' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* volume 33 (2004): 832–34.

³ *Classica et Mediaevalia* 38 (1987): 217–66; and 39 (1988): 273–317.

circular impetus. More generally, Buridan counts among the exponents of nominalism, influencing generations of philosophers into the Renaissance. To what extent Lawrence should be situated in this tradition remains open to some dispute. Moonan incorporated selections from the *De Anima* commentary in his Louvain doctorate thesis but that has never been accessible enough for much discussion. Now, with the publication of Thomas Dewender's dissertation on the problem of the infinite in the *Physics* commentary, there may be the kind of attention to Lawrence's thought that Moonan hoped for.⁴

§3. Divine Power

In 1994 Moonan brought out *Divine Power*, the only book he was to see into print.⁵ As Professor G.R. Evans recalls in her review in this journal,⁶ there was a central dilemma for philosophers/theologians in the Middle Ages: 'God can do everything. But he is wholly good. So it seems he cannot do evil. So God cannot do everything'. Similarly: 'God knows everything. So he knows what I am going to do. But I have free will. So can I choose to do something different? Or does his foreknowledge constrain me? In that case it seems that I do not have free will'. Moonan discusses these issues in the light of the distinction between what God has it in him to do and what he actually does: in the jargon of the day, God's *potentia absoluta* and God's *potentia ordinata*. The book deals mainly with the period from about 1215 to 1280, when the distinction was invented and systematically employed, but with some attention to a second phase, up to the 1340s and Buridan; and a third, more sketchily, running to Luther and into modern times. Explicitly, in fact, Moonan hopes the argument might engage philosophers at the present time, it is not purely an exercise in intellectual historiography. Rather, he strips away associations with the concept 'God' which leave theologians unquestioningly with certain expectations of how God behaves, thus inveigling them in the complexities of conditional futurity, freedom of choice, and the operation of grace. While, as she judges, *Divine Power* is an 'extremely useful resource-book', there are passages, so Evans concludes, where 'one glimpses a submerged agenda'.

Yes indeed! — *Divine Power* is a pretty demanding study of what God can and cannot do as discussed in the 13th century; but the

⁴ Thomas Dewender, *Das Problem des unendlichen im ausgehenden 14. Jahrhundert: Eine Studie mit Textedition zum Physikkommentary des Lorenz von Lindores* (Amsterdam 2002); reviewed by Moonan in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2004): 625–627.

⁵ *Divine Power: The Mediaeval Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure and Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994).

⁶ *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994): 489–496.

distinction between God's absolute and ordained power, so Moonan contends, embodies a concern to maintain a strictly negative theology, while at the same time holding that the world is ordered providentially and in specific ways. He transports the distinction out of its medieval context to philosophical theology as it has been shaped in the wake of the critiques of Hume and Kant. The medieval scholastics had a negative theology, which constitutes quite a radical challenge to philosophical theologians today, or anyway in the 1990s when Moonan first aired his ideas.

§4. Infinite God

The 'submerged agenda' surfaces in the monograph entitled *Infinite God: The central issues addressed by existence-theism*.⁷ In a footnote back in 1999 Moonan referred to it as 'forthcoming', without mentioning the publisher. Internal evidence suggests that he went on working on the text, while occasionally submitting it to a publisher, or at least sending them an outline plan. Since his death, a detailed report by a sympathetic reader on behalf of a major academic publishing house confirms that the text, while it reads well, needs rather more than copy editing: some sections would require expansion and clarification but no one is qualified to undertake this task. A colleague or disciple who had discussed his ideas over the years might have enjoyed working on the text, which would take some months, with no guarantee of publication; but of course Moonan was not the kind of scholar who attracted disciples.

The central thesis, to paraphrase Moonan's summary, is that, despite what seems the case to many philosophers (so he thinks), the idea of a strictly infinite God is not necessarily incoherent; and a systematically explanatory theology consistent with it is not an impossibility. Addressing himself to philosophers who (rightly, he thinks) refuse to disregard what Frege, Quine and others (let alone Kant) have done to clarify existence statements, he would like them to reconsider whether they need dismiss the very idea of strictly infinite existence from the outset. For reflective people in general, not just for academic philosophers, the idea of something strictly infinite needs re-considering: 'how is there to be order, unless there is something eternal and independent and permanent' (Aristotle: *Metaphysics* XI,1, 1060a25), whether that something be regarded as anyone's object of worship or not. In particular, Christian (and certain other) theologians need to reconsider what is involved when the word 'God' is taken to stand for that something, and for nothing else in extra-mental

⁷ My thanks to Lawrence's executors for giving me a copy.

reality. It is also worth re-consideration from intellectual historians, as it widens access to a significant range of ancient or medieval positions on matters of importance. Indeed, as he says, it was through such inquiries that Moonan himself was forced to see what scholars had been missing in medieval uses of the distinction *potentia ordinata/potentia absoluta Dei* — namely, that the medievals were giving real weight, not just verbal recognition, to the consequences of taking God to be strictly infinite, radically incomprehensible, in no *genus* or *species*, and so on. They were forced to come up with some way of understanding putative attributions of divine power consistently with maintaining a rigorously negative theology as regards the divine nature itself. Moonan's purpose in the monograph is to exploit and generalise the achievement of the medievals in the light of post-Cartesian philosophies, in order to show that the Deists operated unquestioningly with a conception of the deity as finite — and the same goes for modern philosophers of religion in the Oxford analytic tradition, whether they are believers, agnostics or atheists. Over against what he calls 'character-theism', in which God supposedly possesses at least some determinate characteristics (goodness, power, wisdom etc.), whether or not we can know anything of them — Moonan offers 'existence-theism', delightedly citing Hume, who knew that 'all the divines almost, from the foundation of Christianity, who have ever treated of this or any other theological subject' — stuck to an understanding of God as 'Being without restriction', never yielding to 'the temerity of prying into his nature and essence, decrees and attributes' (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part II).

As Moonan notes, Hume makes Demea quote from 'Father Malebranche'⁸ to the effect that we should say that God's true name is 'He that is' — and refrain from supposing that 'his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature', so Philo then agrees, as he opens his attack. In effect, for Moonan, Demea's appeal to the 'very great authority' of Malebranche separates 'existence-theism', the apophatic doctrines of God that are found in ancient and medieval thinkers, — the view he finds in Justin Martyr, Thomas Aquinas and Vatican I's *Dei Filius* — from what he calls character-theism, the view that God has at least some determinate characteristics, whether or not we can know them — despite its annihilation by Hume and Kant endemic in modern philosophical theology. Of course Hume regarded the very idea of this 'Being without restriction' as absurd; Moonan, on the other hand, wants to

⁸ The French Oratorian philosopher (1638–1715) whose works Hume no doubt examined during his days in the Jesuit library at La Flèche.

reaffirm the ancient patristic and medieval scholastic conception of God as indeed simply infinite existence.

§5. Love, sinning and agreed statements

Dr Moonan reviewed books for us but also published a dozen articles in this journal from August 1968 onwards.⁹

That first article, composed in the era of flower power and in the wake of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (never mentioned), offers a powerful, complexly argued meditation on the place of the erotic in liberal-capitalist society, culminating in a beautiful quotation from Emmanuel Levinas:

Desires which can be satisfied are like metaphysical desire only in their failure to satisfy, or in the exasperation in the non-satisfaction and in the desire which constitutes voluptas itself. Metaphysical desire has another intention: it desires what is beyond anything which could satisfy it. It is like goodness — the Desired does not crown it but makes it deeper.

The article that Moonan published next offers another rich and intriguing reflection.¹⁰ Here he steers between what he takes to be then current deplorably 'personalist' notions and the perhaps somewhat bleak memories of 'benediction Catholics' (which, one suspects, he prefers):

What will be found is some explanation of what is involved in saying that someone has sinned, which is far from otiose. For though sinning may be as easy as lying, the word 'sinning' can conceal a plurality of senses. Once this has been done, 'forgiving sins' is more than halfway to being explained. By way of a corollary it will then be shown why 'forgiven-ness', much talked of by some sensitive people today in connexion with forgiveness, cannot serve for explaining 'forgiving sins'.

A third article reflects on the nature of ecumenical agreed statements:

It may well be ... that in producing agreed statements in doctrine that are of real worth, the crucial issues are neither theological nor analytical, but rather political.¹¹

As always, Moonan comes up with an intriguingly novel and provocative line of thought. While these three pieces obviously focus on disparate issues that at the time prompted a young priest with

⁹ 'All you need is love?', *New Blackfriars*, August 1968: 565–571.

¹⁰ 'Sinning and Forgiving Sin', *New Blackfriars*, April 1972: 174–180.

¹¹ 'Agreed Statements: Hazards and Possibilities' *New Blackfriars* July 1979: 309–320.

pastoral concerns to consider, he was also publishing learned notes in professional medieval studies journals.

§6. Existence-theism versus character-theism

The rest of Moonan's contributions in this journal focus almost exclusively on questions connected more or less directly with trying to show that the dominant school of analytical philosophers of religion operate (of course unwittingly) with the assumption that God is a finite being (of course a very special one).

The first, in an essay somewhat dauntingly technical for this journal, takes up what was at the time a famous claim by Professor Peter T. Geach to the effect that 'God can do anything/everything' makes no sense.¹² Here Moonan defends Thomas Aquinas's view against Geach, obviously drawing on his work on medieval theories of divine power. Of course it makes sense to say 'God can do whatever', so he contends — though perhaps in the background to Geach's contention one might discern some of the wilder theories in voluntaristic theologies according to which God could do arbitrary and irrational things, like making $2+2=5$, undo the past and suchlike.

During his years teaching philosophy at Bolton, Moonan seems to have submitted nothing to this journal. In 1999, however, we published one of his most important essays, arguing that the way to deal with the supposed conflict between divine omnipotence and divine goodness is to bring in the freedom of the blessed in heaven.¹³ In the substantial endnotes he spells out the central claim in *Infinite Power* (which he announces as forthcoming, not mentioning any publisher): in particular he introduces the distinction between existence-theism and character-theism, for the first time in print: the key theme in the rest of his work. If, as seems likely, the monograph never finds a publisher, the gist of Moonan's thesis is in this article, obviously without the sustained arguments, documentation and refutation of rival views that would explain and support it (the monograph runs to 120,000 words).

What Moonan labels existence-theism he delights to find in the claim by Hume's Philo that the validity (if so it is) of the conclusion that a first cause of things exists obviously affords 'no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance' (*Dialogues* Pt XII). This of course was what Hume wanted to establish: 'It was no threat to him, if someone wanted to say that God existed, provided that absolutely nothing impinging on our

¹² 'Why can't God do everything?' *New Blackfriars* December 1974: 552–562.

¹³ 'Theodicy and Blissful Freedom' *New Blackfriars* November 1999: 502–511.

doings here and now could possibly follow from it'. In other words, existence-theism by itself affords no inference to the effect that God is omnipotent, good, etc., where these attributes in turn have implications for us creatures, and, as Moonan puts it, are more than, say, mere expressions of a sentiment.

Just how such attributions are to be made sense of, consistently with existence-theism (and thus how any theology worth the name is then possible, as he would think), are problems, which Moonan assures us will be dealt with in the 'forthcoming' monograph. Briefly, his move is to treat attributions to God as 'systematically misleading' in specifiable ways, and to permit as premisses in theology only those attributions whose analyses can be maintained consistently with maintaining a rigorously negative theology of the divine nature. He proposes to bring this off while respecting a quite standard post-Fregean notion of existence.¹⁴

Existence-theism, with no appeal among academic theists today, so Moonan held, was already unfashionable among the Deists known to Hume. He quotes from *The God of the Philosophers* by Anthony Kenny (1979) and mentions *The Nature of God* by G.J. Hughes (1995) to exemplify what he means by character-theism. Yet, as Hume's Demea acknowledged, its rigorously negative theology on the divine nature had been the view of 'all the Divines almost, from the Foundation of Christianity' up to quite modern times. It is a position important still to many ordinary worshippers. Moonan delights in the recognition by Antony Flew (another philosopher famously skeptical about religion) that it is 'the Roman Catholic account of the universe and its Creator'.¹⁵ In analytical philosophy of religion, currently fashionable exponents whether of theism, agnosticism or atheism, have lost touch with ordinary Catholic worshippers as well as with the apophatic theologies of patristic and medieval times, or so Moonan's thesis goes.

The next article in this journal, the text of a paper read to the annual conference of the Catholic Theological Association, is the best available account of Moonan's project to overthrow standard academic theism.¹⁶ He was responding to the committee's invitation to consider whether there might be a 'modern culture... in which the God-question is vitiated often right from the start in the way in which it is posed'. This of course answered to his most strongly held concern — yes indeed, in this post-Deistical era the god about whom

¹⁴ For Frege existence is not a property of individuals but instead a second-order property—a property of concepts.

¹⁵ A.Flew, 'Divine omnipotence and human freedom', in Antony Flew & Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London 1955): 144–69, 159.

¹⁶ 'The Responsibility of Theology for the Question of God' *New Blackfriars* January 2000: 2–15.

we quarrel in academic discussions is a finite being. Nothing else is imaginable. Thus Moonan sets out to explore how 'God', 'the divine nature', can be used coherently, 'whether in serious worship, or in professedly explanatory discourse', asking in particular how it is that we claim things to be, or not to be, 'when saying that God exists, or that the world is ordered by him, or that he is Father of Israel, all-merciful, or whatever' — 'For unless we can be clear about what the metaphysical claims are, that are being made, we are not going to know whether they even can be made to stand up'.

He offers a diagram of competing views of what 'God', 'the divine nature' and related expressions, should be understood to stand for, whether in praying, blessing, cursing etc., or in theology, as in expressions like 'ordered by God', 'loved by God', 'predestined by God', and so on. In practice, individuals often have conflicting views and feelings; and even 'conciliar or confessional statements tend to keep close to a rhetoric of devotion — as from liturgy or Scriptures — rather than to a bare, metaphysical rhetoric'.

The key question is whether we believe something strictly infinite exists, and that it ought to be worshipped. This engages Trinitarian doctrines in their full-blown, post-Nicene rhetoric, but also certain Jewish doctrines, as well as the kind of view expounded by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, or in the Commentary on the *Metaphysics*, where — to meet his adversaries on 'neutral' ground perhaps — he seemingly avoided Trinitarian, or even more generally theological modes of expression. With its high doctrine of providence and emphasis on a day of judgment, Moonan remarks, Islam evidently presupposes an ultimately ordered universe, and hence the existence of something strictly infinite. Quoting Hume's Demea again, Moonan notes that Christian theologians maintained — officially at least — a rigorously negative view on the divine nature, at least up to the days of Locke, Clarke, and the Deists.

Philosophers' views have to be inferred from their views on the world around us: is it to be seen as ultimately no more than a sum of things (as in Hobbes, or the ancient atomists), or is it ultimately an ordered totality, an *universitas rerum* in more than just its name? Those who would hold a 'No entity without identity' position (Quine's slogan) to include absolutely everything, not just everything susceptible of being investigated scientifically, would seem left with a deity (if wanting one at all) in some way determinate, limited. Moonan reintroduces his distinction between religious character-theism and strictly existence-theism, the latter as in Justin Martyr, Aquinas and Vatican 1's constitution *Dei Filius* alike, so he avers.

In this perspective, only two ultimate answers are (arguably) available, two ontologies, alternative positions on what there ultimately is, or is not:

Ontology 1. Something exists and everything exists in some or other determinate manner ('No entity without identity')

Ontology 2. Something exists, and not everything that exists, exists in some or other determinate manner.

The second, which he admits is not widely held among metaphysicians nowadays, is the one that (at least) arguably permits what it is for reality to be ultimately ordered, rather than being a plaything of blind necessity within at most a sum of things, a 'universe' in no more than appearance.

If we were to suppose that only things of some determinate kind could be said with truth to exist, then we would have to imagine in consequence that God would have to be a thing of some determinate kind, a thing among the things. If, by contrast, we may suppose that not everything which exists, exists in some or other determinate manner, then at least it is not excluded from the outset that God (as worshipped in Catholic Christianity) should be identified with — more properly, should not be thought distinct from — the simply existent, and so we may then say with truth that God is strictly infinite, whether or not we personally worship the infinite God.

Matters are complicated, however, by the hybrid discipline of 'philosophical theology' as typically conducted within modern arts faculties. This is exemplified in much of the work of Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne, as well such as Anthony Kenny, Antony Flew, J.L. Mackie and, at a much more popular level, the French Catholic philosopher Jean Lacroix.

Moonan takes his examples from Swinburne: the much discussed characterization of a theist as one who understands by a 'God' something like a 'person without a body' (*The Coherence of Theism* 1993) — a basic, no-frills model of God, which philosophers at least can work on; whether or not any actual worshipper can, so leaving no place for views implying a strictly infinite God, as in ancient and medieval theology, and treating Christians is as a sub-class of character-theists. And secondly from Kenny, who assumes anyone who is interested in the existence of God has to study first of all the divine attributes, for to say that God exists is to say that something has the divine attributes (*The God of the Philosophers*, 1979.)

'Attribute' is used in more than one way. First, with the past participle *attributum*: something attributed, never mind how. In this sense Christian theologians can indeed be found using 'attribute' and its equivalents up to quite modern times. But 'attribute' is also routinely used among modern philosophers in a narrower, semi-technical sense, for that which a significant predicate — most typically, a non-relational predicate — designates. Using that sense, it would be absurd to say of a strictly infinite God (in no way determinate) that it has or is any attribute (something in at least some way

determinate). So if you work within the perspective outlined by Kenny you are going to have to exclude from the outset even the possibility of supposing God to be strictly infinite. Your favoured candidate for deity, if you can get one to satisfy your requirements, is from the outset bound to be at best some kind of thing among the things; and arguably a plaything of necessity within what is arguably going to be no more than a sum of things. Or so Moonan's story runs.

§7. Barth, Dummett, Wittgenstein

Three more articles remain to summarize. In the first Moonan discussed the notion of the hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, in Scripture and then in some disagreement with Karl Barth, concluding with him (however) and Thomas Aquinas that Jesus was always aware of his divine nature, and enjoyed the beatific vision.¹⁷

Then, in another beautifully crafted paper, Moonan reflects on questions raised in *Thought and Reality* (2006), the Gifford Lectures that Michael Dummett gave at St Andrews: 'What would it be for there to be a universe devoid of sentient beings? What would be the difference between God's creating a material universe, in the whole of which there never was any creature able to experience it and His creating nothing at all? ... What difference would its existing make?' According to Dummett: 'there would surely be no difference ...' for 'unless there are sentient and rational observers, it would not be possible for either observation or inference to occur'.

Some theists might find this a disconcerting restriction on divine power, Moonan grants; but whether or not you are prepared to use 'God' to stand for something not finite in any way, and for nothing else in extra-mental reality, Dummett's lectures are metaphysically serious: they put the supposition of a strictly infinite God – where 'God' is taken to stand for something in no way finite, and for nothing else in extra-mental reality – firmly back on philosophers' agenda. The lectures will surely meet resistance from those committed directly or indirectly to a 'mere sum of things' ontology, — and this will not exclude the academic theists whose practice implies that God has at least some determinate characteristics; nor those theologians who have become detached from the position on God which Hume's character Demea had arguably correctly identified as that of 'all the Divines, almost, from the Foundation of Christianity' until the time of Locke.¹⁸

¹⁷ 'How to hide something properly' *New Blackfriars* March 2004: 186–194.

¹⁸ 'A Universe devoid of sentient beings?' *New Blackfriars* September 2008: 606–618/

And finally, appearing a couple of months after his death, Moonan returned to Hume's delight in the conclusion about the first cause of all things that allows no possibility of drawing inferences of practical consequence to us from an essence about whose content it is supposed that nothing can be known, thus stymying the theology of Hume's Deist primary targets, but which does not have to trouble others, whether engaged in theological explanation, or committed to worship of a God not finite in any way.¹⁹ The strictly infinite God of Demea's ancient divines is precisely something of which nothing can be known, something of which one cannot but be silent; something, that is, of which nothing intelligible to us can be predicated properly, absolutely, and with truth.

Apropos, it would appear, of an ontological argument, Wittgenstein once said: 'That the essence of God guarantees his existence – that really means that here there is no question of existence'. There is indeed in anything strictly infinite, no question of the existence we can recognise in the existence of determinate things, the existence recognized in the values of our bound variables, if entity is to be allowed from the outset only where there is identity in some kind. If there is a strictly infinite divine nature, it cannot be 'a thing among the things', and need not be expected to be. Moreover, if that nature's essence is nothing other than its existence, as was held also by Thomas Aquinas (whom Wittgenstein was surely quoting), it should likewise be allowed to hold that there is in play in a strictly infinite divine nature no question of an essence either, i.e., no question of an essence of the kind from which effects can be read off; or indeed of an essence of any determinate kind. So Moonan concludes, bringing Hume, Wittgenstein and Thomas Aquinas together in his last word on the infinity of God — in this journal at least.

§8. The Five Ways

In 1970 Dr Moonan brought out translations of Fernand van Steenberghen's *Epistemology* and his *Ontology*: good examples of seminary course books in the Neo-Scholastic philosophy that was largely abandoned in colleges and seminaries by then in the aftermath of Vatican II. Wearing his Louvain hat he published several articles (I don't know how many) in a variety of scholarly journals: spin offs often of research on Lawrence of Lindores.²⁰

¹⁹ 'So 'a nothing would serve just as well . . . ?' *New Blackfriars* May 2013: 358–368,

²⁰ For example, 'Pre-Surgical Sedation, Montpellier c.1393: Testimony of Lawrence of Lindores', *Medical History* 12 (1968): 299–301, displaying his liking for quirky byways of research.

However, Moonan wrote three extremely important articles, in rather inaccessible periodicals, which should be summarized as follows, again largely in his own words. These articles are carved out of chapter 7 in the unpublished monograph.

In the first of these three articles Moonan argues that the Five Ways should not be understood as demonstrative proofs, successful or otherwise, for the existence of God.²¹ Rather, they provide a necessary step (as he puts it) towards supplying licensable surrogates for the essential predications that cannot logically be drawn from the incomprehensible nature of God, yet would seem needed for Thomas's declared project in his *Summa Theologiae* of argued exposition of Christian doctrine. What Aquinas is proving in arguing 'deum esse' (*Summa* I.2.3) is not God's actual existence (see I.3.4 ad 2) but an alternative interpretation of 'God's being something' where 'God is something' is a placeholder for, say, 'God is prime mover' or, more explicitly, for such (necessary) identities as 'The prime mover is the necessitated necessitator', an identity whose necessity depends on the assumption of God's existence from faith, not on demonstrative proof of God's existence. In short, the Five Ways are intended as demonstrative proofs (Moonan did not hold with those who regard them as 'pointers' and suchlike); it is just that what they prove (if they do) is nothing like what it is commonly supposed they do.

§9. Vatican I

Many believe that Roman Catholics, since the constitution *Dei Filius* passed by the bishops at the First Vatican Council in 1869, are obliged to believe as a matter of dogmatic truth that the existence of God can be proved in the strict sense by pure reason unaided by divine revelation. Moonan casts doubt on this supposition in a brief study placed in a somewhat inaccessible journal.²² Of course he is aware of the problems with which the bishops and their theologians were dealing, — problems created by rationalism and fideism (traditionalism), the second of which, as may be seen from the reports that we have of their speeches, greatly attracted many of the bishops.

Moonan asks us to reconsider the Latin. The usual translation inflects us towards the standard view that 'God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty (*certo cognosci posse*) by the natural light of human reason, from created things (as Romans 1:20 says)'.

²¹ 'Re-tracing the Five Ways of 'Summa Theologiae' I.2.3.' *International Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2004): 437–450.

²² '... *certo cognosci posse*. What precisely did Vatican I define?', *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum* 42 (2010): 193–202.

But knowing God's existence in terms of the verb *cognosci* is something much more flexible than the systematic rigour that the text would imply had the word *scientia* been employed. Then couldn't *certo* be read as qualifying *cognosci posse* — which would better address the extreme traditionalist position: we humans have assuredly got some capacity for getting some kind of knowledge of God from things around us, and would still have had that capacity, even had we not been assisted in other ways — contrary to what some traditionalists believed, or were thought to believe. Catholics do not despair of how much unaided human reason can achieve. On the other hand, as we know from the minutes, the proposals by bishops who wanted to mention proofs in the strict sense were rejected. In short, as Moonan concludes, demands for proofs for the existence of God are surely not for proof of the sheer existence of the immense, incomprehensible God of Catholic faith but for this or that cherished image, for example of the morally good God of Plato. (This article was also a paper delivered to the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain annual conference.)

§10

Finally, in his lengthiest article, Moonan spelled out his ideas about analogy and the function of the Five Ways in the *Summa*.²³ Once again, the argument runs, the Five Ways are to be seen as providing surrogates for the essential predications which an argumentative theology of the kind announced in the Prologue would usually be expected to need; and which in the case of the incomprehensible divine nature of the God of Aquinas's Christian faith, cannot logically be drawn from that nature. Most especially, the consequence is that the Five Ways article is not to be seen as providing or even aimed at providing proofs worth the name for the existence of God; never mind providing them as some imagined kind of indispensable, pre-theological grounding for the *Summa*'s project. Rather, Moonan hopes to show, the argument needs the assumption of God's existence, taken from the faith of the Church.

§11.

Perhaps his independence for most of his teaching career, settled at Bolton Institute of Technology from 1972 until resigning in 1985 (aged 48), never needing to publish in order to secure

²³ 'What Analogy and the Five Ways are meant to do for Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*' *Rivista Medioevo* (2013): 9–71.

tenure or impress State-mandated inspectors, allowed Lawrence Moonan to pursue so many lines of research that he was never likely to complete the major works which he hoped to achieve. Someone's critical editions of Lawrence of Lindores's Aristotle commentaries will appear, but we are a long way from the assessment of this eminent Scottish philosopher that Moonan hoped for. Obviously, *Divine Power* has entered the scholarly literature on early scholasticism. As far as the central ideas in the unpublished *Divine Infinity* go, while obviously he wanted them to come out in a big book, we have them sketched out, as we have seen, in a clutch of recent essays — essentially Moonan the Louvain medievalist, with a little help from Hume and Aquinas, retrieving existence-theism in the hope of exposing and discrediting character-theism in academic philosophical theology. In the end, it was perhaps memories of the faith in God that he saw in the very ordinary Catholic people whom he was ordained to serve that drove him to look for the metaphysics that would help to articulate a properly argued theology of the incomprehensible, strictly infinite God.

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