

# Aquinas after Marion

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What reflections might occur to a veteran student of the works of St Thomas Aquinas after reading Jean-Luc Marion's remarkable book *God without Being*? Of course, it is not primarily about the thought of Aquinas. But we are persistently encouraged to reject an approach to the question of God which thinks in terms of a concept of 'Being', in favour of an acceptance of the reality of God in an economy of 'Gift'. Thus, one is certainly sent back to the text of Aquinas with provocative questions. For myself, I have to say that I was prompted first of all to return to the magnificent account in the *Summa Theologiae* of the epistemology of the beatific vision (Section I)—not that Marion himself discusses it (he doesn't), but his whole approach is a reminder of the radical 'theocentricity' of Aquinas's thought. Next, it proved interesting to compare Marion's approach with philosophy of religion in the English-speaking context (Section II). Much else might be mentioned, no doubt, but, given that context, the intelligibility of speaking of God either with or without reference to 'Being' could not but become questionable (Section III).

## I

Question 12 of the *Prima Pars* must be one of the finest in the *Summa Theologiae*. Composed in 1266–67, when St Thomas was teaching at Santa Sabina in Rome, it has no precedent or exact parallel in the rest of his work, although of course he treated the same material in several different places.

Having considered how God is in himself (*qualiter Deus sit secundum se ipsum*), Aquinas turns to the question of how God is found in our experience (*qualiter sit in cognitione nostra*). What arrangements have to be in place, epistemologically speaking, for human minds to have knowledge of God? How might God come to mind, so to speak?

Difficulties at once present themselves. It might seem, given what God must be like (unique, transcendent, infinite, etc.), that no human mind could ever have any knowledge of him. That which is unlimited, you might say, is just radically unintelligible. And so on—considerations, as Aquinas clearly understood, which are both plausible and profound (at least at first sight). In addition, since our acquiring

knowledge of anything is always an enrichment of the mind, according to his epistemological assumptions, there must already be some possibility of a relationship obtaining between the mind and the object or state of affairs which offers itself to be known. With respect to divine reality and the human mind, however, there seems to be no such possibility. On the contrary, 'they are infinitely distant from each other'. Human beings can, therefore, surely have no knowledge of what is (to lift a phrase) 'wholly other'.

Well, St Thomas reminds us, bats cannot see the sun because it is too bright for them (at least according to an observation by Aristotle which Aquinas probably never attempted to verify for himself). On this analogy, we may say that God, being the reality which is totally and transparently intelligible in itself (because wholly realized— 'there is nothing about God which might be but is not'), naturally exceeds the cognitive range of any finite mind so dramatically that he is simply beyond our comprehension. But this is only because our minds are blinded by the immeasurable surplus of intelligibility displayed by the divine reality. It is not surprising, Aquinas concludes, that people believe that no created mind can ever have knowledge of God.

But it is a mistaken belief. For one thing, it is contrary to the Christian faith. We have been promised that 'we shall see him just as he is' (1 John 3:2). No text in the entire oeuvre of St Thomas brings us closer to his mind at its most characteristic than his exposition of the Fourth Gospel. He himself evidently knew how important it was. The lectures were taken down (in Paris in 1269) by Reginald of Piperno, his assistant. When his close friend Adenulf of Anagni, a diocesan priest, came up with a considerable sum of money to have it professionally copied, Thomas revised the transcript himself. His work was increasingly dominated by certain themes from the Fourth Gospel, particularly the Trinity, the dispensation of divine love, and the gift of eschatological vision of God 'face to face'. Aquinas, remembered best in English-speaking philosophy of religion for the Five Ways, natural law, and resistance to body-soul dualism, needs to be remembered also for the profoundly 'Johannine' (and thus 'theocentric' and 'mystical') cast of his mature work.

The first effect of reading J.L. Marion's remarks about Aquinas is, then, that one returns to the *Summa*, gratefully, with a renewed sense of these deeper theological connections.

Only the blessed in heaven actually have immediate face-to-face knowledge of God. Indeed, for Aquinas, heaven may even be characterized simply as the realization of this vision. From the epistemological point of view, it involves something of a post-modernist

'crisis of representation'. The blessed do not have any representation (*similitudo*) of the divine reality. 'The essence of God is to exist, and, since this could not be the case with any created form, no such form could represent the essence of God'. Besides, 'the divine essence is beyond description, containing to a transcendent degree every perfection that can be meant or known by the created mind'. We have to say, according to Aquinas's epistemology, that 'for the seeing of God's essence some representation is required' but it has to be 'the light of the divine glory itself'.

In the ordinary mundane economy of knowledge, the human mind in the act of knowing is identical with what it knows, in a certain way—'*anima est quodammodo omnia*'. Mind is all, one might almost say. But, if and when God is known as he is by a human mind, what happens is that what is actually known (the divine essence in this jargon) is itself how the mind actually knows. The divine reality occupies the minds of the blessed in such a way as to be the condition as well as the object of knowledge. As Aquinas says, in his laconic and deceptively jejune way, but quite mind-blowingly: '*ita divina essentia unitur intellectui creato, ut intellectum in actu, per seipsam faciens intellectum in actu*' (Ia 12, 2 ad 3).

The neat Latin is difficult to translate. It goes something like this. The divine reality itself, being permanently and totally meaning (*ut intellectum in actu*), unites itself directly and immediately (*per seipsam*) with the human mind, making it meaning in action (*faciens intellectum in actu*). When the human mind sees the essence of God, as Thomas says a little further on, 'that very divine essence becomes the form through which the mind understands' (12, 5). The vision of God is so 'immediate', when God himself is the 'intelligible form', that the human mind may even be said to become 'deiform'.

Everything dealt with in *sacra doctrina*, as Aquinas says elsewhere (Ia 1, 7), is dealt with 'sub ratione Dei'—'theocentrically', we might say. Students of Aquinas have not always taken this principle seriously. In practice, he may not always have stuck to it himself, but he certainly did so with respect to the question of our knowledge of God. The thirteen articles of Question 12 may even be read, not so much as a ladder, more as a moving escalator, taking the reader from the paradigm of knowledge of God in the beatific vision to this earthly and temporal life's experience of being joined to God, in the dispensation of grace, 'as to an unknown', *quasi ignoto* (12, 13 ad 1)—and back again.

Thus, Aquinas's discussion of our knowledge of God is entirely dominated by the biblical promise of face to face vision, which he translates into terms of complete identity between the human subject

and God in an endless transforming ('deforming') act of knowledge. For Thomas, it may even be suggested, the beauty of Aristotle's account of knowledge was precisely that it showed how the human subject might indeed become one with the object (whether world or God)—but without being extinguished. There is no question of submersion or loss of personal identity in any nirvana or ocean of Being.

Students of Aquinas sometimes talk as if his great interest lay in developing a proto-empiricist theory of knowledge in the wake of Aristotle for its own sake—into which he then, perhaps with some reluctance and a certain amount of massage, had to squeeze the abnormal case of beatific vision. But, given his deepening commitment as the years went by to reading the Fourth Gospel in tandem with the works of Aristotle, it seems much more likely that he wanted the relatively down-to-earth 'empiricist' epistemology in place precisely to highlight the extraordinary nature of the consummation of the human mind in the eschatological gift of 'deforming' knowledge. The utterly grace-given character of 'beholding and reflecting the glory of the Lord' (cf 2 Corinthians 3:18) could be located in an Aristotelian theory of the economy of human knowledge far more pointedly (poignantly, even) than in the Augustinian neo-Platonism which Aquinas inherited. The radically 'incarnationalist' naturalism of Aristotle struck Thomas as (providentially) far better designed to identify and protect the specifically Christian dispensation of grace than the dualistic metaphysics of the Platonist tradition ever was despite appearances.

## II

Jean-Luc Marion quotes Heidegger to the following effect (*God without Being*, page 64): 'A proof for the existence of God can be constructed by means of the most rigorous formal logic and yet prove nothing, since a god who must permit his existence to be proved in the first place is ultimately a very ungodly god. The best such proofs of existence can yield is blasphemy'.

This remark comes from lectures which Heidegger delivered in the years 1936–40 (see *Nietzsche*, volume 1, 1961, page 366). In context, he is discussing Nietzsche's proofs for determining things as a whole as the eternal return of the same. What we have first to do, he says, is to decide what sort of proofs Nietzsche offers. The possibility, and indeed the necessity, of a proof depend on the kind of truth that is at issue. 'A proof can be perfectly conclusive, and have no formal logical defect, and yet prove nothing, remaining implausible, because it does not touch or engage with the rightful truth-context'. Heidegger then gives us the example of the proof for the existence of a deity which may be formally

valid but entirely miss the point: the God who is first obliged to have his existence proved must in the end be a very ungodly God.

Heidegger makes many remarks in this vein, as J.L. Marion notes. One of the neatest, in a lecture given to the Bavarian Academy of the Fine Arts in 1950, goes as follows (*Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1971, page 179–80, translation slightly modified): ‘The world’s worlding cannot be explained by anything else nor can it be fathomed through anything else. This impossibility does not lie in the inability of our human thinking to explain and fathom in this way. Rather, the inexplicable and unfathomable character of the world’s worlding lies in this, that talk about causes and grounds fails to do justice to the subject. As soon as the mind calls for an explanation here, it does not transcend the being of the world but on the contrary falls far short of it’.

The human will to explain, *das menschliche Erklärenwollen*, is precisely what, in this case, demeans and occludes its putative object. That the world ‘worlds’ is a way (in Heidegger’s later language) of avoiding having to say that it exists either as caused or as created. It is not that he wants to rule out either scientific explanation or theological interpretation altogether. His claim, from *Sein und Zeit* onwards, has always been that the world has to be accepted for what it is in itself, as it gives itself—before it is buried (as he would think) under layers of scientific explanation and/or religious interpretation. We have to get back ‘to the things themselves’, in Husserl’s phrase, ‘to let them be’, so to speak—before atomizing them by analysis or treating them as mere tokens of God. According to Heidegger, science and theology may well conflict with one another but they are both rooted in the metaphysical inclination (as he thinks) to lose sight of the human world. A human being has a reality, wonderfully enough, prior to what science or religion makes of him or her. The world is what is there, so to speak, inviting awe and requiring obedient participation, independently of all possible scientific discoveries or religious revelations.

One might, of course, wonder whether Heidegger’s fear that the world gets lost in talk about its being created is rooted in a reductively deistic doctrine of creation. For Aquinas, and indeed for any authentically Christian theology, pure ‘giftedness’ is central to being ‘created’. But that is perhaps connected with the priority of being over goodness in the Thomist scheme (see III).

These Heideggerian considerations have an equivalent in English-speaking philosophy. Wittgenstein, also in 1950 as it happens, was confiding to his private notes (*Culture and Value*, page 85), the thought that, when people who believe in God look around, asking what it all means, they are not calling for an explanation in terms of causality—on

the contrary: the point of their question is that it expresses a desire precisely for *no* such explanation: it expresses an attitude to *all* explaining. For Wittgenstein, this attitude shows up in one's everyday life: 'The attitude that is in question is that of taking a certain matter seriously and then, beyond a certain point, no longer regarding it as serious, but maintaining [literally: explaining] that something else is even more important'. For example, he goes on, we may say that it is a very grave matter that some one should have died before he could complete a certain piece of work (Wittgenstein had known for six months that he had incurable cancer and would never finish the book which he had been writing for twenty years)—'and yet, in another sense, this is not what matters'.

There are, after all, three conditions which often look alike but differ completely: attachment, detachment and indifference. It is a hair's breadth away from apathetic resignation no doubt; but Wittgenstein's conception of an attitude that manifests a desire (*Verlangen*), when faced with life and the world, for the cessation of the will to explain (*Erklärenwollen*), seems remarkably close in spirit and tone to Heidegger's sense that, in calling for an explanation for the very existence of the world, we may think that we are transcending the world to some prior or more sublime plane but in fact we are only overlooking the world altogether.

With this background in mind, then, the question that J.L. Marion raises is whether 'the conceptual discourse that pretends to accede positively to God' (page 32) is not even more radically objectionable than atheism. Indeed, before entering and constituting conceptual atheism, idolatry may well be at work inside Christian apologetics—'the apologetic attempts that claim to prove, as one used to say, the existence of God'. That is to say—'Every proof, in fact, demonstrative as it may appear, can only lead to the concept; it remains for it then to go beyond itself, so to speak, and to identify this concept with God himself'. Aquinas, according to Marion, 'implements such an identification by an "id quod omnes nominunt" repeated at the end of each of his *viae*' (pages 32–33). Proof in natural theology uses positively what conceptual atheism uses negatively. 'In both cases, human discourse determines God'. Of course the two positions contradict each other, but the common presupposition which unites them is 'that the human *Dasein* [existence] might, conceptually, reach God, hence might construct conceptually something that it would take upon itself to name "God" either to admit or dismiss' (page 33).

There is certainly something in J.L. Marion's idea that modern western atheism is the result of certain ways of doing theology. Michael

J. Buckley, in his magisterial historical study, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987), traces the rise of atheism to the attempts of seventeenth-century Catholic theologians such as Leonhard Lessius (1554–1623), a Jesuit who taught at Douai and Louvain, and Marin Mersenne (1588–1648), a lifelong friend of Descartes and a member of the Order of Minims, to prove the existence of God independently of any intrinsically religious and moral experience or evidence. The ‘death of God’, as one might have guessed, was an inside job, the result of two or three centuries of ‘natural theology’. By shifting to supposedly neutral religion-free ground to mount proofs of the existence of God these theologians inaugurated a whole tradition of philosophical theology which dialectically generated its own negation. Historically, atheism would thus be the product of a certain kind of theism. So at least the story goes, plausibly enough.

How much farther back may such crypto-atheistic theism be traced? In particular, need the Five Ways of Aquinas be regarded as ‘human discourse’ that ‘determines God’, and thus count, in J.L. Marion’s terms, as idolatrous?

Are the Five Ways ‘proofs’ or ‘pointers’, as Thomist commentators used to say? Is Aquinas out to demonstrate formally that God exists from premisses that bracket out all religious and moral considerations? Or, more weakly, is he explicating in monotheistic terms what people already suspect from experience? Many exponents, whether defending or rejecting them, certainly treat the proofs as methodologically isolated from any human and religious context.

Lubor Velecky, on the other hand, in his important recent book, *Aquinas’ Five Arguments in the Summa Theologiae la 2, 3*, elaborating a case which he has made over the years, places the text firmly in its literary and historical context, arguing that Thomas never intended to prove God’s existence, which anyway he regarded as in principle unknowable, but rather to give the word ‘God’ a meaning from non-biblical sources, in conversation specifically with contemporary Aristotelians. In effect, he was reassuring the young students for whom he was writing, as they began to do theology, that the God whose self-revelation they were destined to preach had some connection (analogical and remote enough as it might be) with the principles of intelligibility taken for granted elsewhere on campus by students of cosmology, physics and so forth.

This is very much the line taken by Edward Sillem, in his valuable if now little read book *Ways of Thinking About God* (1961)—‘[Thomas] is trying to reassure the timorous Augustinian theologians that the philosophers who had not the faith were not really the menace to their

Christian acquaintances they were held to be, for they knew *something* about the existence and nature of God' (page 99).

We may perhaps go a little further. If anything emerged from the extremely bitter debates within Catholic theology set off by Henri de Lubac's essays in the early 1930s (perhaps it is unwise even to mention them!), it must surely be that Aquinas never conceived, even hypothetically, any destiny for human beings that could be detached from eschatological vision of God as promised in Scripture. Cajetan (1469–1534), the reforming Dominican who had a famous dialogue of the deaf with Luther in 1518, no doubt wanted to stress the integrity of human nature and the radical gratuitousness of divine grace, but his suggestion that Thomas believed in a double destiny for human beings—one natural and one supernatural—surely reads a distinction which is not there into the text. Baius (1513–89), the greatest theologian at Louvain, fuelled theological speculation about the conceivability in the abstract of an ungraced and unredeemed order of creation (a theoretically Christless world)—all for the best of reasons, of course. But the way had opened up for a theology of 'pure nature'—natural theology in the modern sense (as Hans Urs von Balthasar says in his book on Barth, 1951).

It had become possible to discuss the existence of a deity who was yet to make any moral or religious impact on any one, historically. Natural theology in the sense of theological reflection on the natural realm within the real world as it actually presents itself, a discourse as old as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement, never bracketed out the religious, ethical and aesthetic experience of the inquirer or apologist. Of course, it did not include such experience explicitly either. It was just that the distinctions allowing such experience to be excluded had not yet been drawn.

This hypothesis of a natural destiny for human beings independent of the actual historical dispensation of redeeming and divinizing grace had fateful effects outside academic theology. Indeed, as Henri de Lubac noted in 1965 (*Le mystère du surnaturel*, page 15), the modern Catholic Church suffers more than ever from this rupture between nature and grace, between what human beings can do 'on their own' and what they need God to supply 'from above'. If we are capable of obtaining a natural beatitude through reason and the means that nature provides, the supernatural comes to seem something superimposed and superfluous. Theology itself, since the Enlightenment, has striven to construct an interpretation of Christianity acceptable to the exigencies of reason alone—as if human reason were somehow outside the history of fallen and redeemed humanity—independent, then, of moral and



religious presuppositions .

When Aquinas, maintaining that we cannot know what God is, insists that we do know something of God 'from his effects', *ex ejus effectibus* (Ia 3. 41), it is very easy to assume that he has in mind principally (even solely) physical processes, events and objects in our empirically observable environment, stars, stones, rabbits and suchlike, to mention some of his own occasional examples. But, as I recall Cornelius Ernst remarking in a class some thirty five years ago, there is no reason to exclude ourselves from the scene of the divine effects. Just because Aquinas seldom (if ever), writes of inwardness, memory and so on there is no reason to suppose that he had no conception of it. After all, his mind was steeped in the writings of St Augustine. Again, just because he has so little to say about symbolism, ritual and so on, we need not assume that he was an alien in the medieval world of mazes and heraldry, plainchant and seasonal liturgy.

Many philosophers of religion in the English-speaking world write as if whatever moral and religious experience they (and we) might have can be bracketed out of reflection about God. For J.L. Marion, by contrast, such a methodologically neutral and uncommitted approach to the question of God would be futile and simply crypto-idolatrous. Whatever such philosophers would be writing about, it could not be God.

### III

As David Tracy notes in his helpful foreword, *God without Being* rejects the typically modern theological strategy of seeking correlations between faith and reason, and in particular between Christianity and the religious and moral dimensions of secular experience. Instead, J.L. Marion favours a revelation-based strategy, rather in the style of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar. As regards St Thomas, the persistent fear is evidently that, by approaching God in terms (say) of 'Being Itself' (Ia 3, 7), the reality of God as self-giving love is radically misunderstood. We have to liberate talk of God from the concept of Being—to open up a way to speak of God 'without Being'.

Marion reminds us of the interesting fact that Thomas deliberately broke with tradition when he insisted that being (*esse*) is prior to goodness (*bonum*). Among his contemporaries, St Bonaventure stuck to the venerable litany of the Divine Names which they all inherited from Denys the Areopagite (late fifth-century Christian neo-Platonism as we now think), as Duns Scotus later did. The Platonic connections between goodness and love, as well as the neo-Platonic concept of the Good as bountiful self-giving (*bonum diffusivum sui*), seemed too precious to

displace. In effect, for Marion, the God revealed in Jesus Christ under the name of charity (1 John 4: 8, 16) was reduced by Aquinas, with his metaphysics of 'Being' (page 82), to no more than the Supreme Being. The non-Thomist conception of the priority of goodness over being seems closer to the distinctively Johannine revelation of God as the unmerited outpouring of immeasurable love.

The original edition of *God without Being* met with some savage reviews, especially by French Dominicans. In the preface to this American edition we find Marion, perhaps somewhat shocked, plainly remaining nostalgic for 'the path that St Thomas did *not* take', but now handsomely conceding that 'even when he thinks of God as *esse*, St Thomas nevertheless does not chain God either to Being or to metaphysics' (page xxiii). On the contrary, since for Aquinas there is no distinction in the Godhead between existence and essence (Ia 3, 3), the divine 'Being' surpasses creaturely beings 'immeasurably'—indeed '*hardly* maintains an *analogia* with' them (my emphasis). With a deepseated suspicion of the very idea of analogy, apparently, which Aquinas would not have shared, he seems to back away, in the preface, from accusing him of turning the God of self-giving love into the metaphysical idol of the Supreme Being.

But should we not investigate why Thomas decided to reverse the traditional priority of the Good? He may, of course, be wrong about this, as many recent commentators say—but is it not clear that his first concern is to insist on the radical difference between the Creator and creatures in terms of 'what God is not' (*ST* Ia, 3)? If consideration of 'the ways in which God does *not* exist' is placed at the head of the agenda, then is it not inevitable that we find ourselves talking first about 'being'—or 'existence'?

The hardest thing, for philosophers of religion in the English-speaking context, is, however, to cope with talk of 'Being'. The word, at least nowadays, simply does not have the metaphysical aura that it seems to have in French, and even more in Heideggerian German. In his *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (1933), which Gilson somewhat extravagantly considered 'as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St Thomas', G.K. Chesterton regrets that the word 'being' reminds us of fantastic professors in fiction, who wave their hands and say, 'Thus do we mount to the ineffable heights of pure and radiant Being', and the like (chapter 6). The word has 'a wild and woolly sort of sound; as if only very vague people used it; or as if it might mean all sorts of different things'.

A great admirer of the work of St Thomas such as Sir Anthony Kenny, in his 80-page introduction in the Past Masters series (1980),

allows that the doctrine of God as self-subsistent Being has often been hailed as his most profound and original contribution to theology—and devotes nearly twelve pages to debunking it as ‘sophistry and illusion’ (page 6). On the other hand, in *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, by far the most substantial and comprehensive modern study (1992), Brian Davies does not even mention ‘Being’. He translates the Latin *esse* as ‘existence’ (page 33). To say that ‘God is Existence’, far from being the open sesame of ‘the metaphysics of Exodus’ (‘I am Who I am’), turns out, quite undramatically, to be a way of contrasting God with everything else (as suggested above). Indeed, for Brian Davies, this is precisely how Aquinas looks around the world asking ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’. There has to be something which exists by nature—Aquinas is simply saying that God is the Creator. To say that God is ‘Existence Itself’ is just another way of saying that God is not a creature (page 55). The magniloquence of Thomist raptures about ‘Being Itself’ suddenly collapses, which does not mean, on the other hand, that Brian Davies has robbed the doctrine of God as Creator of its profundity.

On the contrary. According to the preface to the English edition of his book, Wittgenstein is part of J.L. Marion’s ‘horizon’ (page xix). In fact it is difficult to detect much sign of that in the text. But if Wittgenstein has taught us anything, it is surely that we need to ask ourselves whether our favourite metaphysical words—specifically including ‘being’—have any connection with the way they are used in the language in which they are at home (*Investigations*, section 116). If we demystify the word ‘Being’, as Brian Davies quietly does, we need not fear that we must lose all sense of how wonderful the world is. In 1916, aged twenty seven, in a lull on the Russian front, Wittgenstein made the following note (*Notebooks*, page 86)—‘The wonderful thing is that the world exists. That there is what there is’.

Thus, *God without Being* drives one back to the mystical theocentricity of the *Summa* (Section I). It invites us to question whether natural theology, properly understood, is ever independent of our ethical and religious context (Section II). And finally, when we turn to expositions of Aquinas by English-speaking philosophers, we hear (from Anthony Kenny) that God as Being is an illusion, which might strengthen J.L. Marion’s case. But we find also (with Brian Davies) that God as Existence is a neat way—but certainly not the only one—of describing God as Creator. And if that is right, God ‘without Being’ may have been the One whom St Thomas had in mind all along.