

## Comment: *Ratzinger's Thomism*

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In *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977* (published in English in 1998), the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger has nothing happy to say of the Thomism which he was taught in his seminary days: ‘I had difficulties in penetrating the thought of Thomas Aquinas, whose crystal-clear logic seemed to me to be too closed in on itself, too impersonal and ready-made’. He means, of course, the philosophy courses that preceded entry into theological studies—logic, apologetics, metaphysics and so on. Nobody in those days thought of dogmatic theology as particularly ‘Thomist’, it was simply Catholic: Thomist moral theology, by contrast, was a minority interest, little practised outside Dominican study houses. The seminary philosophy, anyway, as Ratzinger recalls, was ‘a rigid, neoscholastic Thomism’. Presumably he was taught from textbooks that set out the Thomist ‘system’, without ever requiring students to read much if anything by St Thomas himself. Referring to its being ‘closed in on itself’, after all, is not something that anyone with firsthand knowledge of Thomas’s work would be likely to think. Like most seminarians of his generation, and for decades before and afterwards, Joseph Ratzinger survived the mandatory years of Thomistic philosophy without its making any profound impression on him.

Ratzinger has said that he preferred St Augustine as a counterweight to St Thomas. This is clear in the study of paragraphs 11 to 22 of *Gaudium et Spes* which he contributed to the Herder Commentary on the Vatican II documents (1968, English translation 1969). In the very interesting discussion of atheism (paragraph 21) he regrets that the authors took no account of recent theological controversy, especially as provoked by Karl Barth’s ‘attack on *analogia entis*’—thus on the very idea of natural theology, proofs of God’s existence, and so on. Even more he regrets that Vatican II makes no advance over Vatican I (1869): it should have added the notion of ‘*experientia*’ to that of ‘*ratio*’ (his Latin). In effect, he is suggesting, what modernists like George Tyrrell and others sought but failed to bring off was to integrate the appeal to ‘experience’ as well as to reason in the exposition of Catholic theology: something that he finds missing at this point in *Gaudium et spes*.

Vatican I anathematized atheists,—those who say that ‘the one, true God, our Creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason’.

This is a much more enigmatic, provisional, ambiguous and controversial statement than it looks at first sight. For one thing, it is not knowledge of God that can be reached by reasoning, but only of God's existence—though this key distinction that Thomas makes may not have been clear to all the bishops in 1869. For another, earlier in the text of the document, God is described, not as 'our Creator and Lord', but as 'the source and end of all things'—which is a good deal less specific, much closer to Thomas, and free of any suggestion that we could reason our way to knowledge of God as 'Lord' (a biblical and divinely revealed title, one would have thought). Then, as records of the discussions at the time show, some of the bishops questioned whether or not knowledge of God's existence could be attained by 'fallen' reason, without the help of 'healing grace', *gratia sanans*—a question it was decided to leave undecided.

To return to his commentary, Ratzinger regrets that this paragraph of *Gaudium et spes* fails to exploit Augustine's theory of knowledge—'incomparably more profound than that of Thomas'—in the sense that Augustine realises that 'the organ with which God can be seen cannot be a non-historical (*geschichtslose*) 'ratio naturalis', which just does not exist, but only the *ratio pura* i.e. *purificata* or, as Augustine expresses it, echoing the Gospel, the *cor purum* ('Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God')'. As he goes on at once to say, 'the necessary *purificatio* of sight takes place through faith (Acts 15:9) and through love, at all events not by the power (*Macht*) of reflection alone and not at all by our own power (*Eigenmacht*)'.

By implication, the version of Thomism that Ratzinger rejects here is clearly some kind of rationalism. Unless he is setting up a straw man he is suggesting that Thomists operate with a conception of reason according to which it lies within the power of reflection to demonstrate God's existence, independently of the reasoner's moral condition. Admittedly, while he says quite explicitly that Augustine's theory of knowledge is much more profound than Thomas's, it is probably only modern Thomists whom he is accusing of operating with an ideal of reason which is quite independent of a certain purity of heart—no different, we may say, from the impartial and neutral reason allegedly introduced at the Enlightenment. In the end, however, this dream of reason is an illusion.

Whether Augustine's theory of knowledge is much deeper than that of Thomas Aquinas would still be worth discussing: in the meantime, the rationalistic Thomism to which Benedict XVI was exposed in his youth has gone, leaving us (as he said back then) with a serious problem about how credibly to contend with modern forms of atheism.

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