

41. Cf. C.I.C. cc. 537 and 1280.
42. Cf. Vito Pinto, ed., op. cit., comment on c. 1287 §1 and 2 p. 733.
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44. Cf. Luigi Chiappetti, ed., *Il Codice di Diritto Canonico* Napoli (1988), Vol. II, comment on C. 1284 §1 and 2, p. 394.

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“GOD” IN THOMISTIC METAPHYSICS: A HELP IN THE FACE OF CONTEMPORARY ATHEISM

Paul K. Oredipe

Introduction

In the whole course of philosophical development, the subject of God has, in one form or another, been a central and significant one. The view of Miguel De Unamuno that the history of philosophy “is strictly speaking a history of religion”¹ may be an exaggeration, but the fact remains that the subject of God has been central to Western philosophy from Thales to Sartre. The question is no less central to the philosophies of the Eastern world, where the line of demarcation between philosophy and theology is more difficult to draw. At the present time, this same interrogative has continued to impress itself on us with acute urgency, relevance and renewed interest.

My choice of this topic is prompted by the unique character and problem of contemporary atheism which no responsible philosopher can neglect to reflect upon. There is little doubt that what in fairness could be called the classical proofs for the existence of God leave contemporary man unimpressed and seldom, if ever, convinced. The issue of God’s existence (though it may be not the most important religious issue) is one of the most interesting philosophically and it has recently become very crucial due to the influence of the “God is dead” thinkers. Difficulties about believing in God, and doubts about Him assault most of us, and we are surrounded by people who suffer from such doubts and difficulties more acutely than ourselves, or else who suffer from no such doubts because they are clear that God does not exist. In modern times, there is a strong current of atheism all over the world, propagated politically by Communists and (at least in contemporary western civilization) promoted by cultural conditions that are inimical to a religious orientation. All these give additional importance and urgency to the subject of “God”

In this article, I do not intend either to rationalize faith or to offer any proof of God’s existence, for that would mean a wrong application and use of the word ‘proof’, but rather to articulate reasons which seem to me capable of convincing anyone for whom the question is an open one that we are justified in holding that there is a God, that is, a Being, (at least legitimately thought as a person) who is the source of all being and value. This will

show that faith is justified by the natural power of the human intellect. The knowledge of the reality of God might be described as "non-technical", "non-discursive", "non-argumentative" or even "non-scientific", but it is not "irrational". A rational knowledge of the existence and attributes of God is not only possible but also real. My consideration is based on the issue of God's existence in Thomistic metaphysics, showing that although it may have been substantially weakened, it cannot be conclusively refuted by criticism. For to say that an argument is invalid is by no means the same thing as to say that its conclusion is false. Perhaps something will be found which is not only valuable but also traceable through the vicissitudes of history and yet possess a message for the present age.

God-Talk, Why?

With regard to this question, Miguel De Unamuno rightly points out that man is preoccupied about the question of God because he is preoccupied about himself, about his own existence, the meaning of his life, and especially what will happen to him hereafter.² It is the problem of man that leads to the problem of God. This is brought out clearly in anthropocentric theology in which God is seen and studied only in relation to man's salvation. "At the root of all man's restlessness and all his philosophical speculations there is only one problem," "says Regis Jolivet, namely, the problem of God. This surely is the question of questions to which all others lead and which is impossible to escape".³ It is "the philosophical question of most extreme importance, both theoretically and practically". The problem of God is primary amid the whole range of fateful human questions. The whole man is profoundly engaged both in the positing of the problem and in its solution. In fact, he is in a real sense a datum of the problem itself, and his solution of it has personal consequences that touch every aspect of his conduct, character, and consequences. This problem is so unique in that no man may say of it, "it is not my problem". No being other than God occupies so large a place in the life even of those who deny Him, or believe that they do not know Him. Some of such men have in fact recognised that this conclusion must profoundly alter one's way of understanding himself, his fellows, and his world. Thus, the problem of God is basically the problem of man, the problem of human life, its meaning, its origin, value, and its ultimate destiny. No sooner do we start reflecting on human life than the problem of God arises in one form or another. Furthermore, in order to show that the problem of the existence of God is a great one F.C. Copleston asked B. Russell in a debate between them:

would you agree with me that the problem of God is a problem of great importance? For example, would you agree that if God does not exist, human beings and human history can have no other purpose than the purpose they choose to give themselves...?

From the foregoing, it is clear that the question of God is not an abstract question. Man does not see it as an abstract question because it arises from disturbing, existential questions about himself. It is these fundamental questions that lead him ultimately to the question of God. For the meaning we find in human existence must depend entirely upon the solution that we give to the problem of the existence and nature of God. Thus the question of God is a practical question, since it is in the light of its affirmation or denial that all human affairs must be understood and regulated. It is a question, perhaps more and certainly not less, opportune now than at any other period in the history of the human race. In addition, the human enigma is what every one must confront and resolve. In this regard the question of God's existence is no trivial question. It is an exceedingly important question. Hence, man is continually preoccupied with God-talk and more specifically with the question whether God exists or not.

Is A Philosophical Approach Possible?

It must, however, be noted that for some people, for a philosopher, if he happens to be Christian (as in the case of the present writer), to take up such a problematic and impervious issue as God's existence is merely rationalizing a conviction previously embraced on other and logically less reputable grounds. Bertrand Russell objects that St. Thomas Aquinas' "appeal to reason is, in a sense, insincere, since the conclusion to be reached is fixed in advance".⁶ He goes further to say that:

There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an enquiry... Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth...

In contrast to this view, one cannot deny the fact that St. Thomas was fully aware of both the limitation and the value of human reason and, therefore, he made his philosophic approach to the supreme question of the existence and the mode of existence of God in a spirit of profound humility

combined with assured confidence in the validity of human thinking. He knew precisely to what extent God is unknowable and knowable through the unaided capacities of reason. In other words, he was always aware of the virtually unbridgeable guilt between the powers of human knowledge and the infinitude of God's nature, saying that "the divine reality surpasses all human conceptions of it".⁸

That notwithstanding, it is the condition of man to be a social animal even in his thinking, to be influenced by tradition and the environment, and to be indoctrinated as a child before he begins to reflect as a man. It is equally his business, as his mind matures, to pass a reflective judgment on the influences which have moulded him and are still working upon him. Those who profess to think in complete independence are all the more inevitably subject to the intellectual influences of their times, because their declaration of self-sufficiency incapacitates them from acknowledging and, therefore, criticizing the influences that bear upon them. Man's power of knowing is precisely conditioned, positively and negatively, by his grade of being. The philosopher who has been educated as a Christian may, consequently, be given the benefit of a claim to honest reflection and to the acquisition of an honest philosophical conviction about some of the doctrines which he accepted before he approached philosophy. If we have been told that the Eiffel Tower exists in Paris and we see it with our own eyes when we go there, we do not think it necessary to suppose that we are suffering from hallucination on account of what we have been previously told. There exists within the tradition of Christian thought a genuine use of reason, fully rational, independent (this does not mean separated) and distinct from revelation. Also the Christian experience itself should be part of the data of basic human experience that forms the starting point of the realistic philosopher. Even in an epoch like our own, a thinker can scarcely claim to be a philosopher if he leaves so momentous a feature of human life as religion out of account or merely attempts to explain it away. The philosopher, therefore, while not trespassing upon revealed theology, has his own proper task to perform in exploring the possibility and mode of a natural knowledge of God based on the universal principle of reason. Directed by these elementary considerations, St. Thomas was able to embark upon his investigations into natural theology with the most accurate estimate of its possibilities and limitations. And St. Thomas, it can be said without mincing words, represents as none of his contemporaries singly does, the totality of medieval thought. Thus "to know Thomas Aquinas is to know the medieval mind at its finest, its most powerful, and, indeed, its most modern expression".⁹

The Notion of God

In any discussion about God, there is a more basic question than the question of the existence of God. This is the question of the meaning of "God". Hence, when asked if he believed in the existence of God, Albert Einstein is said to have replied: "First of all, define God, then I shall tell you whether or not I believe in His existence".¹⁰ In fact, unless there is agreement on this point, and thus agreement as to what is the point of the question that is being asked, the question itself cannot be intelligently discussed. Otherwise our disagreement or agreement would be merely verbal rather than real. We may then say that the question: "Does God exist?", implies another: "who is God?" Furthermore, according to P.O. Bodunrin, "philosophical inquiry has a peculiarity".¹¹ Unlike other disciplines, philosophy most often poses the question "What is X?" before it asks "Does X exist?" Philosophers first seek the characterisation or definition of the object of discourse, to clarify their meaning or contest its intelligibility before contesting the evidence or justification for the entity that is said to exist.

God In Thomistic Metaphysics

The best answer to the question of the meaning of "God" in Thomistic metaphysics is found in the concluding statement at the end of St. Thomas' arguments for the existence of God. For the purpose of this write-up, I will take that of the third way as the most central and fundamental. Although Saint Thomas calls the first way the *Via manifestior*, that is, the most obvious of all, it is possible to argue that the third way, which St. Thomas places at the centre of his five ways, is indeed central and fundamental. S.E. Stump supports this when he writes that:

*The third one, comparing possible and necessary being appears however, to contain the most philosophical rigour and the basic assumption of all the other proofs, namely, that possible beings must derive their existence from something that has existence necessarily in itself.*¹²

R.P. Phillips stresses this further by saying that: "In it is expressed in the clearest fashion the main theme of them all; and moreover, it is concerned with the very heart of metaphysics".¹³

Saint Thomas did not use the word "God" from the beginning so that he would not be accused of prejudging his own proof. For him, in the third

way, God is that being whose existence is necessary of itself. This implies perfect identity of God's essence and existence. His existence follows necessarily from His essence. Thus it is part and parcel of God's nature to exist. This idea of a self-subsistent being is the point where his five ways converge and culminate. This idea unifies the ways as a common keystone unifies five arches. Five attributes appear, one at the end of each way, in ascending order thus: first unmoved mover of the universe, first efficient cause, first necessary being, supreme being, supreme directing intelligence. These five attributes are to be found only in a self-subsistent being. Here then lies the culminating point, the metaphysical terminus of the road that ascends from the sense-world to God. This is a fundamental Thomistic approach.

Principle of Causality

Having seen the Aquinian meaning of God derived from his arguments, we may then ask: what is the rational ground for such a definition or description? How did he arrive at this understanding of God? The answer to this is found in the principle of causality. "Causality" is the most common and the most fundamental concept in St. Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics. As a matter of fact, it is the core of his philosophy. His proofs rest, one and all, on this principle: Anything that exists, if it does not exist of itself, depends in the last analysis on something that does exist of itself. Herein lies the fundamental validity of the five ways. Simply expressed, causality means: the more does not come from the less, the more perfect cannot be produced by the less perfect. This principle expresses a fundamental truth which is exemplified at every turn of the road, and which can almost be deduced from any experience by the intellect of man. For St. Thomas, it is an "ontological principle", dealing with what is essentially intelligible, and only accidentally phenomenal or sensible.¹⁴ However it is not open to any direct measurement, or "presentational immediacy",¹⁵ (in Alfred North Whitehead's term). It is based not on our own internal experience of being ourselves causes, but on an analysis of what any intelligible account of reality necessarily and absolutely requires or demands. To deny this is to affirm that the more comes from the less. For Thomas Aquinas, this is to introduce "absurdity" or "contradiction" into the real world. It cannot exist because it is beyond the bounds of objective reality, without any possible relation to reality. This metaphysical notion of causality is such that even a phenomenalist interpretation of it for the purposes of physical science proves nothing against its validity. For instance, the very term "law" sig-

nifies a statement of uniformity in natural phenomenon whose search would not be intelligible apart from some principle or cause productive of that uniformity. Whoever denies causality must lapse into the endless silence of universal scepticism.

Contingency and Causal Regression

Another question that arises is that regarding the starting point of Saint Thomas' argument: the fact of contingency. The basis of this assertion or affirmation has often been questioned and even denied by those who are not conscious of this fact. It is precisely at this point that one determines whether or not one should go along with Aquinas' argument; whether one shares his insight into the contingency of finite beings, or one remains unconvinced by his argument. Apparently, this is a simple fact of the physical world. We know that some things are contingent for the simple reason that they come to be and cease to be. Our own experience of the generation and corruption of things, so to speak, helps to elicit this insight and forms the basis as such. The coming into being and the passing-way of individuals is, of course, a fact that can be observed. This fact can, and often does, give rise to the feeling of the transience of all things, of the tenuous, uncertain, gratuitous and precarious character of finite existence, including our own.

However, we cannot suppose that everything is contingent or capable of being or non-being. If so, there would have been a time at which nothing existed. But from nothing, nothing could ever come to be. Hence the need for a causal regression to account for the fact of contingency. This causal regression, if properly considered, cannot be conceived as continuing indefinitely forward or backward. Unless there is a first or supreme member in the ontological order it is impossible to explain the notion or the causal activity of the lowest or other members of the series. Also, if an infinite series of causal principles is possible, there would be no beginning to any other series. If there were no actual beginning, then there would be no succession, since each must follow after its predecessor. If there is no first, then we should have to say there was no second or third member, and consequently no other member.¹⁶ This would likewise be absurd. Again, it must be noted as Fredrick Copleston remarked, that in denying an infinite causal regression, Thomas Aquinas was:

*not thinking of a series stretching back in time, of a "horizontal" series... what he denies is the possibility of an infinite series in the order of actually depending causes, of an infinite vertical series.. in the ontological order of dependence.*¹⁷

To put it better, in denying infinite causal regression, Aquinas is talking of "a hierarchy of causes in which a subordinate member is here and now dependent on the causal activity of a higher member".¹⁸ There is a difference between essential and accidental causes on the one hand, and essential and accidental ordering of causes, on the other hand. In a series of actually and essentially subordinated causes, each member is here and now dependent for its causality, and so for being a member of the series, it is dependent on the actual causality of the member before it in the series. The priority of one over the other is a priority not of time, but of the superior over the inferior. In such a series, no member can cause if causality was never imparted to the series, that is, if there not a first in the series of causes. If we see a wagon in motion, as in the case of a train, we know there must be an end to the series of wagons, the engine, which gives causality to the whole. If no water enters the system of water pipes in a house from the mains, there can be no water in the taps. To suppose that we could get causality in some cause which essentially depend for its causality on another by **having an infinite series** of such causes is like hoping to get water in a tap by **prolonging the pipes** for ever, but never connecting them with the mains. One cannot but stop at a first cause in a series of actually and essentially subordinated causes. To prolong such a series to infinity in the hope that, by so doing, we shall account for the presence of causality in the members of the series in which we observe it is an open mistake and a useless effort. The series of dependent causes, rather than being infinite, begins with some first cause which is not dependent for its causality on another, but gives it to all the rest. The dependent thus demands the independent, the relative the absolute. The movement and contingency of the experienced world cannot be without any ultimate and adequate explanation.

Modern Atheism: Any Justification?

It is hard and difficult to see how the existence of God can be denied, or at least, how it can be solidly grounded on philosophical reasons. Whether or not it be possible to prove that there is no God, no atheist takes the trouble to prove. This suggests that there are no invincible reasons to convince him that there is no God. This absence and impossibility of any proof of the non-existence of God does not amount to proof of His existence, but it invites one to think that some facts or reason must account for it. The various criticisms and refutations of the rational grounds for believing in God's existence appear to be based on either a complete misunderstanding

or on prejudice, as in the case of Hume and Kant, of a total rejection of metaphysics as a veritable department of knowledge in any serious sense. To deny God's existence and simultaneously affirm any existence is to fall necessarily into contradiction which does not appear on the surface, in the immediate terms employed, but which is always there if you will but examine those terms. The bond between the notions of divinity and of immortality has become so tight that the notion that a god should die is absurd. If there ever was a god, there must still be one, for if that being died, he was no god. What stands in need of rational justification, therefore, is atheism, much more than the spontaneous belief that there is a God. In addition, if the death of God means His final death or demise in the minds of men, the persistent vitality of theism constitutes for atheism its most serious difficulty. When something is truly dead, nobody will waste his time demonstrating that it is really deceased. His very notion will then become merely an archaeological curiosity. God will really be dead when no one will still think of denying His existence. The fact of near-universal and persistent consensus of the human race is the heaviest stumbling block in the path of atheism. It offers a remarkable resistance to all efforts to destroy it. For a millennia it was believed that the universe consisted of solid concentric spheres; but since Galileo demonstrated that is not true, the notion of heavenly spheres has vanished from our minds. Why then should not the old belief in God also be likewise dead now that it is denounced as an illusion? The idea of God or the sense of the divine presence in human affairs has not only been persistent and widespread in history, but has grieved men and compelled them at times to follow a course of action contrary to powerful natural passions and desires. It has sometimes been more compelling than fear, hunger, sex, and the will to live. Tyrants have not been able to stamp it out.

Also it must be remembered that wherever a truth has practical application and implications, the influence of the will in assent must be taken into account. Obviously no truth has more widespread practical application than that of the existence of God. Its implications are tremendous even for those who insist upon suspending judgement entirely. Hence, because many a man desires to reject those implications, and can do so by rejecting the fact, he manages to shut his eyes to the truth of fundamental principles, which is as certain as the multiplication tables. A man cannot help seeing what he sees, although he may refuse to turn his eyes to see it, or he may turn his eyes away and refuse to look at it again. Also, in real life because the blind cannot see it, it does not follow that the sun does not shine.

The professed atheists believe that they have an accurate knowledge and appreciation of the theistic arguments, all of them and the best of them, yet they refuse them to suit their own purpose. Even what is considered the most formidable objection to the existence of God, namely, the presence of evil in the world, in no way affects the natural tendency of reason to affirm the notion of God in us. On the contrary, it strengthens the significance of that fact. More often than not, men think of God in spite of the presence of evil, particularly when suffering evil and especially when in fear of death. It was said of a man who protested vehemently that he did not believe in God, that on being caught in a bombing raid, he was the first to exclaim "O God", as he and others waited desperately in a fox-hole. Reminded of his statement a few minutes later, he confessed, "there are no atheists in fox-holes".¹⁹ Thus atheism, even when it is real, is a negation implying the presence in the mind of the very notion it denies, a negation fighting, more or less successfully, against a natural tendency of reason to affirm it. What is at stake then is not the death of God, that is, a complete and final absence of the notion of God, but the collapse of our conceptual formulations about Him in the minds of the professed atheists. Their quarrels, it appears are against particular notions of God. "For a man to deny God" writes Thomas Chalmers, "he must be a God himself. He must arrogate the ubiquity and omniscience of the Godhead".²⁰ For before we can be sure that nothing serves as an evidence for His existence, we must know all things. As a matter of fact, a great many noble and enlightened men of every age have openly professed their belief in God.

Lack of belief in God and in a meaningful universe is likely to express itself in a lowered enthusiasm for life. "Atheism", says W.P. Montague, "leads not to badness but only to an incurable sadness and loneliness".²¹ It tends to take morale and drive from life and leads to pessimism, cynicism, and a sense of futility. Belief in God has had a steadying effect upon life and has contributed to mental and personal stability. In this connection the famous statement by Psychiatrist C.G. Jung is opportune: "Among all my patients in the second half of life — that is to say, over thirty-five — there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life".²² His patients had become mentally ill because they had lost that integration "which the living religions of every age have given to their followers".²³

While there are problems growing out of a belief in God, there appear to be more problems involved in a denial of such belief. Atheism, in spite of the several theories and arguments for it, e.g. the eternity of matter, the

existence of evil in the world, and the challenge of modern science, to mention but a few, causes more riddles than surety with regard to the disturbing, existential questions about man and the universe. Thus it is good, safe, and indeed reasonable for man to believe, beyond all philosophy, the testimony of experience and reason, in the existence of God.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is pertinent to state here that Saint Thomas Aquinas' thought process cannot be considered as a "proof" of God's existence in the strict sense, for God is not an object or a thing of which we have experience of a scientific type, and no such experience, that is such as leads to a scientific proof, is possible. What is possible is a process of reasoning or demonstration. However, it is by affirming at the same time that God exists and that He surpasses reason that reason itself knows Him to be God indeed. Thus we can use the expression of Gabriel Marcel and say that Aquinas ways are "ways of approach to the ontological mystery".²⁴ in which our every being and existence are involved. Hence Saint Thomas, more modestly prefers to use the word *viae*, ways of directions. They suffice to merely offer reasonings which are logically demonstrative rather than provide proofs which no one can decline to accept. For the fact that God's existence is not self-evident does not imply that there cannot be good reasons for believing in His existence. In fact the process of reasoning only serves to make explicit a sort of intuition, not of God himself, but of the reasons which support the assertion of His existence. The meaning of reason itself implies that one cannot have faith without reason. Also one cannot have faith in nothingness. We cannot, therefore, restrict meaningful reference to the domain of the directly perceptible. As Fackerheim says, "religious faith can be, and is empirically verifiable, but nothing empirical can possibly refute it".²⁵ Sense is not the only faculty revelatory of the nature of reality, as an inveterate and unbending empiricist like Hume and others of similar stand would claim. Sensory cognition alone cannot be the only genuine mode of knowledge. Metaphysical reflection belongs to a full understanding of things in so far as this is possible for a finite mind because the metaphysical point of view is a possible point of view. Knowledge requires the recognition of the genuineness of both types of cognition. Man is a metaphysical animal with metaphysical needs and, consequently, he cannot satisfy his intellect with incomplete truths (about physical existence alone).

Philosophy is not theology, and philosophical understanding is not religious faith; but the understanding that philosophy can give us, limited though it is, may if we are so inclined, serve as a foundation for faith. This is confirmed by that well-known maxim of Francis Bacon that "a little philosophy bringeth man's mind about to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth man's mind about to religion".²⁶ Hence the process of thought by which Saint Thomas discussed the question of God is only a deepening and "precising" of the way the human mind works or can work spontaneously and accurately in considering the world.

Thus reflecting on the foregoing and proceeding on grounds of objective logic and metaphysics, the existence of God is asserted as a hard fact to be acknowledged by reason without reference to emotions, aspirations, presuppositions, outdated truths, or any support other than honest and accurate thinking. Belief in him is of rational plausibility and possibility. It can, therefore, be described as a "reasonable certitude". It is justified on neutral rational grounds.

*The finest fruit of serious learning (and education) should be the ability to speak the word God without reserve or embarrassment, certainly without adolescent resentment; rather with some sense of communication, with reverence and with joy.*²⁷

*Religion is life, philosophy is thought... we need both thought and life, and we need that they shall be in harmony.*²⁸

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JUSTICE, PEACE AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION AS CULTURAL REVOLUTION: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCHES

A.S. Oyalana

Introduction

In Vancouver, in 1983, the delegates at the VI assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) issued a call to the member churches to engage themselves in "a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice peace and the integrity of all creation"¹ The task was considered urgent and given high priority. It stemmed from a twofold conviction, namely, that "demonic powers of death" abound in the world today and that it is a duty of those who confess "Christ as the life of the world" to resist such powers. The demonic forces of death are present in "racism, sexism, caste oppression, economic exploitation, militarism, violations of human rights, and the misuse of science and technology".² The reports of the Issue Groups 5 and 6 identified more precisely such forces.³ For example, group 6 denounced:

*the machine of the prevailing economic order which starves millions of people, and increases the number of unemployed every year. Science and technology are misused to oppress the people and to destroy the earth in an insane arms race. More and more people are detained and "disappear", are tortured, deprived of religious liberty, forcibly displaced or exiled.*⁴

There is no doubt that the Christian community must, in the name of Christ, oppose such demonic powers. The crucial question here is *quomodo?* or "in what way?" This is not, of course, an easy question and it admits of a variety of answers. the purpose of this paper is to bring up a few concerns of mine (taken up from my reading of Paulo Freire) which may help us in answering the question *quomodo* in our particular contexts. The proposals made in this paper may help us to enhance or in some cases even correct existing strategies. It is certainly neither possible nor desirable to provide the reader with a complete strategy for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Our sole goal is to discuss a few issues which in our view are important.