

THE UNKNOWN GOD

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WE are told that the first question asked by the infant Thomas Aquinas was: 'What is God?' The pursuit of that question became his life's work; to it he gave all his energy and ability. Yet from the time of his earliest writings he had reached the conclusion that in this life he would never find the answer. 'Nescimus', he will say—'We do not know.' And he will repeat St John Damascene's *In Deo quid est, dicere impossibile est*—'It is impossible to say of God what he is.' St Thomas says this over and over again in his writings, from the earliest to the last. He insists not only that we *do not* know what God is—the essence, nature and 'whatness' of God—but also that we *cannot* know it: *non possumus*.¹ He loves to repeat the assertion of the *Mystical Theology* of the pseudo-Denys that the most perfect union with God is union with the utterly Unknown.²

Although it will be found that all saints and sages of any consequence, whether in East or West, whether Christian or non-Christian, are in full agreement with St Thomas on this point, many of his own professed disciples seem to have watered down his teaching to some extent. They will tell us that although it is true that of course we cannot fully know the essence or nature of God in this life, we can and do have a vague, inadequate or (as they call it) a 'non-quidditative' knowledge of the Divine Nature, and they hold that this is what St Thomas really means.

But (as Père Sertillanges and others have pointed out) this is very hard to square with St Thomas's own categorical and unqualified language, which says quite clearly that we do not know the Divine Nature at all, and that it is utterly (*omnino*) unknown to us. Moreover, this interpretation does not seem to square with the cogent reasons which St Thomas gives to explain *why* we cannot know what God is. This is not the place to enter into the controversy or to examine all the technicalities. It must suffice to say that for St Thomas knowledge of anything whatever is impossible without

¹ e.g. in *Summa Theologica*, I, 1, 7 ad 1. All references are to the *Summa* unless otherwise stated.

² *Ille qui melius unitur Deo in hac vita unitur ei sicut omnino ignoto.* (e.g. I, xii, 13, 1.)

some sort of mental image, form or *species* of what is known, however vague, incomplete, or inadequate, and such images or forms must be something definite and finite. There can therefore be no such image or form of the Infinite, and any such image or form which is taken to represent the divine essence will positively misrepresent it (I, xii, 2). Only the direct, beatific vision of God in heaven, in which God himself in some incomprehensible way takes the place of such an image, will yield us any knowledge at all of what God is, and even this can never fully comprehend him (*ibid*, arts. 4, 5, 7). St Thomas does indeed allow that we can in this life have this sort of inadequate, indistinct, 'non-quidditative' knowledge of *created spirits*, that is of angels (I, lxxxviii, 1), though even of these we can never know what each angel is as distinct from another. (One of the difficulties in admitting that we can have a 'non-quidditative' knowledge of God lies in the fact that it reduces God, in respect of our knowledge, to the level of an angel.) Between us and angels there is at least something in common: they like us are in the category of finite beings, created substances. But between us and God there is no *tertium quid* which is in any way common. There is no third term to which God and his creature can be referred, or which would so much as supply a point of comparison (I, xiii, 5). God must be outside all classes and categories, as well as outside the possibility of being imaged or conceived (I, iii, 5).

But if this is so, it raises a lot of questions, not only theoretic, philosophical questions, but very practical ones as well. If St Thomas is right when he says we cannot know what God is, then are we not driven to stark agnosticism? If he found the question was unanswerable, why did he not drop it? If he concluded that he could know nothing about what God is, how came it that he himself talked and wrote so much about God? How can we talk and argue and write about something when we know we do not know what we are talking about?

Let us summarise as briefly and simply as possible his own answers to these questions, though these are not always quite easy to square with what is said in some of the books which claim to reproduce his thought.

Although we do not and cannot know *what* God is, we can know *that* he is. Or, more exactly, we know and can prove that there is something or someone which human beings call 'God' or

'Divine'. We know this, not because we know *his* existence directly, but because we do know the existence of other things. We have direct acquaintance with all sorts of happenings, changes, productions, things, values, strivings. The famous Five Ways set out to prove that these things simply could not exist, indeed nothing at all could exist or happen, unless something Unknown, which we call divine, somehow existed (I, ii, 3). We cannot here pause to examine these Five Ways and argue to their validity. They are nowadays commonly called 'proofs for the existence of God', which is rather unfortunate and misleading: they are never so called by St Thomas. For what we can prove, we know, and St Thomas holds that we can no more know the existence (or *esse*) of God, than we can know his essence (they must be, in fact, one and the same). The Five Ways enable us to know, not the being or existence of God (*Dei esse*), but only that what men call God is, or exists (*Deum esse*) (I, iii, 4 ad 2). They show that *unless* there is some unknown ground or source (*causa* is St Thomas's word, but this does not of course mean 'cause' in the restricted sense in which it is used in modern science) on which everything ultimately depends, then nothing could ever exist or happen at all. This is not to say (as is sometimes claimed today) that God is an 'explanation' of the universe, for we cannot 'explain' what is already better known by what is unknown. But we do claim that if there were no God, there could not be anything else. St Thomas's position differs from that of modern agnostics because while modern agnosticism says simply, 'We do not know, and the universe is a mysterious riddle', a thomist says 'We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know, and if there were not, there would not even be a riddle. This Unknown we call *God*. If there were no God, there would be no universe to be mysterious, and nobody to be mystified.'

But although God is a mystery, and we cannot know in this life what it is, does this mean we can say nothing whatever on the subject? St Thomas quotes approvingly the pseudo-Denys to the effect that God is best known and praised in utter silence: he adds however that 'this does not mean that we may think or say nothing at all about him, but that we must realise that he always transcends anything we can think or say about him' (*In Boethium De Trin.* II, 1 ad 6).

But, if we do not know what he is, how can we think or say anything about him? In the first place, once it is given that there is a mystery on which all else depends, we can say quite definitely what that mystery is *not*. 'Since we cannot know what God is, but only what he is *not*, we are not able to study *how* God is, but rather how he is *not*. . . . For it can be shown in what manner God is *not* by denying of him what does not belong to him.' (I, iii, prologus.) It can be shown quite definitely that this mystery called God could *not* be material, *not* physical, *not* a part of anything else, *not* consisting of parts of any sort. Also, that it therefore must be one and not many (for there can be no difference where there is not some sort of composition), and must be beyond all classes and categories (I, iii, *passim*). This mystery cannot be limited in any way, and so must be infinite (I, vii, 1, 2), not subject to change and so not existing in time (I, x), nor (having no parts) extended in space (I, viii). In short, it—or he—is nothing definite or definable at all, and nothing definite can be it. *Un dieu défini est un dieu fini*.

As we can see, this approach says nothing positive about God at all: it consists entirely, not of affirmations, but of denials. The Greeks call it *apophatic* theology—'denying' theology. St Thomas calls it the *via remotionis* or the *via negativa*: the negative way of removing from God all that he is not. As St Thomas sets it out, it looks like no more than a matter of words and logic. But in its origin it is much more than that, it is a way of the whole soul to reach out to God in his transcendence, and is a way by no means peculiar to Christians. We find the like in Plotinus as well as St John of the Cross and *The Cloud of Unknowing*; we find a similar process of 'stripping' all images and ideas vividly related in the Indian *Upanishads*. Likewise the Hindu contemplatives seek to become Godlike by the exercise called *pratyahara*, in which they say 'Neti, Neti' ('not this, not this') to every thought, image and feeling that comes into their minds, recalling the 'Nada' of St John of the Cross. The same way leads in China to the celebrated opening words of the *Tao Te Ching*—

The Tao that can be told of is not the Unchanging Tao,
The names that can be named are not the changeless Name.
It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang . . .

Only he that rids himself for ever of desires can see the Secret
Essences.

—and brought the Taoists to declare that ‘He who knows Tao does not talk about it: he who talks about it does not know it’.

Yet besides—but not without—this *via remotiois*, there is the *via causalitatis* (‘the way of causality’) and the *via eminentiae* (‘the way of transcendence’³). Just because all things that we *do* experience—

are effects dependent on a cause, we are able to be led from them to knowing *that* God is, and to what must pertain to him in so far as he is the ultimate cause of all, for he must transcend all that is caused. And so we know his relationship to creatures to the extent that he is the first cause of all—also the difference of creatures from this cause in so far as he is not any of those things which are caused by him—and we know that these are not denied of him on account of any lack on his part, but because he surpasses them all. (I, xii, 13.)

Hence, ‘although we cannot know what God is, we use his effects, whether of nature or of grace, instead of any definition’ of what he is (I, 1, 7 ad 1). The fact that other things exist and happen compels us to say *that* he exists as their ultimate uncaused cause, but the fact that other things are our only reason for saying that he is at all, we must deny each and all of them of him (the *via remotiois*), yet we must also say that he transcends them all (the *via eminentiae*). The Greeks call this *kataphatic* or affirmative theology.

It would be out of place here to follow in detail St Thomas’s detailed study (especially in *Summa* I, xiii) of the way in which we can have any positive thoughts or make any affirmative statements about God, and of what sort of meaning and reference they can have to what remains utterly unknown. It must suffice to say that such positive attributions as we can make about God leave the unknown mystery of God intact. ‘All affirmations we can make about God are’, St Thomas says, ‘not such as our minds may rest in them, nor of such sort that we may suppose he does not transcend them.’ (*De Div. Nominibus*, I, 2.) Our language about God can have no greater range and validity than our knowledge of him; hence we can speak of him only in words derived from his

³ I, xii, 13. Cf. *De Divinis Nominibus* I, 3: ‘The last achievement of which we are capable in this life in knowing God is the realisation that he is beyond anything we can think, and so the naming of God which is by way of denial (*remotio*) is supremely appropriate’.

creatures, and no name we use to 'mean' God can express the divine essence (I, xiii, 1). All human words originally signify some creature or effect of God, and therefore, at best, some reflection or refraction of the boundless Light of God—which remains darkness to us. They can therefore only be *applied* to God, and as applied to him have a meaning which we cannot grasp, though this meaning has some relationship (*analogy*, based on causality) to the meaning with which we are familiar from our experience of creatures. Even the name 'God' or 'Deus' itself can be derived only, St Thomas insists, from some created *effect* or *work* of God (I, xiii, 8). But whatever we say affirmatively about God does not make him any less unknown in himself, for all our words must be derived from our knowledge of his effects, not from our knowledge (or ignorance) of himself. 'Hence the perfection of all our knowledge about God is said (by Denys) to be a knowing of the unknown, for then supremely is our mind found to know God when it most perfectly knows that the being of God transcends everything whatever that can be apprehended in this life. And thus, although it remains unknown *what* God is, it is known *that* he is.' (*In Boeth. De Trin.* I, 2 ad 1.)

It is sometimes suggested that, while natural reason only knows God as cause, and therefore can talk about him only in terms of his effects, supernatural revelation nevertheless gives us knowledge of the divine essence 'in itself'. St Thomas knows nothing of this. We have seen that he says that in talking of God we can only 'use his effects, whether of nature *or of grace*'. And he tells us expressly that, 'Neither a Catholic nor a pagan knows the nature of God as it is in itself, but both know it only by way of some conception of causality, of transcendence or of negation'. (I, xiii, 10 ad 1.) The object of divine faith itself is still the Unseen and Unknown—*non visum, non scitum* (II-II, 1, 3).

What then does revelation give us that natural reason does not? St Thomas answers,

Although by the revelation, which is of grace, we do not know in this life what God is, and so [even by grace] we can be united to him only as to one unknown to us, still it enables us to know him more fully in so far as it displays to us both more and better effects, and enables us to attribute to God certain things which are beyond the scope of natural reason, such as that God is three and one. (I, xii, 13 ad 1.)

God is thus no less of an unknown God to the believer than to the unbeliever, to St John of the Cross than to Shankara or Plotinus, and we may say that to the Christian believer he is more, rather than less, mysterious. What the Christian believer has to deal with are '*plures et excellentiores effectus*'—more and better effects—but still only effects. Truly, they are effects of the very utmost importance, for they constitute the Gospel, the Good News of salvation, the *verbum salutis* on which ultimately our forgiveness, health and happiness depend. They are effects which, since they include the coming of God made flesh and the results of the sending of his Spirit, enable us to say things about God that we could not otherwise say—for instance, that he is trinity as well as one. But never in this life do they make any exception to the rule that 'We do not know what God is', and that 'we are most perfectly at one with him when we know that he is utterly unknown'. Paradoxically, we are most in his light when we are most in the dark about him. In our way to the promised land he is a dark cloud in our daylight, and a pillar of fire in our night.⁴ St Thomas tells us that even 'regarding those things which are revealed by God, and are set forth for our faith . . . we are scarcely able to hear the truth in the words of the holy Scripture, for they are as but a dewdrop falling upon us; still less can anybody in this life "be able to behold the thunders of his greatness"' (*Contra Gentiles*, IV, i, cf. Job 26, 14). Not only, St Thomas says in the same chapter of the *Contra Gentiles*, can we not see God in this life, but we cannot perfectly know even the 'ways to come to know him'.

Even when God was talking to Moses 'as a man talks to his friend' he told him, 'Thou canst not see my face, for no man shall see me and live . . . Thou shalt see my back parts, but my face thou canst not see' (Exodus, 23, 20-23). 'Verily thou art a hidden God, the God of Israel, the Saviour' says the prophet Isaiah (45, 15). It is instructive to run one's finger under the word *hide* in a Bible concordance, and see how often God is reproached with hiding himself from his most devoted servants. And hide himself he must, for so soon as we become satisfied with any picture or image⁵ of God, we are in danger of idolatry: of mistaking the

4 cf. *Bhagavadgita*, II, 69: ' . . . knowledge of the Atman is dark night to the many. . . . What they think is daylight to the seer is darkness.'

5 It seems useful to understand our psychological image of God, not only (or

comprehensible image for the reality, of losing the numinousness, the mystery, the transcendent majesty of God. So soon as, consciously or unconsciously, we suppose we have grasped God, he must elude us, for he is always beyond the furthest advance we make in knowledge about him. That is why image-breaking is as much part and parcel of man's religion as image-making—the story of Job and his disillusionment is a famous example of this, foreshadowing the *Eloi, Eloi lamma sabachtani* of Golgotha. God might be called a Fox of heaven for ever eluding the human hounds.

Yet, St Thomas shows us, the more we know of the *works* of God, both within the human soul and without in nature, the more we know about him—and the less we find we know (*Contra Gentiles*, II, 1, 2). In these days when the discoveries of science make nature increasingly mysterious and frightening, the more our familiar pictures of the universe are dissolved, the more we know of God, and the less we find we had known. Just because we only know God in his works, the more we know of his works, the more we know of him; but, on the other hand, the more we are sure we have grasped God, and that he conforms to our own *image* of him, the less shall we be inclined to penetrate further into the unexplored regions of nature or grace—themselves the reflections of his own infinite mystery. That is, as the psalms and prophets say, the trouble about idolatry—the fixed image petrifies and stultifies its worshipper into its own likeness, inhibiting his own growth by preventing further knowledge of God and his works.⁶

'No man has seen God at any time', says St John (John, 1, 18). All our images and concepts of God are stepping-stones which must be discarded if they are not to become idols, and we ourselves become stocks and stones, incapable of penetrating more deeply in knowledge of God through his works. But, St John adds, 'the only-begotten of the Father has revealed him'. In following God made man in his life and teaching, death and rising,

necessarily) as a visual phantasy or concept, but as the focus of a whole complex of conscious or unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, views and associations, often very tenacious, which should be no less subject to revision if we are to guard against 'peril of idolatry'.

6 e.g. 'They that make them [inanimate idols] shall become like them.' (Psalm 113, 8.)

and that in the power and love of the Spirit given us by the one God who is Father and Son and Spirit, we become *Filii in Filio*—children of God in the Child of God—and establish the right relation to the Unknown, now revealed to us as mysterious Trinity.

But what is the use of it all? What is the point of seeking to know the unknown and unknowable? Just this, St Thomas replies, that in our search for knowledge about God we find the truth about ourselves, our purpose and destiny, and on this our whole weal depends (I, i, 1). He recalls how even the pagan Aristotle had said that the very least and most imperfect knowledge we can have of divine things is more precious than the most precise knowledge about anything else (I, i, 5 ad 1).

To the objection that it is futile to try to know the unknowable, to grasp the boundless, St Thomas answers with St Hilary: '*Qui pie infinita persequitur, etsi non attingat aliquando, tamen proficiet prodeundo*'.⁷

7 'He who reverently pursues the Boundless, even though he will never attain it, will himself advance by pushing forward in his pursuit.' (Quoted *In Boeth. De Trin.* II, 1 ad 7.)