

CHAPTER 18

God

Robert Barron

There is a story told of the very young Thomas Aquinas. At the conclusion of an elementary catechetical instruction, the six-year-old Thomas raised his hand and asked his teacher, "but Master, what is God?" This was not the more familiar question – which the adult Aquinas would famously ask – concerning the "whether" of God's existence; this query was getting at something more elemental: what exactly was his Christian teacher talking about when he used the word "God"? It assumes that the meaning of this term is by no means self-evident, that it carries, perhaps, a surprising implication. It is sometimes presumed that, in inter-religious conversations, one can find unambiguous common ground in reference to the idea of God, that this belief somehow will link traditions otherwise sharply divided over doctrine and morals. It will be a central concern of this chapter to show that this presumption is false, that there is, in fact, an irreducible distinctiveness about the Christian conception of God, and that, therefore the question posed by the youthful Aquinas is both legitimate and illuminating. The Catholic Christian tradition argues that, most properly speaking, God is the strange and personal power revealed in the total event of Jesus Christ: his Incarnation, life, teaching, death, rising from the dead, and sending forth of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, one can find any number of family resemblances between this notion and understandings of God in other religious traditions, and upon that basis one can undertake fruitful inter-religious conversation. Nevertheless, the Christian conception of the divine remains unique, one-off, uplifting, precisely in the measure that it is unsettling. For the Christian notion is that God – ultimate reality – is nothing other than love.

The Incarnational Starting-Point

One could argue that all of Christian dogmatics flows from the assertion that, in Jesus Christ, God became a creature. This fundamental claim first unnerves us and then orients us, illuminating both the nature of the world and the nature of God. Christian

anthropology, cosmology, ethics, and aesthetics follow from that first illumination and the Christian doctrine of God from the second. What is that divine power capable of *becoming* a creature without ceasing to be divine and without compromising the integrity of the creature that it becomes? In the New Testament period itself and then throughout the first several centuries of the Church's life, reflective Christians wrestled mightily with that question. Tentative resolutions emerged in the earliest creedal statements, in the speculations of the first systematic theologians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, and in the formularies of the councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus. Much of this energetic intellectual work was summed up in a pithy statement at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Attempting to walk a middle ground between monophysitism and Nestorianism, the fathers of Chalcedon said that Jesus Christ is the hypostatic union of two natures – human and divine – in one divine person. The *Logos* instantiates two modes of existence – created and uncreated – which come together in the closest possible unity, yet without "mixing, mingling, or confusion." This tells us that God cannot be, himself, a worldly reality, something qualitatively similar to a human nature. Worldly things, finite natures, exist in a kind of mutual exclusivity and over-againstness. Part of what it means to be a tree is *not* to be any other finite thing. Thus the only way for a creaturely nature to become another is to be absorbed by it or to devolve into it, as the antelope becomes the lion only by being devoured or the house becomes ashes only by being burned. Yet, in Jesus, a divine nature enters into a personal union with a non-divine nature in such a way that neither is compromised in its integrity. Therefore, the God revealed in Christ's incarnation cannot be a being in the world, one thing among others, a supreme reality in, above, or alongside the rest of the universe. This God is other than the world, but if I can borrow Kathryn Tanner's term, he must be "otherly other," that is to say, not distinctive in a conventional sense, but rather non-contrastively other. Robert Sokolowski has observed that there is a distinction between God and the world that is utterly unlike the ordinary distinctions that obtain among and between creatures: differences of size, position, color, quality, or ontological density (Sokolowski, 1995: 35–6). The Renaissance-era theologian Nicholas of Cusa caught this paradox when he commented that God, while remaining absolutely distinct from the world, must nevertheless be named the *non Aliud*, the non-other. The God disclosed in the hypostatic union is not so much somewhere else (that would make him only a distant finite thing) but *somehow* else, and this peculiar mode of his transcendence is made plain precisely in the act by which he becomes non-interruptively close to the world.

In order to grasp the radicalness of the idea of God implied in the Incarnation it is particularly instructive to contrast this Chalcedonian theology with the competitive notion of God assumed by the great atheists of the modern period. For Ludwig Feuerbach, the "no" to God is tantamount to the "yes" for humanity; for Karl Marx, the sloughing off of the skin of religious belief is the condition for the possibility of human flourishing; and for Jean-Paul Sartre, the sheer fact of human freedom positively disproves the existence of an all-powerful God. In all three cases, the unquestioned assumption is that God is competitive to human nature, that divinity and humanity are locked, necessarily, in a zero-sum game of ontological rivalry. But none of this is congruent with the doctrine of God implicit in the Chalcedonian teaching of the

non-contrastive divine transcendence. The true God can personally ground a human nature in such a way that that nature remains utterly uncompromised; this incarnational notion – alien to the modern atheists – stands behind St Irenaeus' dictum *gloria Dei homo vivens* (the glory of God is a human being fully alive).

God as *Ipsum Esse*

This non-competitive transcendence of God compelled the Christian tradition to speak of the divine in surprising and distinctive ways. Its greatest adepts tended to name God, not as a being, even the highest being, but rather as Being Itself. One of the clearest witnesses to this uniquely Christian conception of God is the medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury. In his *Proslogium*, Anselm describes God as *id quo maius cogitari nequit* (that than which no greater can be thought), a characterization that, at first glance, seems obvious enough, but that in fact represents a radical departure from the pre-Christian and non-Christian manner of naming ultimate reality (Anselm, 1962: 7). However great the Greek gods were imagined to be, they were still realities within the general structure of nature; however magnificent the Platonic demiurge or Form of the Good are, they remain supreme beings alongside other realities; however ontologically impressive the Aristotelian prime mover, it is still one being among many. And then there is Anselm's "that than which no greater can be thought." Whatever this reality may be, it cannot be something in, above, or alongside the world, for if it were, it plus the rest of the world would be greater than it alone, thus rendering it not that than which no greater can be conceived. If Anselm's description is correct, then the world in its entirety does not add to or subtract from God's being. We could say that, after Creation, there are more beings, but no more perfection of being. "That than which no greater can be thought" cannot be ingredient in the finite realm in any ordinary sense; it cannot be the supreme being or, as David Burrell memorably observed, "the biggest thing around." Here we see the essential congruity between the Chalcedonian and Anselmian formulas: both signal the God who is otherly other and non-constrastively transcendent to the universe.

Anselm is certainly best known for the demonstration of God's existence which flows from this peculiar name and which Kant awkwardly designated "the ontological argument." In point of fact, it is not really an argument at all, but a showing forth of the implications of the name – which becomes clear when we attend to the introductory moves of the *Proslogium*. We find that Anselm is responding to the promptings of his monastic brothers, who were seeking one single elegant proof of God's existence. He tells us that he sought assiduously for that argument and finally despaired of ever successfully formulating it. Only when he surrendered did the sacred name force itself upon him. This little narrative is extremely illuminating, for it demonstrates the impossibility of capturing the true God in the nets of the mind or through an aggressive act of the will. That which is not ingredient in the world as one being among many could come to us only as a gift, through the grace of its own self-disclosure. What follows in the "argument" is a further elaboration of this basic insight.

Anselm tells us that "that than which no greater can be thought" cannot be simply

an idea in the mind, since existing both inside and outside the mind is greater than existing within subjective consciousness alone. If, therefore, like the fool in the psalm, one were to say that there is no God, one would be falling into a strict logical contradiction. Within the brief compass of this chapter, I cannot even begin to enter into the roiled and complex history of the interpretation of this demonstration, but I will maintain that both its advocates and critics tend largely to miss the heart of the matter. As a believing monk writing for his brothers in religion, Anselm is hardly in doubt as to the existence of God and thus is by no means trying to argue the case on neutrally rational grounds. Rather, he is showing *how* "that than which no greater can be thought" must exist. This strange reality can be isolated on neither side of the subjective/objective divide, for such a sequestering would be incompatible with the very structure of its existence. "That than which no greater can be thought" transcends this standard division because it precedes it and grounds it. Once more, were God a being of any kind, he could be caught in the web of the subject/object dichotomy and be known precisely by way of conventional contrast. The same peculiar otherness implied by the Chalcedonian formula is insinuated by the Anselmian demonstration.

Another Christian witness to the strangeness of the divine being is Thomas Aquinas. Throughout his career, Thomas tends to avoid the designation *ens summum* (highest being) for God, consistently preferring *ipsum esse subsistens* (the sheer act of to-be itself) (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 3, art. 7). This sacred name implies the same transcendence of subjectivity and objectivity that we saw in Anselm's treatment, for *ipsum esse* must be, simultaneously, what is closest to any thing and what is utterly beyond the metaphysical confines of being a thing. It must be, to borrow Augustine's lyrical language, what is both *intimior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (closer to me than I am to myself and higher than anything I could imagine). Aquinas specifies this distinctiveness as the *simplicitas* (simpleness) of God, or the coincidence in God of essence and existence. In any creature – from quarks to archangels – there can be found an ontological complexity of *esse* (the act of to-be) and *quidditas* (whatness), the former as it were poured into the receptacle of the latter, so as to give rise to a particular existent. But in *ipsum esse*, there is no such play; the to-be of God is not received or delimited by any principle of *quidditas*, so that to be God is not to be this or that type of thing, but simply to be to-be. An immediate implication of the divine simpleness is the divine unknowability. Thomas comments at the beginning of his discussion of the divine attributes in the *Summa Theologiae* that he will not tell us what God is, only what God is not. Since our senses and minds are so naturally oriented to the universe of things in a nexus of contingent relationality, we cannot really know what *ipsum esse* is, except in a negative way, by removing from the idea of God any qualities that belong to creatures as creatures. Hence, we can say that God is not material, not finite, not temporal, not mobile, etc., but what precisely this infinite, eternal, immaterial, and unmoving reality is, we do not clearly know. The very negativity of Aquinas' theological method witnesses to the non-contrastive otherness of God that we have been insisting upon, for were God a being among others, he could be known through comparison with other things. Thomas sums up this insight by insisting that God can never be defined and hence that God is essentially and not simply provisionally incomprehensible.

God the Creator

Implicit in all that we have been arguing to this point in regard to God is that the universe, as such, has no necessity. Though the ancient Greeks and Romans certainly recognized contingency within the world of nature, they never imagined that nature itself could be contingent. Nature or matter co-exist as ultimate principles alongside the gods or, in a more philosophical framework of discourse, the prime mover or the Form of the Good. But this understanding of the world has to give way once we begin speaking of “that than which no greater can be thought” or of *ipsum esse*. Since the universe adds nothing to the greatness or perfection of the true God, the universe as such need not exist. God would be fully himself without it. But this introduces a dimension of contingency that the pre-Christian world never imagined, namely the radical dependency of the whole of finitude. To say that the universe in its entirety exists but need not exist is to say that it is created. As Christian theologians and philosophers explored the implications of this doctrine, they began to speak of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation from nothing. They saw that the non-constrastively transcendent God had to bring the whole of what is not God into being and that, therefore, there could be no pre-existing substrate upon which or with which the Creator acts. This is why Aquinas, for instance, could say that Creation is not, strictly speaking, a change or a making. A number of contemporary theologians have begun to point out that *creatio ex nihilo* – an ordering without presupposition or substrate – is necessarily a non-violent act (Milbank, 1990: 391). In the mythological and philosophical accounts that preceded and surrounded early Christianity, God or the gods establish order through some act of primeval manipulation, intervention, violence, or aggressive overcoming. Thus, one god or set of gods puts to death and dismembers the body of a rival deity, making the heavens and earth out of the parts of the conquered victim. Or, the most powerful metaphysical principle moves, guides, invasively orders some more pliable element (prime matter, nature, etc.) and thereby establishes the world in its present structure. But none of this obtains when we speak of creation from nothing, since there is, quite literally, nothing for God to move, change, order, or dominate when he brings the whole of finite existence into being. Rather, this coming-to-be occurs through a sheerly generous and non-violent act of love. In the alternative accounts of worldly ordering, being-over-and-against is primary, but on the Christian telling, being-for-and-with-the-other is ontologically basic. The non-competitiveness between the divine and human natures, which we see on display in the Incarnation, finds a more general parallel in the non-invasiveness of the Creator God in his Creation.

From this teaching concerning *creatio ex nihilo* flows the doctrine of metaphysical participation. Since the entire cosmos is made by God from nothing, it cannot have an extrinsicist relation to God, standing as it were apart from its Creator and relating to him in a mediated manner. Instead, everything in the world is a relation to God. In the disputed question *De potentia Dei*, Thomas Aquinas can make the Zen-like remark that that which receives creation from God is itself being created, breaking thereby the Aristotelian language concerning relationship as an accident mediating between two substances (*De Potentia*, qu. 3, art. 3). More to it, since it is so ontologically basic, Creation is not an act that can be relegated to the “beginning” of time; rather, it is the

on-going, here and now dynamic by which finite things are, from moment to moment, constituted. Were God to withdraw his creative energy, things would fall immediately into nothingness. And this is why Aquinas designates Creation as *quaedam relatio ad Creatorem cum novitate essendi* (a kind of relationship to the Creator, with newness of being). Though it can be construed easily enough in a pantheist or panentheist direction, the only language that is even relatively adequate to this relationship is “participation:” the universe shares, in a derivative way, in the intensity of the divine to-be. In the light of this idea of participation, the Thomistic tradition speaks of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being. “Being” is not a neutral word which can be applied to varying degrees of God and creatures; instead, *esse*, in the proper sense of the term, can be ascribed to God alone and only in an analogical manner of those things that participate in God’s to-be. Another implication of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the radical interconnectedness of all things in and through God. Since all created realities are coming forth, here and now, from the ground of the divine creativity, they are, perforce, united to one another at the deepest level of their being, co-inherent with each another through God. Participation in God implies a mitigated but real participation in other creatures.

A final implication of this incarnation-based doctrine of Creation is the unique mode of the divine causality and providence. In Jesus, as we have seen, divine and human natures come together non-competitively, and this means that the human intellect and will of Christ are utterly uncompromised by the proximity to them of the divine intellect and will. This was confirmed, incidentally, in the resolution of the monothelite controversy in the eighth century, when the Church emphatically taught that there are two wills in Jesus, operating in a perfectly coordinated manner. Extrapolating from this incarnational state of affairs, Christian theologians saw that God can direct all things – including the free wills of his rational creatures – in a non-invasive way, allowing the ordinary causal processes of nature – physical and psychological – to unfold in coordination with his own providential direction of the whole of Creation. Because God’s being is modally other than the world, his manner of causality is modally other than that of any agent in the nexus of interdependent causes. One can therefore say, for instance, that the downfall of the Soviet Union was the result of a complex congeries of economic, political, social, and religious factors *and* that it was ingredient in God’s providential governance of the universe, the meta-cause in no way negating or interfering with the complex of particular causes.

Giving Names to God

It could be argued that the central task of theology is assigning names to God. We have been considering God under the rubric of one of his highest names, Being Itself, the roots of which are, to some degree, in the event of the Incarnation. But the earliest explicitly biblical warrant for speaking of God as “the one who is” is in the third chapter of the book of Exodus. When Moses, responding to the divine manifestation in the burning bush, asks God his name, he hears the voice say, “*ehyeh asher ehyeh*,” “I am who I am” (Exod 3:14). During the 1960s there was a heated debate between Etienne

Gilson, who maintained that this divine self-description provided a legitimately biblical justification for the long tradition of naming God in metaphysical terms as being itself, and his critics, who claimed that the spiritually evocative and multivalent language of this Exodus story was seriously compromised by an abstractly ontological interpretation. Within the confines of this brief article, I cannot even begin to explore adequately the nuances of that debate. However, I would like at least to nod to both sides of the issue, maintaining that, in point of fact, the highest kind of metaphysical naming of God carries with it implicitly a powerful spiritual implication.

Genesis tells us that, in response to the suggestion of the serpent that God is a threat to their full-flourishing, Adam and Eve first grasp at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, attempting to seize for themselves a properly divine prerogative. When this proves futile, they seek to hide from God, concealing themselves in the underbrush of Eden, where, of course, they are immediately found out (Gen 3). What are on display in this vividly symbolic narrative are the two principal paths of the sinner – grasping at God, and hiding from God – and also the very manner of God's existence which renders hopeless all such attempts. The moves of the first sinners are repeated by Moses in the Exodus scene under consideration. When he spies the vision of the bush on fire but not being consumed (a wonderful image, by the way, of the non-competitiveness of the divine presence in Creation), he rather aggressively seeks to understand: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up" (Exod 3:3). But God frustrates any such attempt: "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod 3:5). This God cannot be seized. On the other hand, this God cannot be avoided. He speaks Moses' name and then reveals himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and of their people who are suffering in bondage in Egypt. The one speaking from the burning bush is as intimate and immanent as any of the local divinities with whom Moses was acquainted. Inspired by this closeness and forgetting, perhaps, that he is on holy ground, Moses seeks once more to grasp, and this time in the boldest way possible, through the seizing of a name: "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them" (Exod 3:13)? It is to this question that God gives his famous answer: "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*." Precisely in its strangeness, open-endedness, and indefiniteness, this answer/non-answer signals the unique mode of the divine existence as that which can be neither grasped nor hidden from, neither controlled nor avoided. "I am" must be utterly unlike any thing or combination of things in the world (in the measure that they exist as specified instances of being); and "I am" must be present, in the most intimate manner, to any thing or combination of things in the world (in the measure that they exist at all). Whether we render the Hebrew as "I am who I am" or, as some have suggested, "I will be who I will be," the name accomplishes the same undoing of the dysfunctional moves of Eden. Here we see that the description of God as *ipsum esse* is in line with both the dynamics of the Incarnation and the mysticism of Genesis and Exodus.

The more specific naming of God that occurs in the great tradition – the assigning of divine attributes – takes place under this rubric of immanence and transcendence. Certain names of God, which emphasize the divine otherness, are designed to keep

the grasping tendency at bay, and others, which stress the divine closeness, are meant to frustrate the impulse to hide. Thus this ascribing of properties to God has the dual purpose of naming God more truthfully and luring us into the right relationship to God, that of friendship (Barron, 1998: 105). Among the chief anti-grasping names are infinity and unity. For the ancient philosophers, infinity is an imperfection, since it implies incompleteness, and hence it was, for them, not ascribable to ultimate reality. Parmenides, for instance, appreciated Being as a finite and perfect whole. For biblically formed thinkers, however, infinity must be ascribed to God, since it signals his pure and limitless actuality, God's possession of the fullness of ontological perfection. Thomas Aquinas sees the divine infinity as a function of the identity in God of essence and existence: since the divine being is totally unreceived, it must be without limit. God's reality is therefore inexhaustible, and thus inexhaustibly fascinating for the mind. Commenting on Aquinas' eschatology, Karl Rahner said that it is only in heaven that the blessed see for the first time just how incomprehensible God is – hinting thereby that the *via negativa* practiced in the *Summa Theologiae* is a sort of distant preparation for the mode of knowing that will obtain in heaven (Rahner, 1978). The assertion of the divine infinity is thus a salutary frustration to the mind's tendency to seize and define God. A name that flows rather directly from infinity is unity. If we speak of a multiplicity of gods, then we would be obliged to say that one god is not any of the others, and this distinction would imply demarcation and delimitation. There cannot be, in a word, two ontological infinities. Both the *Shema* of the book of Deuteronomy, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4) and the opening words of the *Credo*, "I believe in one God," are affirmations that God escapes the nexus of finite things that stand contrastively over and against one another. And since the human mind knows precisely through the making of distinctions and the setting up of contrasts, this supreme unity of God holds off the temptation to grasp.

Still under the rubric of the divine transcendence, the tradition affirms that God is self-sufficient in his being, that he has, to use the medieval coinage, "aseity," by-himself-ness. As simple, one, and infinite, God must exist through himself and necessarily stands in need of nothing outside of himself. As we saw, Creation adds nothing to the divine perfection, and God requires nothing in the created realm in order to realize potentialities within himself. This divine aseity is correlated to the fact of creation from nothing, for how could God be ontologically beholden to anything that he has brought into being in its entirety? Once we appreciate the absoluteness of God's self-sufficiency, we are disabused of the illusion that we could, through our efforts and exertions, manipulate God or draw him into our sphere of influence. Relatedly, the tradition consistently speaks of God as free and sovereign. In creating, judging, making covenants, and redeeming, God acts freely, compelled by no agent outside of himself. Again, this claim is tightly linked to the affirmation of Creation, for nothing that God has completely made through his will could finally coerce the divine will. Since God acts consistently out of the integrity of his own being, it is pointless to seek to control, dominate, or coerce him.

Remaining under the rubric of the anti-grasping names, we can speak of the Lordliness of God. One of the most frequently-used terms for God in the Old Testament – as a sort of stand-in for the unpronounceable tetragrammaton – is *Adonai*, the Lord. Paul

Tillich has commented that this divine lordliness has both an aesthetic and a political sense (Tillich, 1986: 163). God's aesthetic lordliness is his sublimity and awesomeness, that overwhelming fullness of being in the presence of which the only proper response is bowing low. How often in the Psalms, the wisdom literature, and the prophets this divine sublimity is emphasized, along with the injunction to subject oneself to it in a spirit of humility. God's political lordliness is his capacity to command, to order and govern Creation, to reign supreme over all that he has made, to come unmistakably first. The only proper response to this modality of the divine being is obedience and trust. Whenever we are tempted to place ourselves in the prime position or to imagine that we are the commanders of our own lives, this divine attribute serves as the corrective.

Now these names protective of the divine transcendence (and there are obviously many others) are altogether appropriate and necessary for a proper description of God. But if they are exclusively emphasized, our idea of the divine becomes fatally distorted, God devolving into a distant object, or what Karl Barth termed "the deity of the God of the philosophers" (Barth, 1960: 45). As we have seen, what is remarkable about *Ipsum esse* is not transcendence in the ordinary sense, but rather strangeness, a non-contrastive otherness. Thus, alongside the anti-grasping names, the great tradition has listed an equally impressive number of anti-hiding names, attributes that describe the unavoidable closeness of Being Itself. Hence even as it affirms the infinity, simplicity, and unity of God, the tradition characterizes God as omnipotent or all-powerful as well. This symbol does not imply that God is the strongest and most influential being among beings or that God is capable of affecting anomalies (making two plus two equal to anything but four or declaring adultery morally praiseworthy). Such voluntarist fantasies are among the most glaring and dangerous distortions in the history of theology. Rather, the omnipotence of God signals that God, precisely as the ground of all existence, presses on the whole of finitude with an unconditioned authority. Similarly, God is described as omniscient, all-knowing. This does not mean that God is the most intelligent being among beings, knowing all things, as it were, from without. Instead, God knows all things in the measure that he knows them into being, his act of creation coinciding with his act of cognizing. It is not the case that God knows things because they exist; rather, things exist because God knows them. And omnipresence is ascribed to God as well, not to imply that he permeates all Creation like a force or energy, but that he, as Creator, grounds and gives rise to all space. Not restricted to any space, God is the Lord of all space and hence, if I can put it this way, geographically unavoidable. One could read Psalm 139 – "where can I run from your love?" – in this sense, as a sinner's lament, the cry of someone who wants to escape from God but can find no way to do so. And perhaps one could argue that the biblical stories of the Tower of Babel, David's murder of Uriah, and the attempted escape of the prophet Jonah were meant as narrative accounts of, respectively, the divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

Similarly, were God's self-sufficiency and freedom unilaterally stressed, God would become an overbearing and threatening supreme being. Hence the tradition has balanced these anti-grasping names with the anti-hiding attribute of the divine fidelity. The sheer act of to-be itself cannot fall into self-contradiction and therefore cannot

undermine the structures of the created being which participates in him. God does not hover arbitrarily over affirmation and negation like a capricious tyrant, but rather remains faithful to himself and that which exists in and through his being. To be sure, God does not have to create, but once he creates, he is bound in love to what he has made. In the language of the Bible, this is God's rock-like reliability and covenant faithfulness, his parent-like devotion to his creatures: "could a mother forget her child? Even should she forget, I will never forget you" (Isa 49:15). It is in this context of the divine fidelity that I would affirm of God the much contested attribute of immutability. Though God's unchangeableness has been defended by the Magisterium and by practically every major theologian in the tradition, this attribution has been sharply criticized by many contemporary thinkers, especially those formed in the school of process theology. The difficulty is this: though immutability is clearly an attribute of the absolute being as conceived of by the philosophers, it hardly seems characteristic of the God described in the narratives and poetry of the Bible. The Lord spoken of by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the Yahweh who interacts with Abraham, Jacob, and Moses is passionate, deeply involved in history, responsive to the actions of his people. The key to the resolution of this difficulty is, once again, the fact of Creation. The God who continually brings the whole of finitude into being from nothing cannot, in an ordinary creaturely way, be changed by anything he has made. To say otherwise is to undermine the metaphysical structure of Creation and to turn God into a supreme being among many. But to say that God does not interact with his Creation according to the interdependent manner of finite things is by no means to imply that God is wanting in the passion and deep involvement to which the Bible witnesses, just the contrary. The God who knows all of created reality into being, who stands behind every thought, movement, development, action, and reaction of the world can only be described, in relation to that world, as connected and compassionate in the highest degree. Immutability and love for Creation are not, therefore mutually exclusive, but mutually implicative.

God's Highest Name

Guided by the doctrine of the Incarnation and by the divine self-definition in Exodus 3:14, we have been exploring the implications of God's name *Ipsum esse*. But there is, within the biblical revelation, a higher name than this, an unsurpassable name beyond any other. This is given in the first letter of John: "*ho theos agape estin*" (God is love). G.K. Chesterton remarked that the dogma of the Trinity is nothing but an explication of this claim, for if God is love, then there must be, within the structure of the divine to-be, a play of lover, beloved, and love. If love were simply an action that God performs, something extrinsic to his essence, he could exercise it adequately in relation to the world. But if God is love, an ordered relationality must obtain in him.

The ground for this extraordinary claim of the first Christians is the antecedent claim of Jesus himself to equality with the divine Father who sent him. By forgiving sins, asserting authority over the Torah, cleansing the temple in Jerusalem, saying of himself, "unless you love me more than your very life, you are not worthy of me,"

indeed by the very quality of the whole of his public life, Jesus proclaimed his divinity. He was a human being, to be sure, but he also knew and professed himself to be God, and he spoke to and of the divine Father as another. Now all of this could be seen as the ravings of a madman or the outrages of a blasphemer, and it was just such suspicions on the part of the ruling establishment of his time that brought Jesus to his death on the Cross. However, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was read by the first believers as the ratification of the claims of Jesus on the part of the one he called Father. Thus it occurred to them that within the being of the one God of Israel there is indeed a play of duality, a conversation in love between the Father and the one he sent. Now this differentiated experience of God was further complicated by the sense that the very love which joins Father and Son, the love in which the Son was sent by the Father, had become a living presence within the community of the Church. This Holy Spirit, they intuited, was, like the Son and Father, divine, but other than the Son and Father in the measure that he had been sent by them. These insights – garnered gradually throughout the New Testament period – came to tentative expression in the Epistles of Paul and the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John, and found a paradigmatic formulation in the ecstatic phrase cited above: God is the love that joins Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What was bequeathed to the Christian Church in the post-biblical period was the daunting theological task of thinking together the two great names of God that we have considered: being and love. That the accomplishment of this assignment was a tangled and conflict-ridden affair shouldn't surprise us; that it was achieved as convincingly as it was is the real surprise and remains one of the glories of Christian theology.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will consider the theology of the Trinity offered in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas. A large part of the genius of Aquinas was his capacity to sum up and coordinate the wealth of material that the tradition had offered him, and his Trinitarian speculation is a particularly fine example of this synthetic power. Having in the first book of his *Summa Contra Gentiles* vigorously defended the unity and simplicity of God, Thomas sets out in the fourth book of that same work, to give an account of the Trinity (*Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, chapter 11). He begins with a sort of axiom: the higher the being, the more perfect and more interior its capacity for self-replication. The truth of this ipsedixism can be verified in the hierarchy of existence apparent in nature. The lowest level of being – for Aquinas, an inanimate object such as a rock – has the power to produce an image of itself, but only in a most exterior and imperfect manner. It can, for instance, leave an impression of itself in the soft earth or it can be made to leave its mark on skin or sidewalk. As we move up the ladder of existence, we come to plants, those things enjoying vegetative life. These can reproduce themselves in the elemental mode of the rock, but they can also do so at a higher level of interiority and perfection, giving rise to a seed which, falling to the ground, creates in time a remarkably complete *imago* of the original. At the next level of ontological perfection, we find certain animals capable of generating within themselves – with, to be sure, outside influence – nearly perfect physical replicas.

Then, as we come to the human level, a quantum is crossed, for the human being – physical, vegetative, and animal – is able to reproduce himself in the ways already

described, but he is also able, in his mind, to produce a self-image to a qualitatively more intense degree of interiority and perfection. This happens through the mind's capacity to form an interior word, a mirror of itself, what Augustine called *notitia sui*. All manner of autobiography, introspection, spiritual direction and psychotherapy depend upon this self-reflective power. Yet we have not come to the highest type of being, since even this intense self-imaging is less than perfect (otherwise, who would need the aid of a psychotherapist or spiritual director?) and less than utterly interior, since it, like all modes of human cognition, depends ultimately on the mediation of sense experience. So Aquinas speculates about a still higher type of creaturely being, namely the angels. Pure intelligences separated from matter, angels are capable of the formation of an interior word, a self-replication that is intuitive, immediate, and nearly perfectly interior. What prevents the angelic self-imaging from achieving complete interiority is the creatureliness of the angel. Though extremely high on the metaphysical scale, the angel is, nevertheless, a creature, which means that his being is received from outside, through the agency of God.

And this brings us to the highest degree of existence, to that reality in whom essence and existence coincide, to that which is the sheer act of to-be itself. And this means, in accord with Aquinas' dictum that we have arrived at that reality which is able to form a self *imago* that is utterly perfect and utterly interior. This is what happens when the Father (the primordial energy of the divine mind) knows itself through its interior word (the *Logos* or the Son). So perfect and selfsame is this *imago*, that one is compelled to say that it is one in being with the Father, that, in the words of John's Prologue, it is God. In the white-hot intensity of the generation of the Son from the Father, therefore, duality and unity coincide and coinhere. But there is one more step. The will, for Aquinas, is a modality of the intellect, since the good, understood as good, is immediately and *eo ipso* desired. Thus, when the Father knows the Son, he necessarily knows him as the supreme good, and by that very move, he loves him, he wills him. This divine love, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is the Holy Spirit, the sacred sigh of affection breathed back and forth between the Father and the Son. And since whatever God does is God (due to the coming together in God of essence and existence), we must say that this Holy Spirit is God. Guided by revelation and by the logic of the divine simplicity, we can see how the very unity of God implies the play of the Trinitarian persons. Because God is simple, he must be perfect; because he is perfect, he must have intelligence; because he has intelligence, he must know himself utterly; and because he knows himself utterly, he must love himself. Aquinas shows that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the divine simplicity, that the two great names of God – Being and Love – coincide, and in this he brings the Catholic Christian theological tradition to one of its highest points.

Now what more can we say about these "persons" that constitute the Trinity? In his *De Trinitate*, St Augustine famously commented that we call these realities "*personae*" only so that we might have something to say when people ask us what they are (*De Trinitate* VII, chapter 3)! And Anselm, many centuries later, called them simply *nescio quid* (I don't know what). The obvious danger sensed by both saints is that the use of the term "person" can give the impression that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three separate beings – which would, of course, compromise the divine simplicity.

Nevertheless, there are certain positive clarifications that we can make. Following indications in Augustine's work, Thomas Aquinas argued that the Trinitarian persons are "subsistent relations," that is to say realities that have something in common with substances (since they do not come into and out of being) and something in common with relationships (since they are, necessarily, oriented to another). So God is a set of relationships. Just as unity and plurality co-exist in God, so substantiality and relationality come together seamlessly in the divine to-be; what display themselves as mutually exclusive in the realm of creatures, constitute a *complexio oppositorum* in God, the fullness of the divine perfection transcending and including these contrary perfections.

Aquinas further specifies that among the three persons in the Trinity there obtains a set of four immanent relations. The rapport of the Father to the Son is termed "active generation," and the relation of the Son to the Father is called "passive generation;" while the relation of the Father and Son to the Holy Spirit is termed "active spiration" (breathing out), and that of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son is called "passive spiration." What this technical language signals is that there is, within the divine being, a kind of back-and-forth rhythm, a play of giving and receiving, something like the beating of a heart. Once again, if God is love, then the very to-be of God is a dynamism of loving and being loved, of looking and being looked at, or in the even more provocative language of Bernard of Clairvaux, of kissing and being kissed.

Conclusion

The English Catholic novelist Charles Williams once observed that the master idea of Christianity is co-inherence: that is to say, being in and with the other. He saw this dynamic in the Incarnation – the coming together without competition of divinity and humanity – as well as in Creation, the participation of all finite things in God and, through God, with one another. But the prime exemplar of co-inherence, he thought, was the *communio* of the Trinitarian persons, the existing-together of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a bond so tight that it constituted the divine unity. In the course of this explication of the Christian doctrine of God, we have explored all of these modes of co-inherence. The radical communion of the Trinitarian persons, we saw, grounds the non-invasiveness of the act of creation and the non-competitiveness of the natures in Christ. What we hope to have shown thereby is that willing the good of the other as other is the dynamic that structures reality at all levels, that love, in a word, is the fullest and deepest meaning of existence.

To defend the uniqueness of the Catholic Christian doctrine of God is to defend the legitimacy of that claim.

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