

Expressing the Inexpressible: Naming the One God in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas and in the Writings of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī

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By Way of an Explanation

THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY refers to an incident in the life of Thomas that occurred toward the end of his life as recounted by his biographers William of Tocco and Bernard Gui. While celebrating Mass in the Chapel of St. Nicholas sometime around the saint's feast day, Thomas underwent a bewildering transformation. After that Mass it is said that he never wrote further or even dictated anything. He even got rid of his writing materials. To his secretary and close confidante, Reginald of Piperno, who was astounded at such dramatic change in his Master, he is said to have confided the following:

Reginald, my son, I will tell you a secret which you must not repeat to anyone while I remain alive. All my writing is now at an end; for such things have been revealed to me that all I have taught and written seems quite trivial to me now. The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, He may quickly end my life also.¹

¹ Bernard Gui, *Vita* 27, trans. Kenelm Foster, O.P. (*The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents*, trans. and ed. Kenelm Foster, O.P. (London: Long-

At this point one can only imagine the agonising turmoil taking place within the soul of this man, who is not only considered the finest mind in medieval western Christendom, but also an immensely prolific writer. The day after this mystical experience he is no longer capable of putting pen to paper in order to discourse on the divine mystery that he has beheld and whom he had contemplated throughout his entire life. He has found himself in the awesome situation of being humanly incapable of *expressing the inexpressible*.

Comprehending and Naming God: The *Status Quaestionis*

It is true that any discourse about God can never dwell upon his essence, which is unfathomable, but only on his relation to creatures and, particularly, to humanity, as St. Irenaeus has aptly pointed out:

As regards His greatness, therefore, it is not possible to know God, for it is impossible that the Father can be measured; but as regards His love (for this it is which leads us to God by His Word), when we obey Him, we do always learn that there is so great a God, and that it is He who by Himself has established, and selected, and adorned, and contains all things; and among all things, both ourselves and this our world.²

One encounters a similar argument among classical Muslim thinkers. At the end of the twelfth century, the renowned Muslim philosopher-jurist Ibn Rušd (d. 1198) drew up a passionate defence of the study of philosophy by way of a carefully constructed and tightly argued *fatwa* entitled *Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature and Connection between Philosophy and Religion*. The question posed at the beginning of

mans, Green; Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1959), 46. Cf. chap. 47 of the *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino* by William of Tocco, chap. 24 of the *Life* by Calo, and most famously chap. 79 of the first inquiry into canonization (or Bartholomew of Capua), which appears on pp. 109–10 of this translation by Foster (“all that I have written seems to me so much straw”; “All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has now been revealed to me”). See <http://liberlocorumcommunium.blogspot.com/2010/07/bernard-gui-and-william-of-tocco-on.html>.

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, chap. XX, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers—Justin Martyr—Irenaeus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885; reprint, 1993), 487.

this work is whether the study of philosophy was legitimate in the eyes of Šarī a.³ He replies to this query in the following manner:

So we say: If the activity of philosophy is nothing more than reflection upon existing things and consideration of them insofar as they are an indication of the Artisan—I mean insofar as they are artefacts, for existing things indicate the Artisan only through cognizance of the art in them, and the more complete cognizance of the art in them is, the more complete is cognizance of the Artisan—and if the Law has recommended and urged consideration of existing things, then it is evident that what this name indicates is either obligatory or recommended by the Law.⁴

Such a description of philosophy is, of course, more akin to what we commonly refer to as *natural theology*, whose purpose is to prove the existence of the creator and to provide a better understanding of God through the perfection found in creatures and in the harmony of the cosmos in general. Elaborating a parallel between aspects of Šarī a and philosophy, Ibn Rušd later astutely substitutes *wisdom* (*ḥikma*) for *philosophy* (*falsafa*). In the Qurʾān one of the beautiful names of God is *al-Ḥakīm* (*the All-Wise*). By adopting this strategy he therefore succeeded in giving philosophical discourse a Qurʾānic connotation, whereas the commonly used term *falsafa* suggested something alien, non-Islamic and, for many orthodox theologians, anti-Islamic. The fundamental question to be posed, however, is: to what extent does the human mind apprehend the divine?

Naming presupposes some form of knowledge of the object named, but to what extent is this notion valid within the context of discourse

³ He posed the question in the following way:

Now, the goal of this statement is for us to investigate, from the perspective of law-based reflection, whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is permitted, prohibited, or commanded—and this as a recommendation or as an obligation—by the Law.

The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom and Epistle Dedicatory, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2008), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

about God. Such is the *status quaestionis* of this essay. Throughout this article I will propose a comparative analysis of how Thomas Aquinas dealt with this issue in the *Summa theologiae* I, qq. 12–13, and the conclusions arrived at by classical Muslim *kalām*, particularly the teachings of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 1111) concerning the names of God in the Qurʾān.⁵

The Incomprehensibility of the Divine

Thomas Aquinas

Already in his *Commentary on the Books of the Sentences* Aquinas wrote of God's incomprehensibility in the sense that God always exceeds every kind of knowledge.⁶ Elsewhere he clearly demonstrates that comprehending God requires something more than merely seeing God.⁷ This same argument is reiterated in *De veritate*:

The perfection of the intelligibility of the divine essence lies beyond the grasp of angelic and all created intellects in so far as they have the power of knowing, because the truth by which the divine essence is knowable surpasses the light by which any created intellect knows. Consequently, it is impossible for any

⁵ It should be made clear at the outset that Thomas was in no way acquainted with this work of al-Ġazālī. Like most medieval scholars, he knew of the *Maqāsid al-Falāsifa* (*The Aims of the Philosophers*). This work consisted of an analysis of the main doctrines of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā that were to be dismantled in its sequel, the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*). However, when the former work was translated at the end of the twelfth century from Arabic into Latin by Dominicus Gundisalvi and Ibn Dāwūd the preface was left out. This resulted in the *Maqāsid* being considered by the Scholastics, including Thomas, as a work detailing the main teachings of al-Ġazālī.

⁶ See *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, ad 1 and 3; a. 7, ad 2.

⁷ See *Commentary on the Books of the Sentences* III, d. 14, q. 1, art. 2, ad 1; *On Truth* q.8, a.1, ad 9. Elsewhere in the *Sentences*, Aquinas remarks that:

God is knowable, however not that he is knowable so that his essence may be comprehended. For every knower has knowledge of the thing known, not according to the mode of the thing known, but according to the mode of the knower. The mode of no creature, however, reaches the height of the divine majesty. Hence, it is necessary that God is known perfectly, as he knows himself, by no one.

Commentary on the Books of the Sentences I, d. 3, q. 1, a. 1; see <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/Sent1d3q1a1.htm>.

created intellect to comprehend the divine essence, not because it does not know some part of the essence, but because it cannot attain the perfect manner of knowing it.⁸

As seen from the above, Aquinas often relates negation and preeminence closely. Beginning with *ST I*, q. 12, a. 6, Thomas outlines his doctrine of divine incomprehensibility by first stating the question: Can a created mind comprehend the essence of God? He replies by stating clearly that “no created mind can attain the perfect sort of understanding that is intrinsically possible of God’s essence.”

In the subsequent article he argues that “it is impossible for the created mind to attain that sort of understanding that is intrinsically possible of God’s essence”; it can, however, understand God, “more or less perfectly according to the degree of the light of glory that floods it.”⁹

In article 11 of the same question he addresses the issue as to whether any man in this life can see God’s essence. To this he replies that “mere man cannot see the essence of God unless he be uplifted out of this mortal life” because “our souls . . . cannot by nature know anything except what has its form in matter or what can be known through such things . . . It is impossible, therefore, that the soul while it lives normally on earth should be raised to an understanding of that which is most intelligible of all, the divine essence.”¹⁰

⁸ *On Truth*, q. 8, a. 2; see <http://dhspriory.org/thomas/QDdeVer8.htm#2>. [Parallel readings: *De ver.*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 5–7; q. 20, a. 5; *ST I*, q. 12, a. 7; I–II, q. 4, a. 3, ad 1; III, q. 10, a. 1; *In III Sent.*, d. 14, q. 2, a. 1; d. 27, q. 3, a. 2; *In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 3; *In Ephes.* 5, lec. 3 (P. 13:490b); *In I Tim.* 6, lec. 3 (P. 13:618b); *In De div. nom.* I, lecs. 1–2 (P. 15:261b seq.; 269a seq.); *De caritate*, a. 10, ad 5; *Super Ioan.* I, lec. II (P. 10:312b); *Comp. Theol.* I, c. 106; SCG III, ch. 55.]

⁹ *ST I*, q. 12, a. 7 c. All quotations from the *Summa* are taken from the English translation published by Blackfriars in conjunction with Eyre & Spottiswoode, London and McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964–66.

¹⁰ The same issue is discussed in *De Trinitate*, wherein he discusses the question as to whether our intellect can behold the Divine form itself. In his reply he states:

We cannot know *that* God and other immaterial substances exist unless we know somehow, in some confused way, *what* they are. Now we cannot do this by knowing a proximate or remote genus, for God is in no genus, since his essence is not distinct from his being: a condition required in all genera, as Avicenna says. Created immaterial substances, however, are indeed in a genus; but even though from the viewpoint of logic they share the same remote genus of substance with sensible substances, from the

When he addresses the question as to whether we can know God by our natural reason in this life, Thomas states: "We know about his relation to creatures—that he is the cause of them all; about the difference between him and them—that nothing created is in him; and that his lack of such things is not a deficiency in him but due to his transcendence."¹¹

He further refines his argument when he deals with the question: Can we use any words to refer to God? Here he asserts:

We have seen already¹² that in this life we do not see the essence of God, we only know him from creatures;¹³ we think of him as their source, and then as surpassing them all and as lacking anything that is merely creaturely. It is the knowledge we have of creatures that enables us to use words to refer to God, and so these words do not express the divine essence as it is in itself. In this they differ from a word like "man" which is intended to express by its meaning the essence of man as he is—for the meaning of "man" is given by the definition of a man which expresses his essence; what a word means is the definition.¹⁴

He then replies to the first objection by stating that "God is said to have no name, or to be beyond naming because his essence is beyond what we understand of him and the meaning of the names we use."¹⁵

viewpoint of physics they do not belong to the same genus, as neither do heavenly and terrestrial bodies. For the corruptible and the incorruptible do not belong to the same genus, as the *Metaphysics* says . . . In the case of immaterial forms we know *that* they exist; and instead of knowing *what* they are we have knowledge of them by way of negation, by way of causality, and by way of transcendence. These are the same ways Dionysius proposes in his *Divine Names*; and this is how Boethius understands that we can know the divine form by removing all images, and not that we know *what* it is.

De Trinitate, q. 6, a. 3; see <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/BoethiusDeTr.htm#63>.

¹¹ *ST I*, q. 12, a. 12 c.

¹² *ST I*, q. 12, a. 11.

¹³ This statement is reiterated in *ST I* q. 13, a. 8, resp: "God is not known to us in his own nature but through his works."

¹⁴ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 1 c. A footnote in the translation draws attention to the fact that "definition" (*definitio*) does not mean for Thomas primarily the explanation of the meaning of a word; it shows forth the essence of a thing by giving its genus and difference.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

From the abovementioned texts, one notes that Thomas connects each negation with some affirmation. But for him there are also theological negations that are intimately bound with an all-pervading sense of God's transcendence. For Thomas this inability to comprehend the divine essence is not so much *agnōsia* but rather *apophasis*, or what the Orthodox theologian Martin Begzos considers as its equivalent in Latin terminology, *theologia superlativa* (transcending theology), rather than *theologia negativa*. Negation is only one factor of *apophasis*.¹⁶ Names are often removed from God, not because God lacks the perfections that they signify, but because he is above and exceeds all creatures.

Thomas addresses the issue on two fronts, both of which have been outlined by Gregory Rocca. The first one is that no creature (especially the human in this life) by its own natural forces can possess what he terms as "a quidditive grasp" of God's essence.¹⁷ Human comprehension of the divine is limited to the existence of God and what God is not.¹⁸ No

¹⁶ Marios P. Begzos, "Apophaticism in the Theology of the Eastern Church: The Modern Critical Function of a Traditional Theory," in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 4, no. 4 (1996): 328.

¹⁷ Thomas had already dealt with this issue in q. 6, a.4 of *De Trinitate*, when he addressed the question as to whether our intellect could behold the divine form by means of some speculative science, to which he replies:

We cannot know the essence of the separate substances through that which we take from the senses. This is clear from what was said above. But through sensible things we can arrive at a knowledge of the existence of these substances and of some of their characteristics. So we cannot know the quiddity of any separate substance by means of a speculative science, though the speculative sciences enable us to know the existence of these substances and some of their traits; for instance, that they are intellectual, incorruptible, and the like. This is also the teaching of the Commentator (i.e., Ibn Rušd [Averroes]). Avempace (Ibn Baġġa) was of the opposite opinion; he thought that the quiddities of sensible things adequately reveal immaterial quiddities; but, as the Commentator says, this is clearly false, because quiddity is predicated of both almost in an equivocal sense.

De Trinitate, q. 6, a. 4; see <http://dhsprpriory.org/thomas/BoethiusDeTr.htm#63>.

¹⁸ One already encounters his affirmation/negation duality in *De Trinitate* when Thomas addresses the question of whether our intellect can behold the divine form itself, to which he replies:

In the case of immaterial forms we know *that* they exist; and instead of knowing *what* they are we have knowledge of them by way of negation, by way of causality, and by way of transcendence. These are the same ways Dionysius proposes in his *Divine Names*; and this is how Boethius

creature can ever claim to possess a comprehensive, infinite grasp of the divine essence. Although a “quidditative knowledge” of God is possible in heaven through divine grace, a comprehensive knowledge of God by the creature is never possible not even by God’s grace. The second one is that God’s incomprehensibility continues even in eternity. The basic distinction between Creator and creature is destined to remain.¹⁹

From the above it is evident that Thomas’s sense of God’s transcendence and preeminence is set within the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius, but also of that of Gregory of Nyssa.²⁰

Classical Muslim kalām as Represented by al-Gazālī

Muslim theological thought knows its origins in the need to articulate Muslim doctrine through the application of philosophical terms and arguments in order to meet the challenge of Eastern and Oriental Christian apologetics. Throughout the centuries such a necessity provided a rich area for significant theological reflection and debate, beginning with the question concerning the divine essence (*ḍāt*) and divine attributes (*ṣifāt*), as well as the resulting issue as to whether the Qur’ān as

understands that we can know the divine form by removing all images, and not that we know *what* it is. The solution of the opposing arguments is clear from what has been said; for the first arguments are based on perfect knowledge of what a thing is, the others on imperfect knowledge of the sort described.

De Trinitate, q. 6, a. 3; see <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/BoethiusDeTr.htm#63>.

¹⁹ Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 47–48.

²⁰ A particular passage from the latter’s work *The Life of Moses* provides some insight on the matter under discussion:

The Divine is by its nature life-giving. Yet the characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics. Therefore he who thinks God is something to be known does not have life, because he has turned from true Being to what he considers by sense perception to have being. True being is true life. This Being is inaccessible to knowledge. If then the life-giving nature transcends knowledge, that which is perceived certainly is not life. It is not in the nature of what is not life to be the cause of life. Thus, what Moses yearned for is satisfied by the very things which leave his desire unsatisfied.

Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), Book II, nn. 234–35, 115.

the Word of God was created or uncreated.²¹ Classical Muslim *kalām* draws its doctrine concerning the incomprehensibility of God first and foremost from the Qur'ān. The so-called "Verse of the Throne" (quoted below) offers one avenue of inspiration:

God,
 There is no god but He,
 Living and Everlasting.
 Neither slumber overtakes Him nor sleep.
 To Him belongs what is in the heavens and what is on earth.
 Who shall intercede with Him except by His leave?
 He knows their present affairs and their past.
 And they do not grasp of His knowledge except what He wills.
 His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth;
 Preserving them is no burden to Him.
 He is the Exalted the Majestic.
 (Q. 2:255)²²

In his famous treatise *Al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī [ma'ānī] šarḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā* (The Best Means in Explaining the Most Beautiful Names of God) the renowned medieval Muslim theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 1111) puts forward what would have been regarded in his time as a mainstream orthodox exposition of the Names of God. Throughout this treatise he is careful to deflect the issue from questions concerning the

²¹ Here it would be interesting to take note of Robert Haddad's observation that the entire debate took place concomitantly with the heated controversy that was raging within the confines of the Byzantine Empire, namely iconoclasm:

In pursuing selectively the theme of mutuality of questions posed and answers given, it would be appropriate to begin with what is for each tradition the central event: God's supreme revelation to man . . . the true Islamic analogue to Christ is not Muḥammad but the Qur'ān, the divine word revealed by God to the Arabian Prophet . . . The distance separating the personal logos of Christianity from the impersonal logos of Islam has appeared to virtually all Christians and Muslims unbridgeable. Yet even in this divergence we do not fail to detect convergence. For the word as person or as book raised a question of critical import: is this logos created or uncreated?

Robert M. Haddad, "Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam: An Historical Overview," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 31, no. 1–2 (1986): 18.

²² Unless otherwise stated, all citations from the Qur'ān are taken from Tarif Khalidi, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (New York: Viking, 2008). Parallel texts to the one above are also found in the Bible. See, e.g., Is 40:12–14; 41:4.

nature of God himself, opting instead to discuss the capacities of the subject who strives to apprehend him.²³

In the presentation of their translation of al-Ġazālī's work David Burrell and Nazih Daher affirm that "names are more than attributes, because God uses them of Himself."²⁴ What is of particular interest to our discussion is the first part of this treatise wherein, according to Burrell and Daher, al-Ġazālī "canvasses some of the conceptual issues involved, such as differentiating name from attribute, outlining what is involved in the act of naming, and how names relate to the objects they purport to name."²⁵

According to al-Ġazālī there are two ways of knowing God, one of them he refers to as "inadequate" and the other one he refers to as "closed":

The inadequate way consists of mentioning names and attributes and proceeding to compare them with what we know from ourselves. For when we know ourselves to be powerful, knowing, living, speaking, and hear those terms attributed to God—great and glorious, or when we come to know them by demonstration, in either case we understand them with an inadequate comprehension, much as the impotent person understood the pleasure of intercourse from what was described for him of the pleasure of sweets. Indeed, our life, power and understanding are farther from the life, power, and understanding of God—great and glorious—than sugar's sweetness is from the pleasure of intercourse. In fact there is no correspondence between them. The outcome of defining God—great and glorious—by these attributes, then, is by establishing imaginings

²³ See Anna M. Gade, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), 207.

²⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God: Al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), vii. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God* will be taken from this translation.

²⁵ Ibid. In another work entitled *Al-Iqtisād fī 'l-i'tiqād*, he describes God's eternal attributes by stating that they are "distinguishable from His essence and are eternal and are subsistent in His essence" (*zā'idatun 'alā dātihi wa-qadīmatun wa-qā'imatun bi 'l-dāt*). See Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 48.

and likenesses, and a sharing in the name. But the process of comparison is cut short when it is said: *Naught is as His likeness* (Q. 42:11), for He is living but not like living things, [52] powerful but not like powerful persons, much as you would say: intercourse is pleasurable like sweets, but sexual pleasure is totally unlike that of sweets, although they do share in the name. This amounts to saying that when we know God most high to be living, powerful and knowing, we are only knowing ourselves, as we only know Him by way of ourselves.²⁶ The second way (of knowing God)—the one that is closed—consists in one's waiting to attain all the "lordly" [i.e., divine] attributes to the point of becoming a "lord," much as a boy waits until he matures to experience the pleasure of intercourse. But this path is closed, since it is impossible that this reality be attained by anyone other than God the most high. There is no other way to authentic knowledge than this, yet it is utterly closed except for God the most high and holy One.²⁷

The inability to know the divine essence is considered by al-Ġazālī to be the foundation of mystical knowledge. The mystics (*Ṣūfīs*) are all the wiser because they realize that there exists an unfathomable distance between God and creatures that cannot be bridged:

If you say: what is the ultimate point of knowledge attained by the "knowers" of God²⁸ the most high? We would say: the ultimate knowledge of the "knowers" lies in their inability to know, in their realizing in fact that they do not know Him and that it is utterly impossible for them to know Him; indeed that it is impossible for anyone except God to know God with

²⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 39–40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁸ This term belongs strictly to the mystical tradition in Islam. In the teachings of the *Ṣūfīs* the name given to the mystic is *ʿĀrif*, the gnostic or adept. Hence the mystics are considered as the "friends of God," an elect circle to whom God grants *maʿrifa*, the mystic knowledge that is the result of intuition, not of acquired learning. See Margaret Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1995), 1–2.

an authentic knowledge comprehending the true nature of the divine attributes.²⁹

In his major work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*),³⁰ al-Ġazālī affirms that those who are happiest in the afterlife would be ones whose love of God is the strongest. Now, love depends upon knowledge, an affirmation that appears to be a well-known concept to him given that he leans toward science and toward the wise and to whom he discloses this work.

Man is thus called in this world to know God by every means at his disposal. But this knowledge will always remain imperfect while we still live in the present world; it can only become complete in the afterlife. In order to make his point al-Ġazālī employs the following analogy: "This is like seeing a person at dusk before the diffusion of daylight and then seeing him in full light: the only difference between the two circumstances is an increase in visibility. Hence, whenever imagination is prior in perception, sight perfects and completes the imagination's percep-

²⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 42. In a note concerning this passage, Burrell and Daher observe that there are striking parallels between this statement by al-Ġazālī on the one hand, and the thought of Maimonides and Aquinas on the other. They first quote a passage from the *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:58:

Glory then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity . . . and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity!

The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 137. As for Aquinas, they quote from his *Expositio super Librum Boethii de Trinitate*, ed. Bruno Decker (Leiden; Brill, 1959), 2:

Since our understanding finds itself knowing God most perfectly when it knows that the divine nature lies beyond whatever it can apprehend in our present state, we can be said to know God as unknown, once we sum up what knowledge we have of Him.

Both references are taken from al-Ġazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 186n29.

³⁰ It is worth noting that this work was undertaken at a decisive turning point in the life of al-Ġazālī. He had abandoned his teaching career following a profound crisis in which he realized, by his own admission, that he had pursued such a career for reasons of worldly glory rather than out of genuine religious motivation. However, he also hinted that he experienced a certain dissatisfaction with purely doctrinal and intellectual approaches to religion. This led him to abandon theological speculation in order to embrace a more experiential approach to religion by way of *Taṣawwuf* (mysticism), thereby becoming an ascetic and adopting the mystical path.

tion.”³¹ It is within this framework that he describes human happiness in the afterlife as the vision of God (*ru’yat Allāh*).

Furthermore, he uses the image of a seed that is planted in the soil to portray the passage from the knowledge of God acquired in this world to that enjoyed in the afterlife. The seed is not the tree, but it is from that seed that the tree will issue forth. The seed itself will grow into a tree. Therefore the tree cannot exist without the seed. In an analogous manner, God will reveal himself fully to the soul in proportion to what it had already possessed of him here below: an inchoative knowledge that will be transformed into vision. In sum, without a modicum of knowledge of God in this life one cannot hope of knowing God in the afterlife.³²

Al-Ġazālī also considers distinction in degrees of knowledge of God among creatures:

You may ask: since it is inconceivable to know Him, how can the ranks of angels, prophets, and holy men be said to differ in knowing Him? I would respond: you already know that there are two ways of knowing; one of them is the authentic way which is in fact closed to all but God the most high. Every creature who is moved to attain and perceive Him will be cast back by the splendour of His majesty,³³ nor is there anyone who cranes his neck

³¹ See al-Ġazālī, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment* [*Kitāb al-maḥabba wa l-shawq wa l-uns wa l-riḍā*], Book XXXVI of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* [*Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*], trans. Eric Ormsby (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011), 56. Further on, al-Ġazālī reiterates his position when he declares that “there is no difference between direct seeing in the next world and that which can be known here, except in a magnification of disclosure and lucidity” (*ziyādat al-kašf wa l-wuḍūḥ*); *ibid.*, 59.

³² See René Perez, O.P., “La vision de Dieu en Islam,” in *En homage au Père Jacques Jomier, O.P.*, Études reunies et coordonnées par Marie-Thérèse Urvoy (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 165–66.

³³ This statement is a probable reference to Q. 7:143;

When Moses came to Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: “My Lord, show me Yourself that I may look upon You.” He said: “You shall not see Me, but look instead upon that mountain. If it remains firmly in place you shall see Me.” When the glory of his Lord appeared upon the mountain, it levelled it to the ground. Moses fell down unconscious. When he came to, he said: “Glory be to You! I have

to see Him whose glance is not turned aside in amazement.³⁴ The second way—knowledge of attributes and names—is open to creatures and their ranking in it differs. For whoever (1) knows that he—great and glorious—is knowing and powerful, but in a general fashion, is not like the one who (2) witnesses the wonders of His signs in the realm of the heavens and the earth,³⁵ and the creating of spirits and bodies, and examines the wonders of the kingdom and the prodigies of workmanship;³⁶ closely scrutinizing the details, inquiring into the fine points of wisdom, acknowledging in full the subtleties of organization, and is so characterized by all the angelic attributes which bring them close to God—great and glorious—that by attaining these properties he is in fact characterized by them. Between these two modes of knowing lies an immense distance which it is not possible to measure, while prophets and holy men differ in these details and in their capacities.³⁷

Thus knowledge of the divine essence is closed to all creatures, but knowledge of the divine attributes is open to all but with varying degrees according to their ranks and capacities in apprehending them.

This is the underlying concept of al-Ġazālī's treatise as well as the ultimate end of mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) as thought and practiced in Islam: that

repented before You and I am the first among believers."

³⁴ Al-Ġazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 42–43.

³⁵ "Have they not contemplated the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all the things God has created?" (Q. 7:184)

³⁶ The Qur'ān constantly refers to God as creator who presides over the wonders of his workmanship, such as in the following verses:

It is He Who created for you all that is on earth. Then He ascended to heaven, and arrayed them in seven heavens. (Q. 2:29)

He it is Who created the heavens and earth in six days, then sat firmly on the throne.

He knows whatever passes into the earth and whatever comes out thereof; What comes down from heaven, and what ascends thereto;

He is with you wherever you may be; He knows full well what you do. To Him belongs sovereignty of the heavens, and to God all matters shall revert.

He it is Who entwines night with day, and day with night, and knows full well what lies within breasts. (Q. 57:4–5)

³⁷ Al-Ġazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 43.

of acquiring “whatever possible of those attributes, to imitate them and be adorned with their good qualities” (*al-taḥalluq bi aḥlāq Illāh*) by way of explaining the divine names. In this way “whoever aims at a likeness of their qualities will attain something of their closeness to the extent that he acquires some of their attributes which bring them closer to the Truth most high.”

Al-Ġazālī is well aware of certain doctrines among Muslim mystics that appeared to have fallen afoul of orthodoxy. For this reason he speaks of “closeness” rather than “union.”³⁸

For this reason he reiterates unequivocally:

No one knows the essential reality of God’s knowledge—great and glorious—without having a likeness of His knowledge. But only God has that, since no-one other than Him know it. Others know it by comparing it with their own knowledge, as we showed in the example comparing such knowledge to that of sweets. But the knowledge of God—great and glorious—is totally unlike the knowledge of creatures, so the knowledge creatures have of Him will neither be perfect nor authentic, but illusory and anthropomorphic.³⁹

Naming the Divine *Aquinas and the Divine Names*

³⁸ The term “union” (*ittiḥād*) was applied by, among other *ṣūfis*, Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. c. 875), who was a disciple of Abū ‘Alī al-Sindī, a Hindu convert to Islam. In one of his famous sayings, which is clearly influenced by the Upaniṣads, he declares: “I have shed my Ego as a serpent sheds its skin, then I regarded my essence, and I was myself, He.” See al-Birūnī, *Tārīḥ al-Hind*, I:43, quoted in Smith, *Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East*, 242. The original text in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states: “As a snake’s slough, lifeless and discarded, lies on an anthill, so lies this corpse. But this non-corporeal and immortal lifebreath (*prāṇa*) is nothing but brahman, nothing but light.” See *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.7, in *Upaniṣads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 65.

³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 44.

Thomas Aquinas was unique among medieval thinkers in the way he managed to employ the analogical language of Aristotle and combine it with the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius. This approach lies at the basis of his analogical application of terms denoting perfection in both God and creatures. Following Pseudo-Dionysius Thomas adopted as his guiding principle the notion that God, who is the primordial and transcendent cause of all things, manifests himself in the world through a diversity of perfections, such as “being,” “good,” “wise,” “living,” and so on, which flow from the divine source into the effects found in creatures. The central question addressed by Thomas is whether such names by which we purport to speak about God can be understood to be indeed names of God. In his ensuing analysis he attempts to steer a middle course between the apparently negative approach adopted by Mūsā b. Maymūn (Maimonides)⁴⁰ and the rationalistic claims put forward by Alain de Lille and others, that there is such a thing as an adequate discourse on God. In the *Summa theologiae* I, q.13, a.2 he affirms that such terms as the abovementioned

do say what God is; they are predicated of him in the category of substance, but fail to represent adequately what he is. The reason for this is that we speak of God as we know him, and since we know him from creatures we can only speak of him as they represent him. Any creature, in so far as it possesses any perfection, represents God and is like to him, for he, being simply and universally perfect, has pre-existing in himself the perfections of all his creatures . . . But a creature is not like to God as it is like to another member of its species or genus, but resembles him as an effect may in some way resemble a transcendent cause although failing to reproduce perfectly the form of the cause—as in a certain way the forms of inferior bodies imitate the power of the sun . . . Thus words like “good” and “wise” when used of God do signify something that God really is, but they signify it imperfectly because creatures rep-

⁴⁰ See Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1956), I:58.

resent God imperfectly.⁴¹

This text highlights two principles of vital importance in monotheism, whether Judeo-Christian or Islamic. The first is based on the underlying tension between the Aristotelian notion that our knowledge is derived from the senses⁴² and the Dionysian insistence that the perfection of the cosmos mirrors divine perfection while remaining so unlike God.⁴³ The second lies in the terms *res significata* (the thing signified) and *modus significandi* (the manner of being signified).⁴⁴ Both confirm the assertion arrived at by Thomas in the preceding article that “neither way of speaking measures up to his (i.e., God’s) way of being, for in this life we do not know him as he is in himself.”⁴⁵ Thomas clarifies his position when replying to the question as to whether one can say anything literally about God in q. 13, art. 3. Here he demonstrates that some of God’s names are predicated properly, that is to say “truly and really” and not metaphorically. In his *sed contra* he judiciously invokes the authority of Ambrose, who stated that “there are many ways of referring to God which show forth clearly what is proper to divinity, and some which express the luminous truth of the divine majesty, but there are others which are used of God metaphorically and through a certain likeness.”⁴⁶ This would lead him to conclude that:

God is known from the perfections that flow from him and are

⁴¹ ST I q. 13, a. 2, c. Aquinas would again raise the issue in q. 13 a. 6, obj. 1, when he states that “Dionysius says that the language we use about God is derived from what we say about creatures” (see *On the Divine Names*, chap. 1). Here he is reiterating a statement made in a. 12, ad 1 of the same question, where he notes that “Dionysius says that what we assert of God is loose (or, according to another translation, ‘incongruous’) because no word used of God is appropriate to him in its way of signifying.” See *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, chap. 2.

⁴² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 1 980a25; see ST I q. 84, a. 6.

⁴³ See Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, chap. 1.

⁴⁴ In his reply to the third objection in q. 13, a. 1, Thomas affirms that “demonstrative pronouns can be used of God in so far as they point, not to something seen, but to something understood, for so long as we know something, in whatever way, we can point it out. And thus according as nouns and participles and demonstrative pronouns can signify God, so in the same way relative pronouns can be used.”

⁴⁵ ST I, q. 13, a. 1, ad 2.

⁴⁶ Ambrose, *De Fide* II, prol. PL 16:583.

to be found in creatures yet which exist in him in a transcendent way. We understand such perfections, however as we find them in creatures, and as we understand them so we use words that speak of them.⁴⁷

What Aquinas is stating here is that God already possesses all the perfections of creatures because he is absolutely and universally perfect. The application of the terms “good” and “wise” to God would therefore imply that the quality of goodness that exists in creatures preexists in God in a more excellent way. This affirmation leads him to discuss the issue of whether words are predicated primarily of God or of creatures. For this purpose, Thomas introduces terms that are applied metaphorically to God, such as “rock” and “lion.” This gives him the occasion to articulate the distinction between metaphorical and nonmetaphorical language. Concerning the former he states: “All words used metaphorically of God apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God. When used of God they signify merely a certain parallelism between God and the creature.”⁴⁸ However, he is also quick to point out that nonmetaphorical words applied to God “also say what he is”:

When we say he is good or wise we do not simply mean that he causes wisdom or goodness, but that he possesses these perfections transcendentally. We conclude, therefore, that from the point of view of what the word means it is used primarily of God and derivatively of creatures, for what the word means—the perfection it signifies—flows from God to the creature. But from the point of view of our use of the word we apply it first to creatures because we know them first.⁴⁹

What has been stated above paves the way for Aquinas to begin to formulate a theology of the divine names. He classifies the attributes that can be predicated of God in a threefold manner: negatively, attributively, and absolutely. He then lays emphasis on the third by asserting

⁴⁷ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 3 c.

⁴⁸ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 6 c.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

that those affirmative and absolute names that signify a proper truth about God's very being lie at the very heart of affirmative truth about God's essence.

In art. 4, Thomas then proceeds to discuss divine names such as "Lord," "Creator," and "Saviour" within the context of the issue as to whether such words imply temporal succession. Concerning the application of these names he replies that:

"Lord". . . signifies nothing but a relation to creatures, though it presupposes something about what he is, for he could not be lord without his power which is his essence. Others, such as "Saviour" or "Creator" which refer directly to an action of God which is his essence . . . signify something on account of which he has a relationship.⁵⁰

During the course of this argumentation, Thomas is addressing the underlying question as to how one may speak about God in such a way that his unknowable transcendence is respected and safeguarded.

He is now in a position to discuss whether one can apply a proper name to Divinity. In q. 13, aa. 8–9, 11, Thomas comes up with two ways of referring to God: the name "God" and the name "He who is." Concerning the first he restates that "God is not known to us in his own nature, but through his works or effects . . . Hence 'God' is an operational word in that it is an operation of God that makes us use it—for the word is derived from his universal providence: everyone who uses the word 'God' has in mind one who cares for all things."⁵¹ However, although the name "God" has its etymological derivation from the act of providence, this same name is also used to signify the divine nature. While reiterating the point he raised in q. 12, a. 12, that is to say that "nothing created is in him; and that his lack of such things is not a deficiency in him but due to his transcendence," Aquinas is quick to point out that it is precisely in this manner that "the word 'God' signifies the divine nature: it is used to mean something that is above all that is, and that it is the

⁵⁰ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 7, ad 1.

⁵¹ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 8 c.

source of all things and is distinct from them all.”⁵² This latter statement affirms that for Thomas the threefold way by which we arrive at knowledge of God appears in the very meaning of the name “God,” which is thus meant to designate the reality that is above all things, is the source of all things, and is removed from all things. As for the second name, “He who is,” Aquinas posits three reasons for its appropriateness in designating God: (1) because of its meaning, (2) because of its universality, and (3) because of its tense (the present, because God’s being knows neither past nor future).⁵³ In his reply to the first objection concerning the incommunicability of God, Thomas summarizes the conclusions that he had arrived at and then makes a surprising statement:

“He who is” is more appropriate than “God” because of what makes us use the name in the first place, i.e., his existence, because of the unrestricted way in which it signifies him, and because of its tense, as we have just said. But when we consider what the word is used to mean, we must admit that “God” is more appropriate, for this is used to signify the divine nature. Even more appropriate is the Tetragrammaton which is used to signify the incommunicable and, if we could say such a thing, individual substance of God.⁵⁴

Concerning the name “He who is,” in q. 4, art. 2, Aquinas had already referred to God as “self-subsistent being itself” (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*), and that “nothing therefore of the perfection can be lacking to God, who is subsistent existence itself.” In the light of what Thomas states in q. 3, art. 4, ad 1, this latter phrase has to be taken to mean “unspecified existence,” that is to say, “that further specification is excluded by definition.” Considered in this manner, “unspecified existence is divine existence.” Here, as with the case of the above-quoted text, Aquinas

⁵² ST I, q. 13, a. 8, ad 2.

⁵³ ST I, q. 13, a. 11 c. Regarding the present tense, Aquinas is quoting from Augustine’s *De Trinitate* V:2. One should note that, whereas the application of the present tense to God denotes his eternity in the Christian tradition, Islam applies the perfect tense to divine activity for the same purpose.

⁵⁴ ST I, q. 13, a. 11, ad 1.

was clearly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius.⁵⁵ As for the Tetragrammaton being the most appropriate name, one might posit that Aquinas was influenced by what Mūsā b. Maymūn (Maimonides) stated on this subject in his work *The Guide for the Perplexed*:

It is well known that all the names of God occurring in Scripture are derived from His actions, except one, namely the Tetragrammaton, which consists of the letters *yod*, *hé*, *vau* and *hé*. This name is applied exclusively to God, and is on that account called *Shem ha-meforash*, the “nomen proprium.” It is the distinct and exclusive designation of the Divine Being; whilst His other names are common nouns and are derived from actions, to which some of our own are similar.⁵⁶

Throughout the whole of q. 13, Thomas discusses several types of names figuring in the Judeo-Christian tradition, all of which are biblical. He begins by discussing names denoting perfection, such as “wise,” “good,” “living,” which constitute the main focus of the analysis. As noted above, he then proceeds to discuss metaphorical or symbolic names, such as “lion,” “rock,” and so forth, all of which include a material aspect in their meaning. Consequently, he discusses names that signify God under some relational aspect, such as “Lord,” “Creator,” and “Saviour.” He finally focuses his attention on those names deemed special, such as “God,” “He who is,” and the Tetragrammaton. Perhaps the best explanation for the reason behind this “crescendo” has been provided by Rudi te Velde:

Thomas is not so much concerned with the question of which names in particular can be attributed to God . . . but *how* God can be named by us, that is: how the factual human discourse on God can be understood to be discourse about *God* . . . Thomas wants to make it understandable how *human* names—names which derive their meaning from “our” world—can be names which are somehow appropriate to God and by which something of God is disclosed to us.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, chap. 5.

⁵⁶ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, chap. LXI, 89.

⁵⁷ Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The “Divine Science” of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 96.

Naming the Divine in the Theology of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī

The question of how to address the divine in Islam has its roots in the Qurʾān itself and its reference to the “most beautiful names of God” (*asmāʾ Allah al-ḥusnā*).⁵⁸

The actual terms that comprise the names may typically (though not necessarily) be found at the end sections of the Qurʾān, often appearing in pairs, such as in Q. 22:59 (God is Omniscient, All-Forbearing), v. 61 (He is All-Hearing and All-Seeing), v. 62 (God is the All-Exalted, All-Supreme), v. 63 (God is All-Benign, All-Experienced), v. 64 (God is All-Sufficient, All-Praiseworthy), v. 74 (God is All-Powerful, Almighty).⁵⁹ One may find a partial list of the names in the concluding verses of Q. 59.⁶⁰

According to Muslim tradition, there are said to be ninety-nine

⁵⁸ Q. 7:180; 17:110; 20:8; esp. 59:22–24.

⁵⁹ Qurʾānic evidence for the practice of the invocation and recitation of the *Nine-Nine Names of God* is to be found in two exhortations:

Say: “Call upon God, or call upon the All-Merciful: whichever you call upon, to Him belong the names most glorious.”

Do not raise your voice in prayer, nor whisper it, but seek a middle way between. (Q. 17:110)

To God belong the names most exalted. Worship Him through them and forsake those who blaspheme His names. They shall be required for what they committed. (Q. 7:180)

See also Q. 24:18.20.21.63; Q. 30:50.54, etc.

⁶⁰ Here one may also note that each of the verses is introduced by the repeated formula “He is God”:

He is God,

There is no god but He,

Knower of the Unseen and the Seen,

All-Merciful, Compassionate to each

He is God,

There is no god but He,

Sovereign, All-Holy, the Bringer of Peace,

The All-faithful, the All-Perseverer,

The Almighty, the All-Compelling,

The All-Sublime!

Glory to Him far above what they associate with Him!

He is God,

The Creator, Originator, Giver of Forms,

To Him belong the names most beautiful;

All on earth and in heaven magnify Him;

He is the Almighty, the All-Wise! (Q. 59:22–24)

names, a substantial number of which appear in the Qur'ān. The other names that complete the list of ninety-nine are derived from Qur'ānic themes. The number ninety-nine is based on a saying (*ḥadīth*), of the Prophet and which is found in the major official collections, beginning with that of al-Buḥārī, which says, "Narrated Abū Hurayra: 'Allah's Apostle said, Allah has ninety-nine names, i.e. one-hundred minus one, and whoever knows them will go to Paradise.'" ⁶¹

In his treatise al-Ġazālī presents an essentially mystical *ṣūfī* exegesis of the divine names together with a profound analysis of the general and theoretical problems that they raise. This approach is evident from the way he poses the *status quaestionis*:

Many have plunged into the matter of the name and the thing named, and taken different directions, and most of the groups have deviated from the truth. Some say (A) that the name is the same as the thing named, but other than the act of naming, while others say (B) the name is other than the thing named, but the same as the act of naming. Still a third group, known for its cleverness in constructing arguments and in polemics [*kalām*], claims (C) that the name (C.1) can be the same as the thing named, as we say of God most high that He is essence and existent; and that the name can also be other than the thing named, as in our saying that God is creator and provider. For these indicate creating and providing, which are other than Him. So it can be such that the name (C2) may not be said either to be the same as the thing named or other than it, as when we say "knowing" and "powerful": both refer to knowing and power, yet attributes of God cannot be said to be the same as God or other than Him.

⁶¹ Buhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. III, n. 894; see http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/bukhari/bh3/bh3_893.htm. See also Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ: Dīkr*, 5, 6; Tirmidī, *Al-Ġāmi'*, *Da'wāt*, 82; Ibn Māḡa, *Sunan*, *Du'ā'*, 100. Recently the Ninety-Nine Most Beautiful Names of God have become the inspiration behind a best-selling comic series created by Kuwaiti psychologist Nāif al-Muṭawwa'. Its characters hail from a variety of countries. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8127699.stm; <http://en.qantara.de/content/99-cartoons-islamic-super-heroes>; <http://www.the99.org/>.

Here al-Ġazālī is referring to one of the most fiercely debated issues in the classical period of Islam: the identification of or distinction between divine essence and divine attributes. It involved the two major theological schools of that period, the Muʿtazila and the Ašʿariyya. As Robert Caspar has clearly shown, the Muʿtazila adopted a strict interpretation of monotheism. For them, monotheism required an uncompromising observance of the transcendence and absolute unity of God. For them God is pure essence without any attributes, because, from their point of view, assigning attributes implied multiplicity. The Muʿtazila further affirmed his internal unity: in God everything is one, with no distinction within the divine essence. Hence the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of knowledge, power, will, speech, sight, and the like are identical with the divine essence (*dāt*). God knows, is capable, wills, speaks, sees, and so on, by his essence, or rather by the attributes of knowledge, will, power, and the like, identical with his essence. According to the Ašʿariyya, however, the divine names and attributes,⁶² revealed or deduced, correspond to realities in God and are not to be identified simply with his essence, as the Muʿtazila declared. However, they are not something other than God, who is one and indivisible. The Ašʿariyya apply the traditionalist formula: they are “neither God nor anything other than God” (*lā ʿaynuhu wa-lā ġayruhu*), a rather inadequate formula for the theologian, but which has the merit of respecting the mystery of God.⁶³ He continues: “Now the dispute (A, B) comes down to two points: (1) whether or not the name is the same as the act of naming, and (2) whether or not the

⁶² As Robert Caspar rightly points out, “Islamic tradition draws a distinction between the divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*) and the beautiful names of God (*asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*). The attributes are substantives indicating a quality, such as knowledge (*ʿilm*) and power (*qudra*), whereas the names are what in European languages one refers to as adjectives or present or passive participles, such as knowing (*ʿālim*) or wise (*ḥakīm*). The names generally take precedence over the attributes, because they are more frequent in the Qurʾān.” Robert Caspar, *Islamic Theology*, vol. II, *Doctrines* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica, 2007), p. 63.

⁶³ See Robert Caspar, *A Historical Introduction to Islamic Theology* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica, 1998), 178–79, 204ff. Concerning al-Ġazālī’s engagement with the ideas of the Muʿtazila and the Ašʿariyya, see R. M. Frank, “Currents and Crosscurrents,” in *Islam: Essays on Scripture, Thought and Society: A Festschrift in Honour of Anthony H. Johns*, ed. Peter G. Riddell and Tony Street (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 126–32.

name is identical with the thing named.”⁶⁴ Al-Ġazālī replies that “the name is different from both the act of naming and the thing named, and that those three terms are distinct and not synonymous.”⁶⁵ He proceeds to discuss at some length the reasons for this conclusion. As for the third position (C) he states that “the meaning of the name is other than the name: the meaning of the name is the same as the thing indicated, and the thing indicated is not the indication.”⁶⁶

The method undertaken by al-Ġazālī in classifying the names of God is of fundamental importance to our understanding of his theological approach. He takes as a basis the traditional distinctions between attributes of essence and attributes of action. The former are subdivided into attributes that reveal the essence itself and those that reveal eternal entities conjoined to this essence. Al-Ġazālī also explores other avenues derived from the theology of Ibn Sīnā. One may here refer to the latter’s notions of negation (*salb*) and of relation (*iḍāfa*). In all he divides these attributes into ten categories,⁶⁷ the first four referring solely to the divine essence.

1. Those names referring to the divine essence without any other consideration, such as *Allāh*, and eventually *al-Ḥaqq* (the Truth), when by this one understands the divine essence insofar as it is necessary existence.⁶⁸

2. Those names indicating the divine essence with a negation (*ma‘a salb*). Among these one may include *al-Quddūs* (the All-Holy) from whom everything that occurs to one’s mind or enters the imagination has been negated; *al-Salām* (the Bringer of Peace), which implies the negation of any defect in God; *al-Ġanī*, which means that

⁶⁴ Al-Ġazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 5. Here the author is associating “name” with predicate and “thing named” with the subject of a descriptive sentence. See *ibid.*, 183n1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6. In this instance, al-Ġazālī is associating “name” with word (or utterance), the “act of naming” with knowledge, and the “thing named” with the object known. See *ibid.*, 183n2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 159–61.

⁶⁸ In this category the influence of Ibn Sīnā is evident. See Ibn Sīnā, *The Healing: The Metaphysics*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), Book I, chaps. 6–7.

God is devoid of need; *al-Aḥad* (the One), which implies that “there is nothing like him”⁶⁹ and that he is indivisible.

3. Those names referring to the divine essence, with an addition (*ma‘a l-iḍāfa*) such as *al-‘Alī* (the All-Exalted, superior in degree to all other essences), *al-‘Aẓīm* (the Tremendous, transcending the limits of human perceptions), *al-‘Awwal* (The First)—*al-‘Āḥir* (the Last [Before and subsequent to the final end of all existing things]), *al-Zāhir* (the Manifest [the Essence with respect to rational demonstration]), *al-Bāṭin* (the Hidden, the Essence in relation to sense perception and imagination).

4. Those names referring to the divine essence with both a negation and an affirmation, such as *al-Malik* (the Sovereign), which signifies both that God needs nothing (negation) and that all are in need of him (affirmation); *al-‘Azīz* (the Almighty), which signifies that none is like unto him⁷⁰ and whose level is difficult to attain or to achieve.

The four categories referring to the eternal attributes are the following.

5. Those names referring to one or the other of the seven eternal attributes, such as *al-‘Alīm* (the Omniscient), *al-Qādir* (the Potent), *al-Ḥayy* (the Living), *al-Samī‘* (the All-Hearing), *al-Baṣīr* (the All-Seeing).

6. Those names referring to divine knowledge together with something in addition (*ma‘a l-iḍāfa*), such as: *al-Ḥabīb* (the All-Experienced), which refers to divine knowledge in so far as it concerns what is hidden; *al-Šahīd* (Knower of the Seen), referring to divine knowledge in relation to hidden things; *al-Ḥakīm* (the All-Wise), which refers to divine knowledge in relation to the noblest things known (*ašraf al-ma‘lūmāt*); *al-Muḥṣī* (the Reckoner), referring to divine knowledge in relation to things numbered and computed.

7. Those names referring to the divine power with something more added (*ma‘a ziyādati iḍāfa*), such as: *al-Qaḥḥār* (the Over-powering), *al-Qawī* (the All-Powerful), *al-Muqtadir* (the Powerful), *al-Matīn* (the Ever-Unyielding). In fact they refer rather to different aspects of this same power. Al-Ġazālī would state that *quwwa* denotes the perfection of divine power; its firmness *matāna*, its intensity (*šidda*); its dominating effects (*qahr*) in being able to conquer.

⁶⁹ Q. 42:11. The translation of this verse is taken from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur‘an*, parallel arabic text (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

8. Those names referring to the divine will with something added or in connection with action (*ma‘a idāfa aw ma‘a fi‘l*), such as: *al-Raḥmān* (the All-Merciful), *al-Raḥīm* (the Compassionate), *al-Ra’ūf* (the Truly Kind), *al-Wadūd* (the Most Loving). According to al-Ġazālī, they all refer to the divine will in relation to a good deed or to fulfilling the needs of the weak.

The final two categories denote those names referring to divine acts.

9. Those names referring exclusively to divine acts, such as *al-Hāliq* (the Creator), *al-Barī‘* (the Originator), *al-Muṣawwir* (the Giver of Forms), *al-Waḥḥāb* (the Bestower), *al-Razzāq* (the Provider), *al-Fat-tāḥ* (the All-Decider), *al-Qābḍ* (the Withholder), *al-Bāsīt* (the Giver in abundance), *al-Hāfiḍ* (the Guardian over all things), *al-Rāfi‘* (the Exalter), *al-Mu‘izz* (the Exalter), *al-Muḍill* (the Abaser), *al-‘Adl* (the Equitable), *al-Muqīt* (the Nourisher), *al-Muḥyi* (the Giver of life), *al-Mumīt* (the Causer of death), *al-Muqaddim* (the Advancer), *al-Mu’āḥḥir* (the Retarder), *al-Wālī* (the Governor), *al-Barr* (the All-Generous), *al-Tawwāb* (the Acceptor of Repentance), *al-Muntaqim* (the Avenger), *al-Muqsit* (the Upholder of Justice), *al-Ġāmi‘* (the Gatherer of mankind), *al-Manī‘* (the Preventer of harm), *al-Muḡni* the Enricher), *al-Hadī* (the Guide), and so on.

10. Those names referring to divine action with something more (*ma‘a ‘l-ziyāda*), that is to say, introducing a supplementary consideration, such as *al-Maḡīd* (the All-Glorious), which recalls both the immense generosity of God and the nobility of his essence; *al-Karīm* (the Most Generous); *al-Laṭīf* (the All-Benign), which combine gentleness in action (*al-rifq fi ‘l-fi‘l*) with sensitivity in perception (*al-luṭf fi ‘l-idrāk*).

Al-Ġazālī draws a distinction between whatever pertains to a name (*ism*) and whatever pertains to an attribute (*waṣf*): “whatever pertains to names is based on [divine] authorization, whereas whatever pertains to attributes is not based on authorization; rather the ones that are authentic are acceptable, but not the false ones” (*al-ṣādiq minhu mubāḥḥan dūna ‘l-kāḍib*).⁷¹ A name is different from an attribute; it is “an utterance imposed to indicate the thing named,” such as “Zayd,” “Qāsim,” and “‘Abd Allāh,” but it is not a description. When an attribute is chosen for a name it loses its function as predicate: naming a child “‘Abd al-Malik” does

⁷¹ See al-Ġazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 177.

not imply that the individual concerned is a servant of the king. The same applies to “‘Abd Allāh” (servant of God “where we form its plural by a single word ‘*Abādila* rather than two: ‘*Ibād Allāh*”). Attributes, on the other hand, “are predicates of something” and are therefore descriptive in their function. If somebody whose name is Zayd is fair and tall he can be correctly addressed as “O tall one” or “O fair one,” “but that would forego using his name, for his name is Zayd and not the-tall-one nor the-fair-one.” Therefore “a name is an utterance imposed to indicate the thing named.”⁷² For this reason al-Ġazālī argues that “each individual’s name is what he names himself or what anyone with authority over him, such as his father or his master, has named him”; hence “naming is limited to these.”⁷³ This statement leads al-Ġazālī to pose the question as to how we can give names to God. He begins by answering that “the evidence that it is forbidden to assign names to God—may he be praised and exalted—is that it is forbidden to assign them to the Prophet—may God’s blessing and peace be upon him, except for those he gave to himself or those given him by his Lord or his father.” By way of analogy what is forbidden with respect to the Prophet is perforce forbidden with respect to God. To this he adds, “This is the sort of juridical analogy on the likes of which judgments regarding divine law are based.”⁷⁴ Thus, as al-Ġazālī had stated at the beginning of his tract, the name *Allāh*

is the greatest of the ninety-nine names of God—great and glorious—because it refers to the essence which unites all the attributes of divinity, so that none of them is left out, whereas each of the remaining names only refers to a single attribute: knowledge, power, agency, and the rest. It is also the most specific of the names, since no one uses it for anyone other than Him, neither literally nor metaphorically, whereas the rest of the names may name things other than He.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 178.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 178–79.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 51. Following this description, later Muslim theologians have asserted that the name Allah is “the proper name of the one who is necessarily existent in himself and deserves all praises.” Because it designates the oneness of God, the word has no plural form, and no one can be named with it except God. The root of the name is,

However, he also points out at the very end of his tract that

when an expression which does not suggest [any imperfection] at all among those who share a common understanding is taken to be true of God, and when revelation does not expressly forbid it, then we freely permit its being applied to God.⁷⁶

On account of the above al-Ġazālī affirms that “divine instruction mentions names other than the ninety-nine”;⁷⁷ these, however, have been singled out because “they would bring together varieties of meanings which tell of [the divine] majesty which another set of meanings would not be able to bring together, so that the combination is possessed of the greater distinction.”⁷⁸

Conclusion

In the light of the above, one can now draw certain conclusions concerning both differences and similarities in the approach taken by Aquinas and al-Ġazālī concerning the incomprehensibility of God and the names given to him.

In the first place, one detects two differences with regard to the fundamental principle underlying their approach to this issue, one that also influences their respective methodologies. The first is that Thomas invariably discusses the incomprehensibility of God within the framework of the relation between faith and reason. In Muslim *kalām*, however, the issue was never discussed in such a context but rather within that of the relation between philosophy and religion, that is to say, whether the study and practice of philosophy was legitimate within Islam as a religion. Al-Ġazālī, in fact, was quite particular in this area. He admitted the study of logic and related sciences but criticized Islamic philosophers for their indiscriminate application of Aristotelian metaphysics to the detriment of theological discourse and the understanding of the

of course, *al-ilāh*, or literally “the God.” The definite article and the name were contracted into one and became Allah. See Zeri Saritoprak, “Allah,” in *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 33–41.

⁷⁶ Al-Ġazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 181.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

Qur'ân. The second basic difference is that Thomas discusses the issue of knowing and naming God as a necessary premise to his later discussion of the Trinity, a mystery that is vehemently denied by the Qur'ân, and to the extent that it is portrayed there, it is certainly not the one held by Christian theology.⁷⁹

Another difference lies in the fact that, whereas both Aquinas and al-Ġazālī are in agreement about the incomprehensibility of the divine essence, the former discusses knowledge of God through knowledge of creatures and his relation to them. Therefore Aquinas examines the issue within the context of his previous discussion on the analogy of perfection, beginning with creatures and culminating in God. Al-Ġazālī, on the other hand, examines the issue from the perspective of the knowledge one has of the divine attributes. He sets out his argument by referring to the centuries-old debate in Islam on whether a distinction exists between divine essence and divine attributes. He is forced into this discussion in order to avoid the two extreme positions held within Muslim theological circles. The first denied the appropriateness of divine attributes (the Mu'tazila); whereas the second took descriptions of God in Qur'ānic texts at face value thereby tending toward anthropomorphism (the Aṣ'ariyya).

Both Aquinas and al-Ġazālī have their preference as to which name is the most appropriate and supreme: the former opts for the Tetragrammaton, whereas the latter prefers *Allāh*. In both cases their preference is determined by a name that refers to the divine substance.

Concerning the incomprehensibility of God, both Aquinas and al-Ġazālī draw similar conclusions. Both relate negation to preeminence. Only God knows himself. Hence such a degree of knowledge is unattainable by creatures and is closed to the human mind. Consequently, the divine essence remains opaque to human comprehension. Regarding knowledge of God, both agree that the only available avenue of approach is by way of human experience, similitude, and association.

Both scholars refer to descriptions of God by way of analogy. What is stated about the perfection of creatures is to be found preeminently

⁷⁹ See Q. 5:73.116. Whereas for the Qur'ân Christians remain "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), there always remains a certain hesitation as to whether they should be deemed *monotheists* (see, e.g., Q. 2:62; 3:110–15; 4:55; 5:69.82), *unbelievers* (*kuffār*, see Q. 5:17.72–73; 9:30), or *associators* (*mušrikūn*, see 5:31.72).

and in all its perfection in God himself. As for certain graphic descriptions used in theological discourse, Aquinas applies the term “metaphors” whereas al-Ġazālī uses the phrase “imaginings and likenesses.”

Both Aquinas and al-Ġazālī accept that knowledge of God on the part of creatures varies according to their status, that is to say, according to the degree of perfection that they possess. Both agree that such perfection in creatures always remains a gift from God.

Both Aquinas and al-Ġazālī draw distinctions between metaphorical and nonmetaphorical terms applied to divine action and to God’s relation to creatures. They do so by developing their arguments in a similar manner referring to the distinction between the object named and its meaning.

Both scholars agree that naming the attributes does not even remotely grasp the full significance of the divine essence because they remain descriptive in their function and have as their *terminus ad quem* the human vision of the cosmos.

In the final analysis, both Thomas Aquinas and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī were theologians and spiritual masters whose lives and works were grounded in the continuous quest for God in his utter transcendence as divine essence as well as in his immanence through human language and experience. Their respective approaches to the mystery of God stand as a worthy example of dialogue across the borders of time, space and cultures. They have bequeathed a legacy to subsequent generations that serves as a basis for future Christian-Muslim dialogue in an age of mass communication and globalization.

Even more so than in the past, it is incumbent on all believers and, particularly in the context of this essay, Christians and Muslims to seek what lies at the heart of their religious beliefs and practices. They are called upon to talk more of and about God in their encounters. Failure to do so would reduce both Christianity and Islam to mere ideologies that simply offer themselves as alternatives to already existing ones. In his masterpiece *Tahâfut al-Falâsifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), al-Ġazālī came up with the following statement that deserves to be inscribed in characters of gold:

The harm inflicted on religion by those who defend it in a way not proper to it is greater than [the harm caused by] those who

attack it in a way proper to it. As it has been said: "A rational foe is better than an ignorant friend."⁸⁰

The underlying threat facing modern secular societies today is not a "clash of civilizations." It is rather a confrontation between a secularism that is being transformed into a religion and an Islam that is being increasingly portrayed as an ideology.

On the one hand, we have a secularism that is becoming increasingly obsessed with wanting to edit religion out of the public forum by applying means that are reminiscent of a religious fanaticism of bygone times: ridicule, demonize, and destroy. Contrary to secularity, secularism is not happy with the mere drawing of the distinction between religion and state and the necessity on the part of both to maintain their autonomy while at the same time collaborating for the common good. As a movement secularism is bent on desecrating all those symbols and beliefs that religious people hold dear, and which they consider an integral part of their life and which define their role in society. It does not limit itself to criticizing religious beliefs and attitudes; it enthusiastically holds them up to public ridicule in order to humiliate them and, subsequently, edit them out of existence *permanently*.⁸¹ At the same time, European societies are being faced with Islamic movements that seek to present religious belief and conduct as homogenous, doing away with inculturation and seeking to present a standard mode of belief and conduct. The sometimes enforced wearing of the *hiğāb* (or the *niqāb*), the increase in the number of Muslim men wearing long beards, the frequent branding of European societies as decadent, immoral and corrupt are typical of this attitude.

This state of affairs is being aggravated by the continuous and persistent application on the part of the secular media (especially by

⁸⁰ Al-Ġazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), "Second Introduction," no. 16, 6.

⁸¹ At the height of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the *Jyllands-Posten* came up with a cartoon depicting St. Joseph pointing an accusing finger at the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus in her arms. The caption below it read: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman!" Long before the film *Submission* was aired on Dutch television, Theo van Gogh had already caused an uproar by pouring scorn and abuse on Dutch Jews and by calling Jesus Christ "that rotten fish from Nazareth." See Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam* (London: Atlantic, 2006), 91.

so-called “religious affairs correspondents”) of ideological terms to religion, any religion. Terms such as “conservative,” “liberal,” “hardline,” “progressive,” “radical,” and “moderate” make no sense in religion, where God is supposed to lie at the centre of any discourse.

What has been stated throughout this article is meant to highlight the necessity for both Christians and Muslims to return to the silent contemplation of “the one God living and true, existing before all ages and abiding for all eternity, dwelling in unapproachable light.”⁸² Both communities should pay serious attention to this common calling and the destiny toward which both are called, that of beholding “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.”⁸³ 

⁸² The phrase is from the preface to the fourth Eucharistic prayer. The English translation is taken from *The CTS New Sunday Missal*, People’s Edition with the New Translation of the Mass (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2011), 621.

⁸³ 1 Cor 2:9; see Is 64:4; 65:17. This is echoed in a *ḥadīth* found in the collection of Buḥārī: Narrated Abū Hurayra, “Allah’s Apostle said: Allah said, ‘I have prepared for My Pious slaves things which have never been seen by an eye, or heard by an ear, or imagined by a human being.’ If you wish, you can recite this Verse from the Holy Quran: ‘No soul knows what is kept hidden for them, of joy as a reward for what they “used to do.”’ (Q. 32:17). Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IVn467; see http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/bukhari/bh4/bh4_471.htm.

