

The “Dark Knowledge of God” and Our Worship of the Divine Mystery

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THE MAIN FOCUS of my *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*,¹ St. Thomas Aquinas’s theological epistemology of the divine names, may also be useful to the Catholic ecclesial community, as a way of accounting for what happens, theologically and epistemologically, when we adore and praise the Divine Mystery in our liturgical worship.² For Aquinas’s theological epistemology can be viewed as a kind of transcendental reflection upon the conditions of possibility for the language of Trinitarian monotheism that is proper to Christian worship. As systematic theology begins its life from within the matrix of the Church’s worship, so it should also place its insights at the service of the ecclesial body, which after all, as David Tracy has taught us, is one of theology’s three public arenas, along with society and academe.³ Indeed, Aquinas’s theological insights are of considerable importance not just for classrooms but for churches as well.

As would only seem fitting for this inaugural Charles Cardinal Journet Lecture, I would also like, in the investigation of my subject, to call at

¹ Gregory Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004). The following essay is a slightly revised version of the inaugural Charles Cardinal Journet Lecture, given at Ave Maria University on April 7, 2005. I sincerely thank the Aquinas Center for Theological Renewal at Ave Maria University for awarding the inaugural Charles Cardinal Journet Prize to my book, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*.

² What I say here in reference to Catholic liturgical worship would also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to various other forms of Christian liturgical worship.

³ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 3–45.

times upon the very thought of that prolific theologian and loyal churchman after whom this lecture is named. Charles Journet was born on January 26, 1891, in Geneva, Switzerland, and was educated at the Seminary of Fribourg in the Swiss town of the same name. He was ordained a priest in 1915, and after spending seven years in pastoral work for the diocese of Fribourg, became a faculty member of the Seminary of Fribourg, a position he kept from 1924 to 1965. An internationally renowned theologian, he also founded the French theological journal *Nova et Vetera*. After receiving episcopal consecration for the titular see of Fornos Minore on February 20, 1965, he was created cardinal by Pope Paul VI in a consistory two days later and took part in the fourth and last session of Vatican Council II in the fall of that same year. He died on April 15, 1975, in Fribourg.

Cardinal Journet's bibliography is truly vast, impressively wide-ranging, and obviously derives from a contemplative and deep-thinking spirit.⁴ In the English-speaking world, some of the most popular translations of his works include *The Church of the Word Incarnate*, *The Meaning of Grace*, and *The Meaning of Evil*.⁵ However, the little work of his I want to use for my subject is less well-known and available, and goes by the felicitous English title *The Dark Knowledge of God*.⁶ "Dark knowledge" describes very well, according to Journet, the kind of recognition we have of God in this world, and the phrase also links up nicely with Thomas's theological epistemology as an appropriate theological foundation for understanding what we are thinking and saying whenever we worship the Divine Mystery.

In what follows, then, I will first describe how various components of the Catholic liturgy, especially its words, evoke a sense of God's mystery.

⁴ For the bibliography, consult *Charles Journet: Un théologien contemplatif* (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1991); this is also found in *Nova et Vetera* (French) 66 (October–December 1991). Also see *Charles Journet (1891–1975): Un théologien en son siècle: Actes du colloque de Genève, 1991*, comp. Philippe Chenaux and Guy Bedouelle et al. (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires; Paris: Éditions Mame, 1992).

⁵ *The Church of the Word Incarnate*, vol. 1 of *The Apostolic Hierarchy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (London: Sheed & Ward, 1955); *The Meaning of Grace*, trans. A. V. Littledale (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1960); *The Meaning of Evil*, trans. Michael Barry (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1963).

⁶ *The Dark Knowledge of God*, trans. James Anderson (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948). The original French title, not as rhetorically pithy for my purposes, is *Connaissance et inconnissance de Dieu* (Paris: Egloff, 1943). Journet also has two other articles dealing with the divine names: "La portée des noms divins," *Nova et Vetera* (French) 35 (1960): 150–54; "Les noms de Dieu ineffable," *Nova et Vetera* (French) 35 (1960): 291–309.

I will next discuss how we might characterize Christian worship language for God as the iconic mean between the extremes of agnostic and idolatrous speech. Finally, with a little help from Journet's book, I will discuss some elements from Aquinas's theology of the divine names, which provide some of the basic theological and epistemological presuppositions for understanding our liturgical worship of the Divine Mystery.

Liturgical Language and the Mystery of God

Let me depict a liturgical setting that all of us have probably experienced at some point in our lives, maybe even very recently.

We start outside in silent darkness, and then a fresh fire sparks into life, and from that fire a large candle and many small candles are lit. We process into the place of worship, and once everyone is inside, carrying their bright points of glittering light that radiate a gentle glow but also leave much in shadow, an ancient, tremulous, and ecstatic song begins, filling every ear with a lilting melody of praise and exultation. The sweet-sharp smell of a frankincense cloud wafts through the air, stimulating our olfactory nerves and, if it is strong enough, even our sense of taste. A bit later, we feel drops of water as they scatter from an aspergillum of metal or moss and strike our foreheads, noses, cheeks, and hands. Even later, we will taste sanctified bread and wine and, perhaps with just a slight flush of inebriation, know that we have communed with our Deity.

It is a high holy day, the congregants are many, and during the service we will also perceive the community's physicality as we see, hear, and touch one another. All our senses have engaged in worship and praise, every physical organ of cognition has become active and attentive to the presence of mystery, quickened and provoked by strange yet familiar, by alluring yet comforting sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations.

So, which liturgy have I been describing? The answer comes without pause if you have ever experienced it—of course, the Catholic Easter Vigil liturgy. Well . . . maybe . . . maybe not. Attend carefully to my description: Those details could just as easily apply to an ancient Mithraic worship service, a Bacchic revelry of the more demure sort, or a modern pagan or Wiccan celebration. As Catholics, you have spontaneously traced the distinctive contours of your faith over the liturgical Rorschach test I have just administered to you. My apologies for the surprise, but two crucial points come out of this exercise. First, the Catholic liturgy gains some of its power to evoke mystery from its rootedness in the physical and human worlds: At the level of symbol, physical environment, and

human community, Catholics are quite at home with the rites and structures of many religions, ancient and modern. But only *some* of its power, for the physical symbols I have been talking about, though *necessary* for Catholic liturgy's approach to the mystery, are nevertheless not *sufficient* for that task. An older sacramental theology used to speak of each sacrament as comprising both a matter and a form; today, we substitute the terminology of symbol and word, though we are talking about the same thing. Only symbol and word together are sufficient to evoke the Christian mystery, but while the symbols of our worship tie us to the totality of religious humanity across all ages and cultures, it is the words of our worship that make it distinctively Christian and Catholic.

My second point, then, says that it is the language of our worship, when connected to its symbols, that especially allows us to enter into and experience the mystery of our Trinitarian God. Indeed, what you were spontaneously supplying to my earlier description were all the words that accompany the symbols and actions of the Easter Vigil: The new fire resounds with cries of "Christ our light"; the ecstatic melody sings the "Exsultet," that Easter hymn of salvation history, sin, death, Christ's cross, and the victory of his resurrection; the water flicks out over the congregation while they are repeating their Christian baptismal promises and reliving that primordial sacrament; and the words Catholic worshipers hear while consuming the sacred bread and wine are "Body of Christ" and "Blood of Christ." These are Christian and Catholic words that transmute the religious symbols common to humanity into inseparable elements of Catholic worship.

So, then, what is the quality of the liturgical language proper to Christian worship, which attempts to proclaim the Trinity, which is Christianity's distinctive form of monotheism? Liturgical language is often scriptural language, and I cannot begin to display here the amplitude of scriptural and liturgical testimony about the mystery of God. Scripture and liturgy show God as powerful and transcendent creator, and as caring and tender provider and re-creator; as merciful and just; as punisher and forgiver; as lover, spouse, friend, and parent. Jesus is also a study in contrasts, as he heals, forgives, banters, and cajoles, duels words with his adversaries, and shows a tender side as well as a threatening mien. Jesus' words about God are also a blend of light and darkness, sunshine and shadow: God is deeply caring but morally demanding, fully forgiving but not averse to punishing, willing to overlook adultery but not hypocrisy, dispensing mercy to sinners and justice to the hard of heart, and always loving toward his Son, even on the cross. Journet writes that "Jesus made human words say what they had never said before concerning the mystery of the intimate life of God, the

strictness of his justice, the depth and gentleness of his forgiveness, the tenderness of his love."⁷ But even the Son could not reveal all about the Father, for only the Son fully knows the Father, and the Father the Son. The liturgy characteristic of Christian Trinitarian monotheism prays to God, Creator, and Father; to Son of God, Christ, and Lord; to Counselor, Comforter, and Spirit—but these names do not reveal all there is to know about the Trinity, for much is left in shadows.

How does the language of Catholic worship, allied to its vital symbols, introduce us into the mystery of God?⁸ We address, pray to, and speak of the triune God as the elusive transcendent One who escapes every one of our words, actions, thoughts, and imaginings, who will not be captured by anything created; the liturgy also acknowledges, however, that this transcendent God has not remained entirely hidden but has been powerfully active in creating and gracing the human race, in gradually revealing himself to humanity, and in remaining immanent within humans through the gifts of Christ and the Spirit. Christian liturgy rejoices to shower upon this God every possible pure perfection, confessing and praying that God is supremely good, loving, merciful, compassionate, caring, provident, eternal, powerful, wise, and so forth. The liturgy, as a kind of theophany of the triune God, presses us by its inner dynamism to simultaneously confess our God as transcendentally other and as immanently intimate with creation.⁹ Since the transcendent God is never exhausted by the creative and graceful actions of the immanent God, the mysterious triune God continues to abide beyond our ken and comprehension.

The apex of the liturgical experience of God's mystery, which thrills and soothes at the same time, always includes the feeling that God is ever more, ever better, and ever beyond whatever we are singing or praying or confessing at the time. Thus, the mystery of God is what Karl Rahner refers to as God's essential incomprehensibility, which is not merely temporary and able to be removed by the beatific vision but will endure as long as God lives.¹⁰

⁷ Journet, *Dark Knowledge*, 120.

⁸ Cf. James Bacik, "Reclaiming a Sense of Mystery in Worship," *Emmanuel* 98 (1992): 251–55. A whole issue of *Liturgical Ministry* 8 [Summer 1999]: 113–55) is also dedicated to the theme "Recovery of Mystery in Liturgy."

⁹ Thomas Fitzgerald, "The Holy Eucharist as Theophany," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28 (1983): 27–38; Stanislaus Campbell, "The Sense of Transcendence in Liturgy: What Is Appropriate for Engagement in Mystery?" *Liturgical Ministry* 8 (1999): 123–35.

¹⁰ Karl Rahner has written about the essential incomprehensibility of God as Holy Mystery, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth, (New York: Seabury, 1974), 36–73.

Christian liturgical language, therefore, when cultured within the nutritive environment of religious symbolism, encourages us to experience the mystery of God as the essential and eternal incomprehensibility of Father, Son, and Spirit, even as the Father is revealed and acknowledged in the temporal missions of Son and Spirit, and even while all Three are confessed and worshiped in the prayers, rituals, and sacraments of the church. 1 Timothy 6:16 (New Oxford Bible) is in effect a paradigmatic liturgical doxology celebrating God's mysterious transcendence and incomprehensibility: "It is [God] alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen."

Agnostic, Idolatrous, and Iconic Language

The worship language endemic to Christian Trinitarian monotheism is what I call iconic in nature and is a mean between agnostic speech and idolatrous speech. This claim is a mouthful and will bear a little unpacking. It is precisely because Christian monotheism believes in an active Creator and Redeemer God who is both transcendent and immanent that its worshipful speech cannot be either agnostic or idolatrous, but must be iconic. Some worshipful speech can veer almost totally toward a language of unsaying and unknowing,¹¹ but Christian worship language, as we have seen, is entirely too positive and too knowing (though not all-positive and all-knowing) for that kind of agnostic discourse. For most Christians, it is God's immanence (especially in Christ and the Holy Spirit) that prevents God's transcendence from remaining totally unknowable to the human and thus totally unsayable by the human, and this is why most Christian worshipful speech does not become entirely agnostic or even cease altogether in adoring silence.¹²

For Christians, moreover, it is also God's transcendence that keeps God's immanence from becoming identified with the human or any other creature, and this is ultimately why Christian worshipful speech can never be as clear and precise, or as thin and woodenly rationalistic, as a chiseled idol. For the words of Christian liturgy, however worldly and secular their provenance, are predicated of the God who transcends that world and can never exist as a mere object within it. Although launching itself from the pad of normal human discourse, liturgical speech always

¹¹ The phrase is from Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Sells explains why some mystical speech prefers the way of negation and agnosticism.

¹² By way of exception, Quaker silence holds a unique position within the spectrum of Christian liturgies.

strives to shoot beyond the earthly atmosphere of that discourse and vector itself into the outer spaces of divine infinity ("‘for my ways are not your ways,’ says the Lord," Is 55:8–9). But idolatrous speech, like the idol itself, is content to follow the prearranged contours of material reality, precisely and minutely tracing the visage of its god according to a preunderstood human pattern of concepts and possibilities.

A word or two more on the difference between idol and icon is in order at this point. The two words are English transliterations of two Greek words (*eidōlon* and *eikōn*) that are as physically close to each other in a Greek dictionary (barely a page between them) as they are in an English one. Their original meanings are also very close: image, similitude, likeness, spectral phantom, and image or idea in the mind.¹³ However, due to monotheism's tradition of polemic against the pagan idols and to Eastern Christianity's penchant for veneration of icons,¹⁴ in religious contexts *icon* almost always has a positive meaning whereas *idol* has gained a pejorative significance that is hard to shake.¹⁵ Part of the negative meaning of *idol* in monotheistic religious contexts derives from the fact that pagan idols were often invested by their devotees with magical or fetishistic qualities, so that whoever controlled or possessed the idol also somehow controlled or possessed the depicted god or goddess. But

¹³ There is a slight difference in connotation: *eidōlon*, which derives from *eidos* (form or shape), can also mean an unsubstantial form; *eikōn*, which derives from *eikō* (to look like or be like), can also mean a portrait. Thus, *eidōlon* as image connotes the outer form or shape of something, whereas *eikōn* as image connotes a portrait or likeness of something.

¹⁴ Monotheism's history of polemic against pagan idols begins with the Decalogue's prohibition of "graven images" in Exodus 20:4, which the Septuagint translated by *eidōla*. Because of the trenchant critique against paganism and its idolatrous practices by early Christian apologists, the iconoclasts were able to claim the mantle of tradition and thus gain an early upper hand in the eastern struggle over the veneration of images, but what eventually won the day for the iconodules at Nicaea II in 787 was a sustained Christological meditation on the aesthetic implications of the incarnation of God in the flesh and face of Jesus Christ. See Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. William Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1989); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990); Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York and London: New York University, 1992); Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (New York: Brill, 1994); Christoph von Schönborn, *God's Human Face: The Christ-Icon*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994).

¹⁵ For example, Gregory Collins, "From Idols to Icons," *Doctrine and Life* 52 (2002): 334–38. In popular culture, on the other hand, *idol* often refers to someone who is admired and almost worshiped by his or her devotees.

true monotheism abhors any human control or capture of the one God, whether spiritually, cognitively, or linguistically. The other negative aspect of standard idol worship is the idol's minutely exact and precisely traced delineation of the god's form, which monotheism would see as derogating from that necessary nebulousness that should envelop any representation of the transcendent God, whether pictorially or linguistically.¹⁶

The term *icon* and its derivatives can mean different things to different people. What I have chosen to focus upon are the icon's following traits, which can occur in a variety of contexts: the religious icon can be described as a "door" or "window" to the divine;¹⁷ it can be understood as making eternal verities visible to the present world or as relating a created and tangible artifact to its uncreated and intangible prototype;¹⁸ and it can be seen as always leaving certain aspects of God undepicted, so that it does not simply substitute itself as an adequate representation for what it points to.¹⁹ This is why I have chosen to refer to the Christian language of worship as iconic, for on the basis of God's immanence it tries in some modest way to represent and suggest God's transcendence, but without ever identifying its thoughts and representations with the transcendent God and thus attempting to capture that God imaginatively or cognitively.

¹⁶ In C. S. Lewis's novel, *Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1956), 272, an old peasant woman prefers praying to the ancient formless (or perhaps deformed) stone image of the goddess Ungit rather than to her more lifelike and more sunnily beautiful Hellenistic wooden image. Though both are idols in Lewis's story, the more rationalistic Hellenistic version is usually what we have in mind when we think of pagan idols.

¹⁷ Cf. Marilyn Minto, *Windows into Heaven: An Introduction to the Russian Icon* (Cardiff: Aureus, 1996); Linette Martin, *Sacred Doorways: A Beginner's Guide to Icons* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2002).

¹⁸ Cf. Stephen Beall, "Verbal Iconicity: A Problem in Liturgical Translation," *Downside Review* 117 (1999): 133–44. Anthony Welch notes that in Islam, a highly aniconic form of monotheism, calligraphy, the craft of the beautifully written word, was thought to be the supreme art; he remarks on the "iconic relationship between the written words of a visible Quran, created by human skill, and the prototype, the intangible, eternal, and uncreated Quran." "Epigraphs as Icons: The Role of the Written Word in Islamic Art," in *Image and the Word: Confrontations in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), 72.

¹⁹ Discussing Jean-Luc Marion's view of Aquinas's understanding of *esse*, which remains indeterminate at its highest reaches, John Martis describes Aquinas's notion of being as an icon rather than an idol of God, for it does not substitute itself for what it points to. "Thomistic *Esse*—Idol or Icon? Jean-Luc Marion's God without Being," *Pacifica* 9 (1996): 55–68.

The Dark Knowledge of God

In this section, I would like to make three points about Aquinas's theological epistemology of the divine names. Though these points cannot attempt to offer a comprehensive synthesis of that epistemology, they do show, together with some cognate insights from Journet's book, that Aquinas does propose a genuine "dark knowledge" of God and, thus, that his theory about how we know and speak of God is both a theological justification and an epistemological foundation for what I have called the "iconic" quality of the Christian liturgy's language of worship. His full theory, erudite and complicated as it is, performs a crucial service for the life of the Church in its worship and prayer.

First Point. Thomas's theory of the divine names, in two major ways, is thoroughly imbued with the darkness of negation and limitation. First, he is entirely convinced that God is essentially incomprehensible and expresses that conviction by two theses: (1) that no created intellect can naturally possess a definitional or intuitive knowledge of God's essence; and (2) that no created intellect can ever possess, in principle, a comprehensive knowledge of God's essence. Thomas frequently says that during our earthly life we can know *that* God exists but cannot possess a definitional, exact knowledge of *what* God is.²⁰ However, he is willing to grant that the blessed, through God's grace, enjoy an intuitional and essential knowledge of God in the beatific vision of heaven.²¹ But even the blessed, for all time, will never have a comprehensive, infinite knowledge of God in heaven, even though they will possess an intuitive and direct knowledge of the infinite divine essence. A rhetorically effective text frames the issue succinctly: "The very boundlessness [*immensitas*] of God will be seen [in heaven] but it will not be seen boundlessly [*immense*]: for [God's] total measure [*totus modus*] will be seen but not totally [*totaliter*]."²²

²⁰ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, ed. P. Mandonnet (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929), 1.8.1.1; *Summa contra gentiles*, in *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium*, vols. 2–3 (Turin, 1961), I, 11.66, 69. For more texts and background, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 30–32, and 30–32 footnotes 10–17; Journet, *Dark Knowledge*, 115–17.

²¹ For texts, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 32–40; cf. Journet, *Dark Knowledge*, 117–18.

²² *De veritate*, in Leonine Commission, vol. 22 (1970–76), 8.2. ad 6. For more texts, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 40–47. For the originality that Thomas shows in how he handles these issues, see *Speaking*, 39 note 38; and for the paradox that Thomas asserts when he claims that the blessed have a direct though finite knowledge of the infinite God, see *ibid.*, 47 note 60. See also Karl Rahner, "An Investigation of the Incomprehensibility of God in St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. D. Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979), 244–54.

Several texts display that, for Thomas, our intellects can do little to penetrate the darkness of God in this life: In the end, “we recognize God as one unknown,”²³ for what God is “remains totally unknown,”²⁴ and indeed the ultimate in human knowledge of God occurs when someone “knows that he knows not God, insofar as he recognizes that what God is exceeds everything that we understand of Him.”²⁵

Second, Aquinas also possesses a tripartite *via negativa* or “negative path.” The first part of his *via negativa* is what I have called, in *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, the “qualitative negation,” which is a total and absolute denial of a quality or predicate to God, removing from God the entire universe of discourse connected with the predicate in question. We deny these qualities of God because they do not agree with the perfection of the divine being. For example, we say that God is immaterial (because he is not part of the material realm); eternal (because he is not part of the temporal sphere); immutable (because he is not a reality that changes); simple (because he is not a complex reality made of parts); and infinite (because he is not a finite reality).

The second part of Aquinas’s *via negativa* is what I have called, in *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, the “objective modal negation,” which denies the creaturely objective mode of a perfection to God, although the perfection itself as such, according to the divine mode of supereminence, is still able to be affirmed of God. For example, knowledge may be predicated of God, but also denied of God by an objective modal negation:

Whenever knowledge or understanding or anything pertaining to perfection is removed from God, this must be understood according to transcendence [*excessus*] and not according to defect. . . . If it is denied, then, that the name *understanding* is properly suitable to God, this is because God does not understand according to the creature’s mode but more eminently.²⁶

²³ “Deum tamquam ignotum cognoscimus.” *Super Boetium de Trinitate*, in Leonine Commission, vol. 50 (1992), 1.2. ad 1.

²⁴ “Penitus manet ignotum.” *ScG III*, 49.2270. For the Neoplatonic background of the phrase, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 28 note 3.

²⁵ *De potentia*, in *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. P.M. Pession (Turin, 1949), 7.5. ad 14. For more on God as supereminent darkness, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 28–29; Journet, *Dark Knowledge*, 29–30. The most beautiful pages in Journet’s book (70–114) deal with the global negations of apophatic mysticism, which originate in the theological virtue of love and involve a non-conceptual type of knowledge based on connatural inclination.

²⁶ *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 1.35.1.1 ad 1.

What happens if we just keep performing qualitative negations and objective modal negations, one after the other? Thomas gives a beautiful answer that is also mystically uplifting:

When we proceed into God through the way of negation [*remotio*], first we deny of Him all corporeal realities; and next, even intellectual realities as they are found in creatures, like goodness and wisdom, and then there remains in our understanding only that God exists and nothing further, so that it suffers a kind of confusion. Lastly, however, we even remove from Him his very existence, as it is in creatures, and then our understanding remains in a certain darkness of ignorance according to which, in this present state of life, we are best united to God, as Dionysius says, and this is a sort of thick fog [*caligo*] in which God is said to dwell.²⁷

The third part of Aquinas's *via negativa* is what I have called, in *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, the "subjective modal negation," which denies of God the usual ways we tend to think of and express the divine attributes, due to the manner in which we inevitably understand and signify by means of propositions. Consider the following quote:

Every name fails to signify the divine act of being on account of the fact that no name simultaneously signifies something perfect and simple, for abstract names do not signify a being subsisting in itself, and concrete names signify a composite being; . . . rejecting whatever is imperfect, we use each kind of name in divine predication: abstract names on account of their simplicity and concrete names on account of their perfection.²⁸

Summing up, then, qualitative negations are absolute denials while modal negations are relative denials; objective modal negations remove the finite mode of the creature from God while subjective modal negations refuse to assert of God those imperfections that arise from our human manner of understanding and signifying. It should be clear by now that Aquinas's stress on God's incomprehensibility and his *via negativa* cause his theological epistemology to embrace a very *dark* knowledge of God. The second point, however, shows that his theology of the divine names also advocates a dark *knowledge* of God.

²⁷ Ibid., 1.8.1.1 ad 4.

²⁸ Ibid., 1.4.1.2. For more on these aspects of Thomas's *via negativa*, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 56–68; chapter 11 is dedicated entirely to an investigation of the subjective modal negation, which Thomas often explains by saying that certain affirmative and absolute names are truly predicated of God as regards the reality they signify (*res significata*) but not as regards their manner of signifying it (*modus significandi*).

Second Point. Granting the legitimate negations and limitations described in the first point, Thomas's theory of the divine names also espouses a positive, analogous, and substantial predication of God's divine names. To begin with, Aquinas always argues that true theological predication cannot possibly be a matter of univocity or equivocity and, by a process of elimination, concludes that the only alternative left is that of analogy. Univocity cannot be the answer, for if it were, then certain truths about God's transcendence that Thomas has previously established to his own satisfaction could not possibly be the case; but since they are the case, then the attributes we predicate of God cannot be univocal to creatures and God. The truths about God's transcendence that are incompatible with univocity are divine incomprehensibility, divine simplicity and perfection, divine omnipotence, the identity of being and essence in God, and the fact that God never participates in any perfection but simply is that perfection.²⁹ Basically, since univocity always depreciates the divine transcendence, Aquinas sees it as a kind of philosophical or theological idolatry.³⁰

Next, Aquinas uses both epistemological and ontological reasons to argue against equivocity. The epistemological reason asserts that if the predication of the divine names involved equivocity, then our knowledge of God would be destroyed, since the equivocal name carries totally disparate meanings for God and creatures; the ontological reason affirms that the order and likeness between creatures and God precludes any equivocal predication of the divine names. A text from the *De veritate* puts it all together:

It cannot be asserted that whatever is said of God and creatures is predicated in a purely equivocal fashion, because unless there were some correspondence [*convenientia*] between the creature and God in reality, God's essence would not be the likeness [*similitudo*] of creatures, and so by knowing his own essence he would not know creatures; similarly, we

²⁹ *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 1.35.1.4; *Compendium theologiae*, in Leonine Commission, vol. 42 (1979), 1.26–7; *De veritate*, 2.11.103–18; ScG I, 32.285, 288–9; *De potentia*, 7.7; *Summa theologiae*, in Leonine Commission, vols. 4–12 (1888–1906) I, q. 13, a. 5.

³⁰ David Burrell speaks of philosophers and philosophy possessing an “inertial tendency” toward the “default position” of univocal language concerning God. “Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (2000): 40, 48. Denys Turner writes: “For Thomas, reason so participates in the divine self-knowledge that it can, by the exercise of its distinctively natural capacity of reasoning, . . . attain to a conclusion the meaning of which lies beyond any which could stand in a relation of univocity with the created order” (*Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004], 51).

could not attain the knowledge of God from created realities, nor from among the names applied to creatures could we assert one name of God more than another; for in equivocal predication it does not matter which name is used, since no correspondence to reality is recognized anyway.³¹

Finally, Aquinas concludes that analogy is the only remaining possibility, for analogy

is a mean between pure equivocity and simple univocity, for in those names which are said analogically there is neither one meaning as in univocal names, nor totally diverse meanings as in equivocal names, but the name which is analogically predicated in plural ways signifies different relations to something one.³²

Analogy turns out to be the only epistemological explanation capable of accounting for the fact that, in Thomas's eyes, we really *do know* some truths *about God*. For equivocity cannot account for the fact that some *true knowledge* of God actually exists, and, by detracting from God's transcendence, univocity does not allow our true theological judgments to recognize God *as God*. Aquinas's doctrine of theological analogy arises out of his epistemological reflections upon what he sees as the necessary presuppositions and consequences of true theological judgments.

For Thomas, then, analogy is more a matter of judgment than of concept. Analogy occurs when the meanings of words contained in statements are spontaneously adjusted and nuanced in order to keep the truth-value of the statements in which those words appear. But the paradox is that while analogical theological judgments about God may be true, it is not clear at all how the concepts that are the predicates in those judgments apply to God. In other words, the truth of theological judgments outstrips the intrinsic intelligibility of their concepts in relation to God. This means that there is truth of judgment along with darkness of concept, and that,

³¹ *De veritate*, 2.11.122–34; cf. *Compendium theologiae*, 1.27; *De potentia*, 7.7; *ST I*, q. 13, a. 5.

³² *ST I*, q. 13, a. 5; cf. *ScG I*, 34.297; Aquinas, *De potentia*, 7.7; *Compendium theologiae*, 1.27; *De veritate*, 2.11.137–9. For the International Theological Commission, analogy is also the mean between excessively positivist and excessively negativist views of theological knowledge and language: "Analogy protects against an objectivist, reified, and, ultimately, mysteryless understanding of faith and dogma. But it protects as well against an overly negative theology, which regards dogmas as mere ciphers of an ultimately inconceivable Transcendence and consequently fails to recognize the historical concreteness of the Christian mystery of salvation." See "On the Interpretation of Dogmas," *Origins* 20 (May 17, 1990): 9.

although we may make true judgments about God's very being, the nature of that being remains dark to our intuitive understanding.³³

Aquinas propounds a theology of the divine names that claims that affirmative and absolute names like *wise* and *good* signify the truth about God's essence in an analogous and positive fashion. Although, as we have seen, he accepts God's negative *names* like *immaterial* or *incorporeal*, he disagrees with those who merely offer a minimalist negative or causal *interpretation* of God's affirmative names, who understand "God is good," for example, either to mean only that God is not evil (the negative interpretation), or only that God is the cause of good (the causal interpretation).³⁴ Since for Aquinas "whatever perfection is in creatures exists in God preeminently,"³⁵ when "it is said that 'God is good,' the meaning is not 'God is the cause of goodness' or 'God is not evil,' but 'that which we call goodness in creatures preexists in God according to a higher mode.'" ³⁶

Maimonides is usually Thomas's opponent when he contests the negative interpretation of the divine names,³⁷ and, in contrast to him, Thomas

³³ For more on analogy as judgment in Aquinas, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 173–87.

³⁴ The main texts are *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 1.2.1.3; *De potentia*, 7.5; *ST I*, q. 13, a. 2. For more texts and detail on Aquinas's positive theology, including the arguments for his interpretation of the divine names, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 298–313.

³⁵ *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 1.2.1.3. Journet also relates God's unknowability to the divine preeminence: "God is named as unnameable, known as unknown, in this sense: that infinite wisdom and infinite existence, far from fading into nothingness in crossing the threshold of the divine mystery, are, on the contrary, preserved there intact, like the seven colors in white light, being raised to a degree of incandescence that remains unknowable and inexpressible" (*Dark Knowledge*, 37).

³⁶ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 2. Gerard Hughes states that for Aquinas, "God is wise" means "that God is whatever it takes to ground the fact that he is the explanation of all human wisdom." See "Aquinas and the Limits of Agnosticism," in *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1987), 52.

³⁷ For Maimonides's position on the predication of the divine names, see *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 1.50–60. According to *Guide*, 1.58, terms that are perfections for us (for example, *living*) are necessarily predicated of God in affirmative propositions with predicates that are positive in form ("God is living"), but logically these propositions *mean* the negation of the opposite ("God is not mortal"). *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 1.2.1.3, is Thomas's most detailed treatment of Maimonides's position. For comparisons of Maimonides and Aquinas, see Alexander Broadie, "Maimonides and Aquinas on the Names of God," *Religious Studies* 23 (1987): 157–70; Avital Wohlmann, *Thomas d'Aquin et Maïmonide: Un dialogue exemplaire* (Paris: Cerf, 1988); Neil Stubbens, "Naming God: Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas," *Thomist* 54 (1990): 229–67; David Burrell, "Maimonides, Aquinas, and Ghazali on Naming God," in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in*

holds that affirmative and absolute names are predicated of God substantially (*substantialiter*)³⁸ and essentially (*essentialiter*).³⁹ The divine names "signify the divine substance, though deficiently and imperfectly . . . and not . . . as comprehending it."⁴⁰ With great care and precision, he writes that the divine names signify "that which the divine substance is [*id quod est divina substantia*] but do not perfectly signify it according to what it is [*secundum quod est*] but according to how it is understood by us [*secundum quod a nobis intelligitur*]."⁴¹

The care with which he expresses his thought demonstrates his concern to uphold a positive theology which predicates divine names of the divine substance [*id quod est*] while at the same time rejecting any intuitive knowledge of the divine substance [*secundum quod est*]. . . . He is claiming in his positive theology a truth about God's substance and, at the same time, denying any insight *into* God's substance. Most paradoxically, he is at once claiming a knowledge *about* God and admitting an ignorance of God.⁴²

Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation, ed. Peter Ochs (New York: Paulist, 1993), 238–46; Stephen Lahey, "Maimonides and Analogy," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993): 219–32; Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas on the Limits of Reason* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

³⁸ ST I, q. 13, a. 2.

³⁹ ST I, q. 13, a. 6.

⁴⁰ *De potentia*, 7.5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; ST I, q. 13, a. 2, replaces the *secundum quod est* with the equivalent *secundum suam substantiam*.

⁴² Rocca, *Speaking*, 305. This is a crucial but difficult distinction. The rest of this note is quoted from *Speaking*, 305 note 28: "Consider the subtle differences in the positions of two of Aquinas's most famous twentieth-century commentators, Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson. Maritain, interpreting Aquinas's statement that certain names signify 'that which the divine substance is,' writes that such names 'do indeed tell in some manner what God is,' and that we can 'know what God is in a more-or-less imperfect, but always true, fashion' (*The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. under the supervision of G. B. Phelan from 4th French ed. [New York: Scribner, 1959], 425). But Gilson contends that Aquinas is only assuring us that such names designate the divine substance 'as actually being what the names signify,' which can occur without any positive concept of the divine substance (*The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. L. K. Shook [New York: Random, 1956], 458 note 47). 'To escape the "agnosticism of quidditative concept" to which some are ill-resigned where God is concerned, it is not necessary to seek refuge in a more or less imperfect concept of the divine essence, but in the positive character of affirmative judgments,' which still leave God's essence totally unable to be conceptualized (*ibid.*, note 51). Gerard Hughes, referring to perfection terms in Aquinas's doctrine of God, writes similarly: 'We know something about the truth-conditions for the application of such terms to God; for we

Third Point. Thomas's theological epistemology of the divine names is a rich and balanced blend of positive and negative theology, and all the elements that comprise that blend must be acknowledged according to their proper weight if any theological assertion is to be considered true. He advances a tensioned truth about God, in which only the fruitful interplay of positive and negative theology can ever do justice to the elusive God who escapes our epistemic and linguistic capture, and yet who at the same time, as the gracious and free God, desires to be acknowledged and worshiped as our Creator and Redeemer.⁴³ Looming over everything "is the mysterious incomprehensibility of God, from whom Aquinas's qualitative negative theology removes whole realms of discourse, and whose essence humans cannot intuit in this life or ever fathom comprehensively, even in the life to come."⁴⁴ But under that looming cloud of unknowing, Aquinas does manage to claim a positive and analogous predication of the divine names that bespeak God's very substance. Nevertheless, even these positive divine names must deal with the critique of qualitative negative theology, must submit themselves to the denials of both types of modal negative theology, and must allow themselves to be integrated into Thomas's threefold dialectic of affirmation, negation, and transcendent reaffirmation through divine supereminence—a dialectic that ultimately stems from Thomas's reading of Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names*.⁴⁵ *De potentia*, 7.5, ad 2, shows us how

know that those truth-conditions obtain. But we do not know what those truth-conditions consist in. In other words, we know something *about* the meanings of these terms used analogically of God, since we know that they are related to the meanings of the same words used of ourselves: but we do not know what they mean when used of him' ('Aquinas and the Limits of Agnosticism,' 51)."

⁴³ Cf. Rocca, *Speaking*, 356. Journet claims that Aquinas's theological epistemology is "primarily and essentially affirmative, cataphatic, and, secondarily, negative, apophatic" (*Dark Knowledge*, 71). Denys Turner points out Aquinas's "fundamental confidence in theological speech, a trust that our ordinary ways of talking about God are fundamentally *in order*, needing only to be subordinated to a governing apophaticism, expressed as an epistemological principle." See "Apophaticism, Idolatry, and the Claims of Reason," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002), 32. Turner also speaks of "a complex interplay, or dialectic, of affirmative and negative tensions" (*Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*, 51).

⁴⁴ Rocca, *Speaking*, 355.

⁴⁵ I discuss whether Pseudo-Dionysius proposes a twofold or threefold dialectic in *Speaking*, 22–25. Fran O'Rourke thinks that Aquinas sees a threefold pattern in Pseudo-Dionysius's basically twofold dialectic. See *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 14–18, 33–35.

this last process works: Wisdom is predicated of God positively, but then it is also immediately denied of God, not because there is a deficiency of wisdom in God but because God possesses wisdom supereminently, in a manner that transcends all our concepts and words. "And so through that triple way of speaking according to which God is said to be wise, Dionysius offers a complete understanding of how such names are to be attributed to God."⁴⁶

Conclusion

I have found that the first paragraph of my book's conclusion also works very well as a conclusion to this lecture, and so I quote liberally from it here:

Thomas weaves his negative and positive theology together, precisely because *only that interweaving* can do justice to the fact that the Church must speak and praise, must invoke and love and follow the God *who just is* the Mysterious and Incomprehensible One who ever escapes and is never caught by our ideational and conceptual schemes. Thomas's blend of positive and negative theology, however academic its form of expression and social location, is ultimately the servant of the Church in its worship of the utterly mysterious God and, thus, Thomas the academic also serves Thomas the spiritual guide. . . . The Church cannot *really worship* God unless it is somehow able to know that God and somehow able to speak to and about that God, while at the same time the Church cannot worship the *real God* unless it worships the incomprehensible God. Thomas's interplay of positive and negative theology, therefore, enables the Church's language about God and its worship of God to be truthfully iconic without becoming blasphemously idolatrous.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Cf. Journet, *Dark Knowledge*, 72. For more on Thomas's use of the threefold path, see Rocca, *Speaking*, 49–55.

⁴⁷ Rocca, *Speaking*, 353.