

**Toward a Post-Secular, Post-Conciliar Thomistic
Philosophy: *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*
and the Challenge of Contemporary
Natural Theology**

THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, O.P.
Thomistic Institute
Washington, DC

WHAT SHOULD post-Vatican II Thomism look like? How can the study of St. Thomas assist Christian thinkers in the midst of our increasing secular age? In what sense is classical metaphysics important for the renewal of contemporary Christian theology? Any possible responses to questions such as these are inevitably controversial for multiple reasons, and attempts to answer them are not the work of one person alone. However, a limited effort at responding to these queries is offered by this author's work *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology*.¹ The editors of this journal have generously decided to make the book the subject of the colloquium of essays that follows. They do so, one would suspect, not principally because of the merits of the book, but because of the importance of the subject matter: the recovery of Thomistic natural theology in our current intellectual age. This is, of course, a topic as challenging as it is important.

Why, however, is such a topic controversial? Clearly the Church historically has taught that natural knowledge of God is possible for human beings. Since the Council of Trent until the present, courses in metaphysics and natural theology have been required in Catholic seminaries for every candidate to the priesthood, and are considered essential to preparation for doctoral studies in sacred theology. Furthermore, the

¹ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009).

Roman Curia has recently reaffirmed the importance of this practice.² And yet the subject is indeed fraught with difficulties. In what follows, I'll attempt to sketch out briefly, as an introduction to the exchange that follows, the basic argument of the book under consideration, and then name some of the issues that affect the appraisal of Aquinas's philosophical theology in our contemporary context. These reflections are meant to be introductory and topical in tone, serving as a backdrop to discussion on the renewal of Thomistic thought in the Church today.

★ ★ ★

The book *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* is written with three goals in mind. First, the book seeks to respond to the now habituated cultural presupposition (prevalent among academic theologians in particular) that, after the criticisms of "ontotheology" by Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger, philosophical arguments for the existence of God as they existed in classical form are no longer intellectually tenable. Given the criticisms of these thinkers, so it is said, we know today that it is impossible conceptually to promulgate the kind of metaphysical or philosophical theology that Aquinas develops in such works as the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the *Summa theologiae* (especially in the "De Deo Uno" treatise of the *Prima pars*). Theology today has to be done in what Jürgen Habermas calls an age of "post-metaphysical thought," and of course this truth has substantive repercussions for a re-evaluation of what we take ourselves to mean when we speak of God or the divine.³

In purposeful distantiation from such a view, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* looks at the concerns of Kant and Heidegger and argues that Aquinas's own presentation of demonstrative knowledge of God simply does not fall afoul of the criticisms of classical thought enunciated by these paragons of modernity. Aquinas is doing something quite different from that which they take themselves to be criticizing, such that the "rules" of natural theology are articulated by these different thinkers as they would be, say, in different and incompatible games. Heidegger accuses Aquinas of cheating at philosophical checkers, but Aquinas is playing philosophical chess. His thinking can be called into question for many reasons, no doubt, but his thought cannot be catalogued as a common species of what is pejoratively termed "ontotheology." What-

² See the recent "Decree on the Reform of Ecclesiastical Studies of Philosophy," released by the Vatican Congregation for Education, January 28, 2011. www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20110128_dec-rif-filosofia_en.html

³ See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, *Post-Metaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

ever the merits of this modern criticism, it does not apply aptly to the metaphysical thinking of Aquinas.

Although the scope of this argument is complex, the essence of the issue pertains to the question of aprioristic knowledge of God: Kant and Heidegger both seem to presume that classical natural theology appeals necessarily to an *a priori* (pre-philosophical) idea or intuition of God as the supreme cause of being (such as that exemplified in the ontological argument that is defended in St. Anselm and the subsequent Franciscan tradition [St. Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus]). Furthermore, they take it that this approach invalidates authentic thought about being by (a) mechanizing the world according to an artificially technological concept of being as “caused” (Heidegger), and (b) construing all of reality “always, already” in light of a mental systemization of being and a construction of God as supreme cause that is taken to be real, but which in fact is purely immanent to the mind (Kant and Heidegger). For Aquinas, however, metaphysics is not a mental system for conceptual domination of reality, but an analogical investigation into the deeper structures of reality. Furthermore, St. Thomas simply never accords Kant’s premise regarding the primacy and necessity of *a priori* knowledge of God. On the contrary, he argues consistently that the demonstrative knowledge we have of God is only ever derived *a posteriori*, that is to say, not prior to but subsequent to the study of the structure of beings we encounter in the world. Thus, God is “named” only in an indirect fashion, in the way a uniquely transcendent cause is known by and through his effects. The mind has no purchase on God except through the world of concrete existent beings (including of course that uniquely spiritual being that is the human person) considered insofar as they necessarily point to the existence of a transcendent but unknown cause.

Second, the book aims to decipher a proper order of progressive discovery in Thomistic metaphysics (which following Aquinas we call a “*via inventionis*”). That is to say, how can the philosophical investigation of reality lead through a series of discoveries of metaphysical principles inherent in things (such as the distinction of substance and accidental properties, actuality and potentiality, existence and essence)? And how can this unfolding understanding of the deeper ontological structures of reality give rise organically to a more ultimate question regarding the grounds for the existence of the world, and therefore to the philosophical demonstrations of the existence of God? Here the book examines claims regarding the order of discovery as it is articulated in three influential twentieth-century Thomists: Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Karl Rahner. In each case, the goal of the study is to show how—despite

the real merits of each of these thinkers—recourse to the Aristotelianism of Aquinas helps us to correct certain deficits found in each of their viewpoints. In this respect, the book aspires (however broadly) to kinship with more classical readings of Aquinas, that is, those found in the great Dominican commentators of the Thomist tradition, who emphasized the Aristotelian elements of St. Thomas's thinking.

Intrinsic to this second aim there is parallel concern: How ought we to try to understand the different uses of the term "analogy" in Aquinas's metaphysics, especially when he employs analogy theory to speak about the ontological similitude between creatures and God? Here the book looks at the respective uses of the analogy of proper proportionality, the analogy of attribution *multa ad unum*, and the analogy of attribution *ad alterum*, and seeks to discern how these different analogies are employed by Aquinas in the context of discussions of diverse principles and causes of being. For example, when St. Thomas is discussing the intrinsic likeness of being or goodness in diverse categorical modes of being (exp.: the being of a quantity vs. the being of a quality), he uses the analogy of proper proportionality (*A* [being] is to *X* [quantity] as *B* [being] is to *Y* [quality]). When he speaks about the causal dependency of one upon another, he employs the analogy of attribution *ad alterum* (*A* [being of the quantity] resembles *B* [being of the substance], because *B* is the cause of *A*). The point of these reflections is to show how Aquinas's use of analogy theory to speak about being, the causes of being, and ultimately about God, is all constructed in such a way as to permit us to refer to God and to signify what God is truly, without reducing the intelligibility of God to the realm of intra-worldly things (which would be akin to what Kant and Heidegger criticize as ontotheology). A proper understanding of the Aristotelianism of Aquinas, therefore, not only allows us to reflect on a proper order of inquiry into the question of God and the demonstrations of the existence of God, but also allows us to speak of God truthfully by analogy, and yet in ways that are genuinely respectful of the divine transcendence.

The third aim of the book is to suggest (only briefly) ways that natural theology affects the study of Christian theology. The book does so primarily by engaging the *philosophical* question of the apophatic versus kataphatic dimensions of Aquinas's thought regarding knowledge of God. On the one hand, natural theology—if it is to be what it aspires to—must manifest some real capacity to name and signify God as God is in himself. Otherwise the discipline falls inevitably into the ambivalence of a nearly agnostic, radical apophaticism. Aquinas showed understandable concern that the thought of Moses Maimonides tended toward this unhappy

extreme. On the other hand, the knowledge we might have of God even by way of the best and most exquisite metaphysical intelligence is marked by intrinsic limitations. Were this not the case, such thinking could readily mistake its own understanding for one that is maximally perfect in all respects. In this way, philosophical reason could become inherently closed to the higher and deeper knowledge of divine revelation, and the practice of natural theology could serve to imprison the mind within a rationalistic immanence. The analogical and causal argumentation of Aquinas, however, avoids these two extremes. On the one hand, we *can* know something of “what” God is analogically through the consideration of his created effects, and analogical language *can* signify God as he is in himself. On the other hand, the knowledge we have of God is necessarily indirect and limited, and consequently opens the mind *naturally and philosophically* to the desire for a yet-more-perfect knowledge of God, if this were possible.

This pattern of true light and profound shadows in the domain of theological reasoning on the natural level manifests the real possibility and inherent meaningfulness (or congruency) of revealed knowledge of God. For revelation simultaneously completes what is lacking and fulfills an appetite for truth regarding God that is inscribed into human reason. In saying this, I am speaking structurally rather than temporally. The idea is not that one reasons first to an apex of natural reason’s limits, only then to offer one’s self to a higher plane of revelation that begins subsequently. Rather, in light of revelation, and within it, reason can simultaneously perceive within itself *and by its own philosophical indications* the “room” within itself for grace, and the place of contact or of congruent fittingness, wherein nature is intrinsically open to grace, and the natural light of reason intrinsically open to the higher and complementary light of divine truth.

If this is the case, however, the life of grace not only enriches and speaks to our human nature’s highest intellectual aspirations, but also must preserve, purify, and assume those aspirations into itself. The grace of faith, for example, does not destroy our natural capacity to know God. This has implications for sacred theology as such. On the one hand, certainly a sapiential theology of Christian revelation (which perceives all things in light of the Triune God) is not reducible to a sapiential natural theology (which considers all creatures philosophically in light of the transcendent first cause). However, sacred theology cannot bypass philosophical thinking about God, either. On the contrary, it must develop and make use of a metaphysical theology of God within its speculations on Trinitarian theology and in its considerations of creation, the doctrine of grace, Christology, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The

natural, metaphysical range of human reason is not something optional for sacred theology. Those who claim that it is—and that they are working in theological disciplines without some form of recourse to metaphysical reflection—are in fact not avoiding metaphysical thinking of some sort but are in fact (all too often) substituting intuitively for classical metaphysical themes a set of modern ontological commitments that are under-examined and perhaps rationally questionable. What we need is not a post-metaphysical Christian theology, nor one that is rationalistic (employing philosophy in ways that obscure the mystery of faith). Rather, Catholic theology today needs to develop a more philosophically disciplined form of theology, one that seeks to renew metaphysical reflection about God, both for the sake of philosophy itself and for the sake of a more sound practice of Christian theology.

★ ★ ★

This brief sketch marks out the basic vision that I seek to present in the book. As I have mentioned above, however, the road forward in any real renewal of post-conciliar Thomism is marked today by not a few significant challenges. Without attempting to give any kind of developed account of why this is the case, we can name briefly a few of the theoretical and cultural reasons for this situation. A consideration of these issues serves as a helpful introduction to the exchanges that follow.

Consider first, in a thumb-nail sketch, the philosophical legacy of Thomism in recent Catholic intellectual history. Revised by the Roman universities and Pope Leo XIII in the nineteenth century, and subsequently legislated for formation in seminaries by Pope St. Pius X, Thomist doctrine came to a certain prominence in the first half of the twentieth century. Much of this period was in fact theoretically fruitful, and it gave rise to important historical studies of Aquinas in centers of thought such as Louvain and Toronto. In time, however, (and especially in the wake of Vatican II) “Neo-Thomist” doctrine came to be judged profoundly lacking as an intellectual doctrine. It was identified, for instance, with rationalism devoid of emotional realism and spirituality, manualism devoid of contact with the living questions of culture (the ever-present pejorative label: “Neo-scholastic manualist”), and ahistoricism that is conceptualist but unable to attend to the dynamic, changing element of human nature in general and intellectual history in particular. Along with the rise of this interpretation of the Thomism of modernity as fundamentally culturally incompetent, there was a simultaneous interest in the possibility of a new philosophical pluralism in the Catholic Church. The intellectual gains of existentialism, phenomenology, Heidegger, Wittgenstein (and, more

recently, analytic philosophy and various forms of post-modernism) were seen to open doors to the engagement of the life of the mind and to contemporary culture that were otherwise inaccessible. *If* Thomism were to survive and flourish, it would be in need of some kind of strategic alliance with one or more of these forms of thought.

I have alluded here with almost caricatural brevity to a host of now standard criticisms of pre-conciliar Thomistic philosophy. Of course not all such criticisms were accurate. Nor were they all purely inaccurate. What they are all, however, is *passé*. The pressing question the present context raises is far different from that of our Vatican II-generation forebears. For they were essentially interested in widening the conversation of Catholic intellectual life in the face of a complex modern world and in fear of an embattled, enclosed Catholic intellectual provincialism. Meanwhile, the situation has changed drastically. The reason that there are pronounced dispositions toward conservatism among younger Catholic clergy and intelligentsia today is not because of some kind of naïve, ahistorical “false-consciousness” on their part. Rather, many younger students of philosophy and theology have a historically realistic awareness that the problem of the post-conciliar generation is not the core problem in the present and oncoming era. For the real challenge of contemporary Catholic life is to possess and transmit integrally *any coherent account of classical philosophical and theological doctrine at all*.

It should be emphasized in this context that we live in a post-Christian and in many ways post-secular age, in which claims to the truth compete like food items for sale in a supermarket. The diets on offer are incomplete. The purchasers frequently lack informed discretion as to what to assimilate, because they truly lack prior substantive intellectual formation of any kind. This is all the more the case as one travels in the cultures of younger, secularized, post-Christian Americans and Europeans. That is to say, world views are on offer in fragments, but integral formation is often utterly lacking. In such a setting, it is difficult even to procure knowledge of a truly profound and coherent vision of the world, let alone learn to mediate disputes between competing visions. Those who hold the idea that “there are conservative Catholic people out there who already have a content of formation that needs to be broadened” are basically working under an anachronistic idea of an older generation. It is that generation which received a true philosophical formation and subsequently sought to broaden it (or reject it). The young do not have the luxury of such anachronistic prejudices, for they themselves know there is little in the way of a deeper sapiential philosophical vision of reality available in the modern university, Catholic or otherwise. What is

available in the modern university is only a fragmented collection of disciplines: anthropology, biology, theology, literature, etc., without an organic unity among them, and without an intrinsic intellectual connection to God that is in some way common to each. Often what one finds in Catholic universities under the name of the “Catholic intellectual heritage” is an absence of reasoned argumentation and philosophical doctrine, replaced by boilerplate presentations of secular, liberal social justice and Rawlsian, politically correct liberal intuitivism.

In this context of post-modern fragmentation and non-formation, then, *Aristotelian-Thomism* is in its own way very much the order of the day. For precisely *to interact with* contemporary philosophical traditions and the diversity of modern sciences, students need formation in a coherent, realist philosophy: logic, philosophy of nature, philosophy of the living human being, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and natural theology. If the principles of these disciplines are investigated in an intelligible and clear order (being introduced in such a way as to become transparent to human reason through progressive philosophical demonstration), they can become the starting points for a person’s profound orientation to understanding the order of created reality, and creation’s relation to God. They can also become the basis for a disciplined, large-minded, and wise engagement with the broader culture and with the other academic disciplines. But you cannot give what you don’t have. And a generation of philosophers and theologians within the Church who themselves have (as slaves to convention, or through fear or mistrust) systematically refused to learn and to transmit many of the intrinsic treasures of the scholastic philosophical and theological heritage will be ill-equipped to help young people in a secularized, intellectually disoriented, a-doctrinal world. The latter need to find intellectual compass and principled grounds for ongoing intellectual discernment of what is true and good in human culture. Precisely to meet this need, Aristotle, as read by Aquinas, offers us important resources for moving forward in a post-conciliar context, in highly constructive ways.

Analogous things can be said in the domain of theology, and with greater brevity. In the wake of the debates between Karl Barth and Erich Przywara regarding the “analogy of being,” and in the face of the rising tide of secularism and unbelief in twentieth-century Europe, modern Catholic theologians by and large continued to affirm the traditional teaching represented by Vatican I: that human reason is capable in principle of coming to natural knowledge of God. However, they also increasingly admitted (plausibly) that the pursuit and health of this knowledge is highly qualified by the learning subject’s adherence or non-

adherence to the mystery of the Catholic faith. Grace, in other words, heavily conditions the natural success or failure of a philosophy that takes God seriously as a subject of reflection. Thinkers like Gottlieb Söhngen, Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Walter Kasper kept open the possibility and even necessity of a metaphysical reflection on the mystery of God, but saw this possibility unfolding principally “always and only” within the sphere of an explicitly Christian theological culture. Philosophical aspects of theology represent thus a domain of nature preserved or revived virtually uniquely within an intensive realm of revelatory grace.

This idea had of course important ecumenical overtones, and sought out a point of convergence with concerns of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions regarding the possibilities and dangers of using philosophical argument within the sphere of dogmatic theology. Such thinking was also suggestive of certain trends in post-modern theory, wherein diverse traditions (religious or secular) are seen to portray reality in irremediably diverse ways, across a spectrum of incompatible cultural-linguistic systems. In this context, Catholic theology may take itself to be the most integral, total account of reality (and indeed, one rooted in revelation from God) while also being a form of thought able to purify critically and assume into itself the philosophical treasures of past ages. Philosophy therefore has a function within theology, but it is not a mediating function in which philosophy sets the theologian on the supposedly “neutral ground” of “mere natural reason” for interaction with the representatives of other world-views. Rather, reason is always already specifically Christian in some real sense: subordinating and orienting all other forms of thought in and toward a Christological concentration of rationality.

My concern here is not to contest in every respect this wholistic conception of Christian reason (which has many attractive and globally true features). I would simply like to underscore two main points. First, if Christian theology is going to have a capacity to evaluate, critique, and assimilate Christologically the truths of various cultures, moral ideas, metaphysical and scientific theories, etc., there is inevitably the need for a disciplined, ordered form of philosophical thinking as such, distinguishable from theology. Precisely for the health of the unifying totality of theology, there has to be a “moment” within theology of distinctly philosophical, scientifically ordered thinking. Subjects such as the hylomorphic unity of the human person, the spirituality and incorruptibility of the human soul, the nature of “creation,” the concepts of “essences” and “natures,” the structure of moral actions, et cetera—all of these require some true and

integral philosophical analysis, and this is not a form of disciplined thinking that serious theology can itself forego. Without it, theology as a science breaks down into a mere narrative of profound intuitions, devoid of internal order and incapable of coherent transmission to a younger generation. It frequently becomes pluralistic and divided among its diverse practitioners, who are unable to engage one another in depth even when they uphold the same doctrines, due to the (insufficiently scrutinized) diverse philosophical presuppositions that are present among them.

Second, however we may construe the distinction and interactions of nature and grace in the dynamic historical life of human persons, there is surely a real distinction between the two “orders” of grace and nature, and this truth has consequences for human reason. Not all human knowledge is derived from grace or divine revelation. Therefore, if the revelation newly informs, assimilates, and makes use of the powers of human reason, it does not for this reason abolish the relative integrity of natural reason, and reason’s order toward God and capacity for argumentation. In a post-modern age that has difficulty discerning a true order and meaning in *natural* human reason, theologians need to underscore the integrity and meaning of the natural as such. They should do so for the sake of human culture, but also precisely so as to be able to show the openness of human reason to the *gratuity* of transcendent revelation. For grace is given freely in order to liberate human nature and natural reason to go beyond their own constraints, and to enter into a joy and transcendence that they are naturally capable of receiving, but which they cannot procure for themselves.

The Catholic philosophical and theological response to our own secular and pluralistic age will require, among other things, the renewal of a more robust philosophical Thomism present within the intellectual life of the Church. What is required is not a return to manuals (though in truth, some of these were not always as unhelpful as advertised). Rather, what is needed is a conceptually accessible, existentially compelling formation in classical Thomistic principles of logic, philosophy of nature, metaphysics and ethics, one conducted in simultaneous conversation with our contemporary cultural *Sitz im Leben*. These are the two dimensions of Aristotelian science: dialectical engagement with the culture’s questions and answers, and renewed understanding and formation in the principles of the perennial philosophy. The world today is truth starved, lacking in knowledge of basic principles and ultimate perspectives. If we would respond to that challenge, our current challenge, then the philosophical heritage of Aristotle and Aquinas offers us not a romanticized vision of the past, but a challenging and viable way forward. N V