

***Dei Filius* I: On God, Creation, and Providence**

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In this essay, I want to share my impressions of the first chapter of the dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican I. It begins its declaration of the basic truths of Christian faith in a language which is similar, and probably intended to be similar, to that of a solemn confession of faith: “The holy, catholic, apostolic, and Roman church believes and acknowledges that there is one true living God, creator and lord of heaven and earth.”¹ It reminds one, in some of its formulations, of the Nicene Creed, but with a remarkable difference: here, in the text of the constitution, the object of the confession is formulated as a proposition about God’s existence.² What is said is not, for example, “I believe in one God, the Father almighty”; but the Church believes and holds it to be true *that there exists a God*. One can notice a subtle shift from a confession of faith to the proclamation of a (rational) truth. The Pope, gathered with all the bishops of the Church, declares that there exists a God, the one and true living God, a doctrinal statement directed, by implication, against those who dare to deny the existence of God. The opening sentence of chapter 1 corresponds with its canon, which says that, “if anyone denies the one true God, creator and

¹ *Dei Filius* [DF] I, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *From Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) 804–11, at 805.

² The association with the Nicene Creed appears to be not without ground. At the second session of the Council (January 6, 1870), Pope Pius IX opened the meeting with a solemn declaration of the whole doctrine of Catholic faith, beginning with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, in the version of the confession of Trent.

lord of things visible and invisible: let him be anathema.”³ Thus the constitution says that the “one, true living God” of the biblical faith *exists*, that this is a truth, and that, as consequence, the opposed thesis of atheism is false and must be rejected.

Who is asserting this truth? Who is speaking and with which authority? The text leaves no doubt about the speaking subject. It is the Church, entitled to speak with authority about matters of faith, because it is the Roman Church, *holy, catholic, and apostolic*. The Church speaks, in the person of the pope, the legitimate successor of St. Peter, with authority granted to her by God himself through his Son Jesus Christ. In the preface preceding chapter 1 of the constitution, it is said that the Church is appointed by God to be “mother and mistress of nations.” Hence:

She can never cease from witnessing to the truth of God . . . and from declaring it, for she knows that these words were directed to her: “My spirit which is upon you, and my words I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth from this time forth and for evermore” (Is 59:21).⁴

This gives the pope, sitting in the chair of Peter, the authority of “teaching and defending Catholic truth and condemning erroneous doctrines.”⁵ And the first thing to be declared, as part of the Church’s task to proclaim the Catholic truth to all the nations, is to assert the existence of God against the error of atheism.

It is important to understand the genre of a dogmatic constitution. It is a document in which the Church, by mouth of the pope together with the bishops, expounds the basic tenets of Christian teaching. The purpose of a dogmatic constitution is to reaffirm the basic truths of Christian doctrine, to clarify the fundamentals of faith in a message to the world. A constitution may be occasioned by actual developments in the world and society, but it speaks as it were from the standpoint of eternity. In case of the constitution *Dei Filius*, the addressee is the world of the mid-nineteenth century, a time of dominance of scientific reason, of materialism, naturalism, atheism, and not unimportantly, of current forms of idealistic pantheism (Georg Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, the influence of German Idealism in general); what the constitution especially stands opposed to

³ *DFI*, can. 1 (p. 809).

⁴ *DF*, preface (p. 805).

⁵ *DF*, preface (p. 805).

is the view of supernatural religion as being irrational. For this purpose it wants to reclaim reason and to overcome the disastrous gap between faith and (modern) rationality.

The double program underlying the constitution—teaching the Catholic truth and condemning erroneous doctrines—reminds one of the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] of Thomas Aquinas.⁶ The language and spirit of the Council, gathered in order to reaffirm and to proclaim the basic truths of Catholic faith, seem to be influenced by the apologetic program of Aquinas's SCG in at least two respects: first in the emphasis on teaching (proclaiming, making known to others) the truth of Catholic faith together with the critical rejection of the opposing errors, and secondly in the claim of the rationality of faith or of the basic truths of faith such as the existence of God, his attributes, creation, and providence. These are the respective subjects of the first three books of the SCG, in which Aquinas follows the "way of natural reason." Natural reason plays a central role in the project of the SCG. Its distinctive feature is the appeal made to reason in order to formulate a rational account of the truth of what faith professes about God. Especially in the nineteenth century, the SCG was often considered to be a philosophical *summa* (in contrast to the theological *summa*), a work of Christian apologetics aiming at a rational defense of faith against the rationalism and naturalism of the Greco-Islamic intellectual culture. In a similar vein, a most characteristic aspect of the Council's declaration on the basics of Catholic faith is that these basic truths about God, creation, and providence are claimed to be knowable in the natural light of reason, and moreover, that the truth about God's existence especially can be proved by natural reason, and that this conviction is declared to be part of faith.⁷ Against the widespread view in the nineteenth century that religion is irrational and that its beliefs are not justifiable by the standards of scientific rationality, the Church proclaims the rationality of faith, with the remarkable result that the thesis that the existence of God can be

⁶ For the intention and the order of Aquinas's *Summa contra gentiles*, see my article "Natural Reason in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 4 (1994): 42–69.

⁷ DF II: "The same Holy mother Church holds and teaches that God . . . can be known . . . by the natural power of human reason" (p. 806). The claim is made with implicit reference to the well-known text in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans 1:19. Most theologians today would deny the possibility of proving the existence of God through natural reason alone. Denys Turner, however, has recently published a book in which he defends this claim of *Dei Filius*. For his defense of the proof of the existence of God, see David Hammond, "Interpreting Faith and Reason: Denys Turner and Bernard Lonergan in Conversation," *Horizons* 35, no. 2 (2008): 191–202.

known by natural reason is now proclaimed to be a dogma of the Catholic faith. One might see in this claim a confusion between the natural and the supernatural.

The First Vatican Council speaks from the presupposition that the Church has the God-given task and responsibility to preserve, to teach, and to defend the truth of God. This saving truth is undoubtedly more than a series of theoretical propositions about God's existence, his nature, and his essential attributes. But as I read the intention behind the text of the constitution, it is that the full saving truth of the Christian religion, revealed by God through his Son, and as such entrusted to the Church, must be proclaimed and taught each time again, even in the way of a series of semi-rational truths which demarcate the doctrine of faith against the erroneous ideologies of one's time.⁸

Formulating the Basics in a Hybrid Manner: A Confession of the Truths of Faith in the Reflective Form of Theism

The first sentence of chapter 1, beginning in the style of a confession of faith, as we saw above, continues in a more formal Scholastic language in which a series of divine attributes are stated: "almighty, eternal, immeasurable, incomprehensible, infinite in will, understanding and every perfection."⁹ One observes in the text of the constitution a notable shift from an initial language of confession to the more reflective language of the theistic approach to God, his nature and his essential attributes. Clearly the fathers of the Council want to proclaim and defend specifically the truth of theism against the contemporary ideologies of atheism, materialism, and pantheism.

"Theism" is the common name of a certain rational-reflective approach to religious belief in God. It is not simply the same as believing in God. One speaks of "theism" in connection with a certain philosophical engagement with the rationality of religious belief. For instance, Norman Kretzmann published a work under the title *The Metaphysics of Theism*, in which he comments on the first part of Aquinas's *SCG*.¹⁰ The term "theism"

⁸ The propositions of the constitution may be called "semi-rational" insofar as they are indebted to a Scholastic rational style of thought but as incorporated in a document of faith. This interplay of two genres gives the text a characteristic ambiguity, for instance where a scholastic formal language is mixed with words of praise. An example of this is the use of the word *excelsus* in *DFI* (see note 21 below).

⁹ *DFI* (p. 805).

¹⁰ Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

was used by him in the sense of a complex of epistemic beliefs concerning the existence of a divine being, his nature and attributes (eternity, immutability, etc.), and his relationship to the world. According to Kretzmann, Aquinas's *SCG* contains a fully developed philosophical doctrine of theism; it is a work of *natural theology*, which aims to provide a rational justification of theistic belief.

Another well-known philosopher of religion who is engaged in the theistic project of defending the rationality of religious belief is Richard Swinburne. In his book *The Coherence of Theism* he defines a "theist" as a person who believes that there is a God. By a "God" he understands something like a "person without body, who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, et cetera."¹¹ Christians, Jews, and Muslims are in this sense all theist; underlying their common faith is a certain idea of God, of what kind of being God is (most perfect, simple, self-sufficient), what kind of properties he has (eternity, immutability, omniscience), and how he relates to the world (as an intelligent and free cause).

My thesis is that the constitution proclaims, in the first chapter, the truth of the Catholic faith in the reflective form of a theistic belief against the position of atheism and pantheism. Speaking in the name of the holy institution of the Church to which the divinely revealed teachings of faith are entrusted for the sake of human salvation, the constitution nevertheless uses the theistic language of natural theology. Not only does Vatican I declare, in the words of the constitution, that the Church believes that there is one true and living God, but it presents what it believes and confesses as the contents of propositional belief, which can be known "by means of the natural light of reason."

The specific selection of divine attributes in the text of the constitution impresses one as quite arbitrary and without a well-thought-out order. It begins with the classic "almighty," an attribute which specifically pertains to God's power to create. Its place at the beginning of the series makes one think of the phrase "the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth" from the Creed. It is another indication of the ambiguity in style. Then follows the attribute of eternity, central to the conception of God according to classical theism. The theistic God is eternal, existing outside time and the temporal world. "Eternal" (or "everlasting") is a common biblical adjective of God. Eternity means that God is without beginning or end; and added to this is the exclusion of any succession in God. There are no different

¹¹ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1.

temporal states in God, no development; and neither is God essentially involved or implicated in the world of time. The next attribute which is mentioned is “immense” (or “immeasurable”). In traditional dogmatic treatises, the *immensitas Dei* was normally connected with the *ubiquitas Dei*: God is wholly present to all creatures; he is everywhere, not restricted to a determined place. God’s immensity is commonly identified as a mode of his infinity. In Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*, for instance, the attribute of infinity is treated in question 7 of the *prima pars*, and immediately after this, as a sort of corollary, Aquinas comes to speak of the “existence of God in things” (q. 8), that is his *ubiquitas*.¹² Attributing to God eternity and immensity, as added to his incomprehensibility, means that the divine essence is beyond time, space, and every finite understanding. God’s immensity is such that he exceeds every human concept. Then, in line with the attributes of eternity and immensity, God is declared to be infinite. Infinity, in this context, means unlimited fullness of perfection. God is infinite in every perfection, in particular in intellect and will. By adding the phrase “in intellect and in will,” Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange explains, the Council condemns the materialistic pantheism which considers the divinity as merely a blind and impersonal necessity, a sort of law of fatality without either intelligence or will.¹³ It is clear that, by adding the properties of intellect and will, God is thought as a personal being, which is central to the position of theism as opposed to pantheism.

Thinking the Distinction against Pantheism

After having stated the essential attributes of God, the text of the constitution continues with expressing the fact that God is really distinct from the world: “Since he is one, singular, completely simple and unchangeable spiritual substance, he must be declared to be in reality and in essence, distinct from the world.”¹⁴ The keyword in this sentence is “distinct”; as part of the constitution’s defense of a theistic conception of God, the distinction between God and the world is emphasized. Distinction here implies independency. The one and simple substance which is God exists independently from the world, cannot possibly be affected (unchangeable!) by what happens in the world, and is in his essence distinct from all other things (as consequence of his *simplicitas*).

¹² See my *Aquinas on God* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

¹³ Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature, a Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies*, 2 vols. (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1934), 1:4.

¹⁴ *DFI* (p. 805).

“Distinction,” especially when it receives the full emphasis, is an ambivalent word. As part of the theistic conception, it may create the impression of an unapproachable and distant God, a God who stands apart from the world. The mark of distinction is explicitly meant to exclude the error of pantheism, in which God is essentially involved in his world. Pantheism denies in one way or another the essential distinction between God and the world. We see that the chapter’s corresponding canon 3 condemns the position of pantheism: “If anyone says that the substance or essence of God and that of all things are one and the same: let him be anathema.”¹⁵

But the possible negative connotation of distinction (apart from the world, distant) is corrected, one must say, by the introduction of the notions of creation and providence. God created the world “in order to manifest his perfection,” not because of any need. Creation is not the process of divine self-realization, a way for God to increase or to acquire happiness, to become fully complete and satisfied in himself; on the contrary, being from the start *in se et ex se beatissimus*, God decided to create “by an absolutely free plan” (*liberrimo consilio*).¹⁶ God is most perfect from the beginning, and hence no creature can *add* to his perfection or be brought into existence because of what it can add.

Thus not pantheism but free creation is what the Church defends; and the free act of creation is, then, continued by God’s providence, by which he “protects and governs” everything he has made. The notion of providence is clarified by means of two biblical quotations which traditionally figure in the doctrinal treatment of the notion of providence. First is the well-known text from the book of Wisdom (8:1): “. . . reaches from one end of the earth to the other and orders all things well [disponens omnia suaviter],” and then the text from the Letter to the Hebrews (4:13): “All things are open and laid bare to his eyes [omnia enim nuda et aperta sunt oculis eius].”¹⁷ Thus God, by his providence, orders all things well, and he knows everything. Nothing in the world happens by pure chance, apart from God’s knowing it. There is no “dark side of the moon” in the world, a dimension of evil or meaninglessness, where God is absent. The distinction, one might conclude from this, implies not only independency, but also the relationship of being involved in the world of creatures by care and governance. It must be said, however, that this relation from the side of God is regarded in Thomistic theology as not a real relation, but only

¹⁵ DFI, can. 3 (p. 810).

¹⁶ DFI (p. 805).

¹⁷ DFI (p. 806).

secundum rationem. The creature is really related to God, but not vice versa: God is not really related to the created world, since this would make him dependent on something else.¹⁸

The emphasis on the distinction can be seen as a characteristic feature of the theistic account of religious belief in God. God is said to be transcendent in the sense that God exists independently of the world; that God is “transcendent” is taken to mean that it is possible for him to exist without the world, being ontologically self-sufficient (*beatissimus*) and wholly independent (the traditional word for this is “aseity”). But if the distinction, as implicated by the theistic conception of God, is taken to mean that God can exist even without the world, what then about the relationship of creation? Is it not paradoxical to think the “distinction,” which as such implies a relation, in such a way that God is understood as possibly all there is without the world? If God would be all there is, then there is no distinction any more.

The theistic understanding of God’s absolute independence, which we see in the phrasing of the text of the constitution, is also recognizable in how Robert Sokolowski explains what he calls the “Christian Distinction.” For Sokolowski, the distinctive mark of the Christian (biblical) God, as distinguished from how the divine was understood in antique Greek philosophy, consists in the radical distinction between God and the world; and this distinction is defined as the one “between the world understood as possibly not having existed and God understood as possibly being all there is with no diminution of goodness or greatness.”¹⁹

Sokolowski’s emphasizing the “free transcendence” of the Christian God aligns with the distinction as highlighted in the first chapter of *Dei Filius*. I think it is an essential feature of the Christian-biblical doctrine of God. From the Christian perspective, one cannot accept an ontological continuum between the Creator and the world of creatures. The Bible warns us against confusing the one and true God, creator of all things, with created reality. There is an essential distinction between, on the one hand, God the creator of heaven and earth, and on the other, the temporal world

¹⁸ For Aquinas’s view on the “mixed relation” between God and the creature, see *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 13, a. 7. God’s creative action does not bring about a real relation in God with respect to the creature—that is to say, not a relation which posits a new *res* in God (which implies a change in God). Not a real relation, however, does not mean not a relation at all. It would be wrong to draw the conclusion that, according to Thomistic theology, God is wholly *unrelated* to what happens in the world.

¹⁹ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 23.

of creatures. Thus it is perfectly right to assert the fact of the distinction, as the constitution does, but the question here is how to conceive the distinction in such a way that it does not result in an untenable dualism between God and world. The way Sokolowski formulates the distinction is, in my view, problematic. In an attempt to do justice to the absoluteness of God (his *aseity*), abstraction is made from the (contingent) existence of the world, so that God, existing absolutely in himself, remains all there is; God, then, is everything, not as the cause of everything, but prior to his being the cause of everything that might come into existence. Something goes wrong, I think, when God is thought in this way apart from the world. God is then conceived of as a free-standing object, which one can think of and describe by all kinds of essential attributes, without the world as the essential condition for us to say all these things about God. Even if God can exist without the world, God's existence cannot be conceived by us without the world.

God is so truly perfect and self-sufficient that he does not depend on something else. He is free to choose to create or not create; thus God is God, even if the world, hypothetically, did not exist. This theistic language, emphasizing God's distinction vis-à-vis the world, is not as such wrong or misguided in its approach to God. It accords with the biblical emphasis on the sovereign freedom of God with respect to the whole of creation. But the theistic emphasis on the "distinction," which can be recognized in the language of Vatican I, does not do justice sufficiently to the *inclusive* nature of God's transcendence. One might get the impression that, in its zeal to condemn pantheism, the constitution facilitates the paradoxical idea of God without the world, or more abstractly, distinction without identity, which could be called "negative transcendence." This hypothetical possibility of "God alone," thus distinction as purely external to the identity of God, is paradoxical because it denies the general conditions under which the reality of God is intelligible for us.

To get clear what is meant by inclusive transcendence, as the alternative to negative transcendence, it might be useful to consult here Thomas Aquinas for how he understands the distinction between God and the world. After all, it was shortly after Vatican I, in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) of Pope Leo XIII, that the study of the thought of Thomas Aquinas was recommended to be used in the educational institutes of the Church. And the constitution *Dei Filius*, with Joseph Kleutgen as one of its chief authors, bears witness of the revival of Thomistic thought in the nineteenth century. When we look at Aquinas, especially the Aquinas whose metaphysical thought centers around the notion of participation,

undiscovered yet by the Thomists of the nineteenth century, then it appears that his view of the distinction differs from the usual theistic view in an essential aspect. In the first place, for him, we cannot speak of “distinction” without “identity.” It will not do to assume the existence of the world, on the one hand, and the existence of God on the other, and then to posit, from an external point of view, their distinction, as if they both occupy their proper ontological place. For Aquinas, the “distinction” is part of the complex manner in which the intelligibility of God can be determined by us, approaching God from the world. The reality of God, Aquinas says, is known to us *per effectum*: insofar as he is the cause of all things, and as cause distinguished from all things. Distinction (as in the statement “God is not the world”) goes along with identity (God is *in a certain sense* the whole of what exists, in the sense that all the effects pre-exist in the power of the cause). What is said of God—and that include all the attributes mentioned in *Dei Filius*—is said of him *as cause*. Thus God must be said to be distinct from the world not prior to the relationship of causality, but in the sense that the cause is distinct from its effects. Being the cause of everything, he is not one of the items of this everything. It is a distinction as implied by the causal relationship of creation. Here we see the gist of Aquinas’s understanding of the distinction.

Instead of an abstract transcendence, over against the immanence of the world, Aquinas offers us a notion of “excessive (or inclusive) transcendence,” transcendence understood in terms of participation. This notion of transcendence as implying distinction as well as identity can be illustrated by Aquinas’s reading of an interesting passage in Pseudo-Dionysius. One cannot speak well of God, Dionysius remarks in his *On the Divine Names*, as if he is “this” but not “that”; God cannot be treated as if he is an object among other objects, distinguished from other objects in a categorical sense (by being *this* or *such*). On the contrary, Dionysius continues, God is “everything insofar as he is the cause of everything” [*omnia ut causa omnium*].²⁰ This formulation, which may strike the reader as having an air of pantheism, must be understood in the light of the neo-Platonic notion of causality. The cause is said to be its effect (moment of identity), in the manner of the cause (moment of negation), in the sense that the positive reality existing in the effect pre-exists eminently in the cause (moment of excess). To be a creature means to have received from its creative cause,

²⁰ Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 5.8; cited by Aquinas in *ST I*, q. 4, a. 2. The distinction between God and the world, as implied by the causal relationship of creation, corresponds with the moment of negation in the threefold way God can be known from the world in the light of natural reason.

God, the very reality (being, form, perfection) it has; and to be a cause means to communicate to another from its own reality (being, goodness). From this it is clear that the "first cause" cannot be characterized in terms of one among others, a particular entity distinguished from other particular entities. God is in a certain manner everything: the original fullness of all being which is divided and multiplied over the many things in the world. The Dionysian expression speaks the language of "participation," in which identity (affirmation: "God is everything") goes together with distinction (negation: "God is the cause of everything and as such distinguished from everything").

The text of the constitution does not explain how the distinction must be understood; it only states the distinction: "[God] must be declared to be in reality and essence distinct from the world." But considering the fact that the theistic affirmation of the distinction goes together with an unambiguous rejection of the pantheistic identity of God and world, one might conclude that the distinction, as understood by the Council, leaves hardly room for including the aspect of identity in the speculative sense as conceived by Aquinas. One must realize that the dominant systems of philosophical thought in the nineteenth century were radically immanent and anti-Platonic. The philosophical absolute did not exist in itself apart from the sensory and changeable reality of the world; it is something which realizes itself only in and through the concrete world of experience. The Council's laudable rejection of this kind of immanence of the absolute, as leading to unacceptable forms of pantheism, might have facilitated formulations which suggest a dualistic form of transcendence with emphasis on the distinction at the expense of the identity aspect; this can be recognized in the text of the constitution where it says, "inexpressibly loftier [*excelsus*] than anything besides himself which either exists or can be imagined."²¹ What one can learn from Aquinas in this respect is that the "Christian Distinction," as such crucial for the Christian understanding of the relation between God and the world and affirmed in the constitution as part of the Catholic faith, need not necessarily be conceived in a dualistic form of

²¹ *DF* I: "super omnia, quae praeter ipsum sunt et concipi possunt, ineffabiliter excelsus" (p. 805). Here, a term such as *excelsus* serves to stretch the distance between God and all other things; instead of *excelsus*, which is, I think, primarily a term of praise, Aquinas would use in this context the conceptually more precise terminology of the *via eminentiae*, for instance in the sense that the perfections of all things are said to pre-exist *excellenter* (*secundum eminentiorum modum*) in God. Where the effect of *excelsus* is to enlarge the distance between God and the world, Aquinas's *excellenter* underlines the inclusive transcendence of God's perfection.

transcendence, but that participation may open the way to a non-dualistic transcendence (what I have called “excessive transcendence”).

The Principle of Free Creation

The constitution requires a certain way of reading. It is not an argumentative text, nor a text which clarifies or explains the basic terms through which the Catholic faith is defined. It is a text in which the Church, represented by the Council gathered under the authority of the Pope, formulates the basic truths of faith in conformity with the Bible and the declarations of faith from Tradition. These basic truths function as the parameters of faith: if one deviates from one of these landmarks, then one will deviate from the truth of Catholic Faith.

One of these landmarks is the so-called “Christian Distinction.” God is *distinct* from the world, perfect and fully happy in himself, and thus not necessitated in any way to create the world. The thesis of free creation in *De Filius* I (“he creates by an absolutely free plan”²²) is a corollary of the Christian Distinction. How such a free creation must be understood is not explained. Apparently, given the context and genre, the Council fathers did not see this as their responsibility. But it will be clear to everyone that, in light of biblical faith, free creation is indeed a basic truth of the Christian religion.

Denying or compromising the free character of creation means, therefore, that one in fact deviates from the truth of Catholic faith. In the fourth canon of chapter 1, three philosophical positions are mentioned which all contradict the idea of a creation out of nothing by God’s free will. The first position consists in the view that “finite things, both corporal and spiritual, or at any rate, spiritual, emanated from the divine substance.”²³ The key word here is “emanation” (*emanare*), well-known from the neo-Platonic account of creation. The second position holds that “the divine essence, by the manifestation and evolution of itself becomes all things.” Here, a typical nineteenth-century buzzword, “evolution” (*evolutio*), attracts our attention. God, the divine essence, is in itself incomplete, but must become all things by evolution. The third proposition condemned in the same canon says that “God is a universal or indefinite being [ens universale seu indefinitum] which by self-determination establishes the totality of things distinct in genera, species and individuals.”

²² *DFI* (p. 805).

²³ *DFI*, can. 4 (p. 810).

In his book *God, His Existence and His Nature*, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange gives a helpful explanation of this dense passage on pantheism in the constitution of Vatican I. What is condemned in the fourth canon, he says, are the three principal forms of pantheism: “(1) Emanatistic Pantheism; (2) the essential Pantheism of Schelling; (3) the essential Pantheism of the universal being.”²⁴ In this last form of pantheism, the canon presumably refers, Garrigou-Lagrange says, to the theories of Antonio Rosmini-Serbati (1797–1855), condemned by decree of the Holy Office on December 14, 1887, and especially with regard to his teachings of ontologism, condemned on September 18, 1861. Two of the propositions condemned in 1861 read: “(1) What we understand by the term being as applied to all things and without which they mean nothing to us, is the divine Being. (2) Universals, objectively considered, are not really distinct from God.”²⁵

A doctrinal constitution such as *Dei Filius* usually shows restraint in identifying the concrete source of the ideas which are condemned as being incongruent with the truth of faith. It is possible that the fathers of the Council, when formulating the canon against pantheism, had in mind specifically the thought of Rosmini-Serbati, or more likely the influence of certain heterodox interpretations of his thought.²⁶ It is clear that after his death in 1855 the Church felt increasingly the need to distance itself from Rosmini-Serbati’s system of thought and to warn against possible erroneous interpretations in favor of idealism, and in particular of ontologism. The doctrine of “ontologism” is associated with the name of Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) and consists in the affirmation that the human

²⁴ Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 1:2.

²⁵ Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed., Latin–German, ed. by Helmut Hoping and Peter Hünermann [DH], Latin–English ed. and trans. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), nos. 2842–43 (cited in Garrigou-Lagrange, *God*, 1:2, according to original Denzinger nos. 1660–61).

²⁶ Also associated with pantheistic ontologism, rejected by the constitution *Dei Filius*, were other Catholic thinkers in the nineteenth century such as Vincenzo Gioberti in Italy and Gérard Ubaghs in Belgium. It is possible that the third proposition of the canon primary envisages the pantheistic consequences of Gioberti’s ontologism, more than Rosmini-Serbati’s, especially considering the fact that the latter himself has emphasized the distinction between the universal being and God. The idea of being is not God himself, but something which has divine-like characteristics such as infinity, universality, and necessity. An enlightening discussion of his attempt to construct a Christian metaphysical philosophy in response to Kantianism and of his Thomistic critics (Kleutgen among others) can be found in Alasdair MacIntyre’s book *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 70–71.

spirit enjoys an intuitive knowledge of God and perceives in God the ideas through which it is able to know things. Far from being a precisely defined doctrine, ontologism seems to be primarily an idealistic consequence of the Augustinian notion of illumination, which entails the immediate presence of the divine light of truth to the human intellect. Rosmini-Serbati was suspected of ontologism because of his thesis about the *a priori* idea of being, which is originally given in the mind in such a way that it refers to the illuminating action of God. According to Rosmini-Serbati, human concepts are nothing but determinations of the simple and elementary notion of being. This idea of being is indeterminate and universal; it manifests itself to the mind as an intelligible object simply by illuminating it. This ideal being is not God, but we may call it, says Rosmini-Serbati, an appurtenance of God. Essential for Rosmini-Serbati is the idea that the human mind must have in itself an ideal element transcending the contingent and finite realm, which links the mind with God, so that the possibility of knowledge of the absolute can be explained. In the formulation of the canon, we see that the universal being is immediately identified with God, and that this universal being “determines” itself into the totality of things. The logical determination of the idea of being in the order of human knowledge, concretized into many special concepts, becomes here a real process of self-determination of God in and through the totality of things.

I want to conclude this essay with a reference to a 2001 note concerning the thought and work of Rosmini-Serbati by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger while he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, published in 2001.²⁷ In this note, Ratzinger describes the main points of the history of the Church’s critical engagement with the thought of Rosmini-Serbati. One of the factors mentioned by Ratzinger in explanation of the distancing of the Church, resulting in the condemnation of Rosmini-Serbati in the doctrinal decree *Post Obitum* (1887), was the choice of Thomism, promoted by the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), as a philosophical system which could offer a unifying synthesis of ecclesiastical studies: “The adaption of Thomism created the premises for a negative judgement of a philosophical and speculative position, like that

²⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), with Joseph Ratzinger as prefect, “Note on the Force of the Doctrinal Decrees concerning the Thought and Work of Fr. Antonio Rosmini-Serbati” (2001). Ratzinger refers in his note to the encyclical of John Paul II *Fides et Ratio*, which named Rosmini among the recent Catholic thinkers who achieved a fruitful exchange between philosophy and the Word of God (see Vatican website for text).

of Rosmini, because it differed in its language and conceptual framework from the philosophical and theological elaboration of St. Thomas Aquinas.”²⁸ In light of this remark, the dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican I may be seen itself as a sign and expression of the need to strengthen the theoretical and philosophical formation of the clerics in order to come to a fruitful and more inclusive dialogue with the modern world. The example of Rosmini-Serbati shows how important it is for the Catholic Church to accept the challenge of modern thought and to stimulate forms of contemporary Christian philosophy which makes a case for the human intellectual openness to transcendence. NEV

²⁸ CDF, “Note on the Force of the Doctrinal Decrees,” §4.