

Painted Ladies and the Witch of Endor: Response to John O’Callaghan’s “Can We Demonstrate that God Exists”?

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RALPH MCINERNY, when he gave the Gifford Lectures in Glasgow, considered the difficulties for natural theology of recent developments in philosophy; the fruit of these lectures was his delightfully titled study, *Characters in Search of Their Author*.¹ Essentially, that study considered attacks on the traditional proofs for the existence of God leveled by non-believers. In preparing those lectures, however, Professor McInerny was confirmed in his belief that a far more disturbing development was the rejection of Aquinas’s proofs by influential Catholic thinkers. He thus wrote his last work of philosophy, *Praeambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers*, which he introduces by stating that he intended to treat “the negative attitude toward natural theology that is found among those one would have expected to be defenders of it.”²

Principal among those whom we would have expected to be defenders of it is Ralph’s dear and brilliant student and successor at the University of Notre Dame, Professor John O’Callaghan. What would Ralph say, if, like the witch of Endor, we had disturbed him from his merited rest, and brought him here to listen to Dr. O’Callaghan’s

¹ Ralph McInerny, *Characters in Search of Their Author: The Gifford Lectures, 1999–2000* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

² Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), ix.

frightful affirmation that: “the statement *God exists* is not subject to a deductively valid argument that proceeds from premises that do not employ elements of divine revelation”? Would Ralph furiously revise his work, tearfully to include his wayward intellectual son among his rogues gallery of rejecters? I hesitate to say that he would, especially since Professor McInerney, as a careful listener, would invite us to ask: what exactly is being rejected?

First, let us consider what Professor O’Callaghan is not rejecting. He holds that the philosopher can demonstrate that a god exists (and that this is what Aquinas does in the second question of the first part of the *Summa theologiae*, in his famous five ways).³ Next, he further holds that the philosopher can demonstrate that there is only *one* God (and that this is what Aquinas does in question 11 of the *Prima pars*).⁴ Although some will be surprised to learn that the five ways do not prove that there is only one God, but merely that a god exists, this is entirely in line with the best Thomistic scholarship. As Fr. Larry Dewan has recently written, when we seek to know whether something exists “before asking: ‘is there only one or are there many?’ we must ask: ‘is it a sort-of-thing to be found in reality?’”⁵ Thus, Aquinas’s five ways present “five avenues, five pathways, in humanly experienced reality that conclude to the existence of a god.”⁶

We might ask, therefore, if the philosophers can discover that a god exists and that this god is the only god, where is the problem? The problem arises when we ask whether we are employing the word “God” as a common term or as a proper name. Thus far in the argument, virtually all Thomists would agree that Aquinas employs the word “god” as a common term: as Aquinas himself affirms, it denotes a nature that, at least logically, could be shared by other members of that nature.⁷ (It was thus not logically nonsensical for the patriarch

³ *Summa theologiae* (henceforth, *ST*) I, q. 2, a. 3; see Sancti Thomae de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, ed. Petrus Caramello (Taurini, IT: Marietti, 1952). All English translations are my own, although I always consult the Benziger brothers edition, which is called the translation of “The Fathers of the English Dominican Province,” but which is actually entirely the translation Fr. Laurence Shapcote.

⁴ *ST* I, q. 11, a. 3.

⁵ Lawrence Dewan, “The Existence of God: Can It Be Demonstrated?” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 10 (2012): 749.

⁶ Dewan, “The Existence of God,” 751.

⁷ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 8: “hoc nomen deus . . . impositum est ad significandum divinam naturam [this name ‘God’ is imposed to signify the divine nature].” In the *sed contra* of this article, Aquinas quotes Ambrose as his authority: “deus est

Jacob, in Gen 35:2–3, to tell his family to put away the foreign gods that were among them and go make sacrifice to the God that had saved him, even though later his decedents would learn from the prophets, such as Isa 37:18–20, that the gods of the heathens are not.)⁸ Professor O'Callaghan, therefore, is uncontroversial when he affirms that, when philosophers (including Aquinas in the early questions of the *Summa theologiae*) speak of a god that they recognize to be the only god, they employ the word “god” as a common term.

The controversy begins when he turns to the believers' affirmation of faith in God. Specifically, he advances that, when believers affirm that God exists, they are employing the term “god” as a proper name, and thus the non-believing philosopher (or the believer reasoning philosophically) cannot demonstrate that “God exists” because God, in this sense, is only known by means of revelation and in the act of faith.

But why should this be the case? Why should we hold that the believer employs “God” as a proper name? Should we not rather hold, as Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe do, that even here, the believer employs “god” as a common term? (For Geach, “god” is a “descriptive term,” or more precisely, as Miss Anscombe explains, the believer employs it as “a definite description.”)⁹

nomen naturae” (Ambrose, *De fide* 1.1. 7 [Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, 16:530; henceforth, *PL*], as cited by Peter Lombard in *I Sent.* d. 2, q. 4, a. 1). See also Aquinas's Roman Commentary on the *Sentences*, d. 2, q. 3, a. 1, resp.: “Quantum ergo ad id a quo imponitur hoc nomen ‘Deus’ est nomen operationis; quantum vero ad id ad quod significandum imponitur est nomen naturae divinae” (Therefore, concerning that from which it is applied, this name ‘God’ is the name of an operation; while concerning that toward the signifying of which it is applied, it is the name of the divine nature); see *Lectura Romana in primum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, edited from Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 95, ed. Leonard E. Boyle and John F. Boyle (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2006), 102.

⁸ See also the Psalms, where the Lord is described as “the God of gods” (Pss 84:7 and 136:2).

⁹ See Peter Geach, “On Worshipping the Right God” in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969), 108–109, and G. E. M. Anscombe, “Faith” in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume III* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1981), 119. Anscombe's argument is worth quoting: “God is not the god of such-and-such a worship. This is something that can be seen by an atheist too, even though he holds that there is in any case no such thing as deity. For he can see, if he thinks about it, that ‘God’ is not a proper name but is equivalent to a ‘definite description’ (in the technical sense). That is, it is equivalent to ‘the one and only true god,’ ‘the one and only real deity.’ The point of putting in ‘true’ and ‘real’ is that those who

A full engagement with Professor O'Callaghan's thesis (that the believer employs God as a proper name) would require tracing the full genealogy of discussions in analytic philosophy concerning descriptivist theories of naming. We would have to begin with Russell's and Frege's theories about proper names, look at Kripke's and Putnam's criticisms of them and trace our way up to thinkers such as David Chalmers.¹⁰ Mercifully, we do not have space for this. Instead, I propose to go to the heart of the question by offering an analogous example for our consideration.

But first, let us look at Professor O'Callaghan's argument more closely. To defend his view, he draws our attention to Aquinas's analysis of Augustine's influential formulation of the three aspects of belief

believe there is only one deity have so much occasion to speak of deities that they do not believe to exist. We then speak of Apollo, Shiva and Juggernaut as gods who are not gods. An atheist believes that God is among the gods who are not gods, because he believes that nothing is a deity. But he should be able to recognize the identity of 'God' with 'the one and only god.' It is because of this equivalence that God cannot be formally identified as the god of such-and-such a cult or such-and-such a people" (Anscombe, "Faith," 119). Brian Davies attributes this view to Aquinas, underlining its importance for Trinitarian theology: "I would like to emphasize that Aquinas never thinks of 'God' as a proper name. Plenty of people do just that, assuming that 'God' is God's name as 'Brian' is my name. And when doing so they inevitably end up talking as though God were a (nameable) person—a 'person without a body' in the words of Richard Swinburne. But Aquinas is not of their mind. For him, 'God' is a *nomen naturae* (the name of a nature). 'The word "God" is used to signify the divine nature,' he says (*ST*, I, q. 13, a. 8). In other words, Aquinas takes 'God' to signify whatever has the divine nature (as we might take 'gold' to signify whatever is gold). So Aquinas is happy to ask whether more than one thing can be described as 'God,' as he does in his discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity (which he does not take to assert that God is three persons in one person called 'God'). If you think that 'God' is a proper name, you are going to have real problems with the doctrine of the Trinity since you will have to take it to be holding that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one thing whose proper name is God, which conflicts with orthodox Trinitarian doctrine as found in the teaching of the Council of Nicaea and in subsequent texts. But Aquinas is not involved in such conflict. For he does not, as one might put it, think of 'God' as the name of the Top Person around"; see Brian Davies, "Aquinas and Atheism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 122.

¹⁰ For an overview of the principal theories concerning naming in the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy, see Sam Cumming, "Names," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013), ed. Edward N. Zalta (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/names>).

in God: *credere deum*, *credere deo*, and *credere in deum* (which O'Callaghan translates as: "believing that God is such and such," "believing God," and "believing in God").¹¹ He notes that, when Aquinas responds to the objection that these three acts cannot be integral to Christian faith, since infidels seem capable of "believing that God is such and such" (*credere deum*), Aquinas responds that infidels do not truly believe that "God is such and such," for they do not assent to God's existence "under the conditions which faith determines."¹² As O'Callaghan notes, Aquinas bolsters his view by drawing on Aristotle's authority that "in simple things a defect in knowledge means you do not grasp the thing at all."¹³ Surprisingly, O'Callaghan interprets this to mean that, for Aquinas, the infidel knows nothing about this God. In fact,

¹¹ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2. The threefold formulation is actually from Peter Lombard (*III Sent.* d. 23, q. 4), but is drawn from several different places where Augustine expresses the basic ideas contained in the Lombard's reformulation. The fullest expression is found a Sermon (Augustine, *Sermones* 144.2; see *PL*, 38: 788): "it makes a great deal of difference whether someone believes that Jesus is the Christ (*credat ipsum Christum*), or whether he believes in Christ (*credat in Christum*). . . . You believe in Christ (*credit in Christum*), you see, when you both hope in Christ and love Christ. Because if you have faith without hope and without love, you believe that he is the Christ, but you don't believe in Christ (*Christum esse credit, non in Christum credit*"); see Augustine, *Sermons III/4 (94A–147A) on the New Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill with notes, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1992), 431. Augustine offers a similar reflection, which also introduces the third element (of believing what God says), when commenting on Psalm 77 (*Enarrationes in Ps.* 77.8; see *PL*, 36: 988): "This is believing in God (*credere in Deum*), and it is a great deal more than believing what God says (*credere Deo*). . . . To believe in God (*credere in Deum*) is to cling by faith to God who effects the good works in such a way that we collaborate well with him. . . . The generation of whose example we are warned to beware . . . may have believed some of what God said, but they did not believe in god (*etsi aliqua credidit Deo, non tamen credidit in Deum*). They did not cleave to God by faith so as to be healed by him and become effective collaborators with the God who was at work in them"; see Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms III/18 [73–98]*, trans. Maria Boulding with notes, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 2002), 98. See also Augustine, *De symbolo ad cathechumenos* 1 (*PL*, 40: 1190). For a fuller treatment of these aspects of faith in Augustine, see Eugene TeSelle, "Faith," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 347–350.

¹² ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3: "credere deum non convenit infidelibus sub ea ratione qua ponitur actus fidei. Non enim credunt deum esse sub his conditionibus quas fides determinat."

¹³ Ibid.: "Et ideo nec vere deum credunt, quia, ut philosophus dicit, IX metaphys. 10 (1051b30), in simplicibus defectus cognitionis est solum in non attingendo totaliter."

however, Aquinas's claim is more limited: his argument simply asserts that the infidels do not have *faith* in God. He nowhere asserts that they do not have demonstrable knowledge of God.¹⁴ This, at least, is how I read the text, and I would like to illustrate it with a very San Franciscan example.

Let us suppose that you are living in one of the beautiful Victorian houses on Alamo Square known as the "painted ladies." Let us further suppose that, every afternoon a beautiful black labrador retriever squeezes under your neighbor's fence and frolics in your garden for a few minutes before returning home. Now, although the dog has no nametag, over the weeks you get to know a lot about the dog by observing his behavior: he's a black lab with white paws and a friendly disposition. There is no faith involved here: you have evident and demonstrable knowledge of him, even though, in your interactions with him, you just call him by the generic term "dog."

Let us also suppose that you have never met the dog's owner (since he only moved in a few weeks before) and that he is, in fact, blind. Unbeknownst to you, the dog is a guide dog for the blind: a well-trained and professional working dog. With regard to that aspect of the dog, you are ignorant. Let us now consider—if you will bear with me—the neighbor on the other side of the house: she is a shut in, who has never seen either the owner or his dog, but is well informed about neighborhood business from her childhood friend who lives across the square. This lady, although she has never seen the dog, believes (from the detailed reports from her friend) that there is a guide dog for the blind next door. Let us consider the two cases: the lady has faith that there is a dog next door, a dog that she knows a lot about, a black labrador retriever with white paws that is a guide dog for the blind. You, on the other hand, have knowledge, demonstrable knowledge, about the black lab with white paws, but you have no faith or even an inkling that the dog is a guide dog. Your situation is analogous to that of Aquinas's infidel: your faulty cognition is absolute—you do not have faith in what you do not know anything about. The

¹⁴ In his commentary on this passage, T. C. O'Brien invites the reader to "note the point implicit here that while by natural reason the truth of the proposition 'God exists' can be known, such knowledge does not reach God in his own being (see *ST I*, q. 3, a. 4, ad 2); truly to believe does mean, as *ST I*, q. 1 and q. 2 makes clear, an act that terminates, in its own way, in God himself; see *ST I*, q. 8, a. 3"; see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Latin text and English translation, Introduction, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries: Faith [2a2ae. 1–7]* (London: Blackfriars, 1974), 31:68n1.

conditions that determine the lady's faith, and thus her fuller knowledge of the dog, are not present to you. Thus, you do not believe. The dog, however, is the same in each case. Moreover, we use the word "dog" in the same way in each case: when you talk about the dog and when she talks about the dog, you are both using the word in the same way, even though her knowledge is fuller. Fr. Dewan helpfully reminds us of the Thomistic and Aristotelian principle that, concerning the meaning of words, "the usage of the multitude is to be followed."¹⁵ This is as true for gods as it is for dogs. The pagans can arrive at demonstrable knowledge that God exists, but they do not believe he exists because they do not have intimate knowledge of his triune life or of the redemptive mission of his son; belief comes with the grace of faith. Nevertheless, even for the believer, "God" is only a common and descriptive term because our God remains a mystery.¹⁶ Aquinas quotes Paul to express this: "we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery that is hidden" (1 Cor 2:7).¹⁷ Aquinas elsewhere summarizes this beautifully when he affirms that, even though, by revelation and in the gift of faith, we know profound and beautiful things about God, things that surpass reason's ability to discover, we are nonetheless—in this life—united to God "as to one unknown."¹⁸

This leads me to a concluding consideration of what I believe to be the underlying insight that guides Professor O'Callaghan's analysis, an insight that any theologian in the Thomistic tradition would celebrate. The philosopher's discoveries can lead him to the gates of the Temple, but cannot guide him in; he stands at the threshold. The God he has discovered, he has not yet come to know; he awaits an introduction, an invitation to intimacy: "to believe, we must be drawn by the

¹⁵ Dewan, "The Existence of God," 750. *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 1, no. 2: "*Multitudinis usus, quem in rebus nominandis sequendum philosophus censet, communiter obtinuit ut sapientes dicantur qui res directe ordinant et eas bene gubernant* (The usage of the multitude, which the Philosopher holds [*Topics* II, ch. 1 (109a27–29)] is to be followed in the naming of things, has commonly held that they are to be called 'wise' who order things rightly and govern them well").

¹⁶ *Lectura Romana in primum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, d. 2, q. 3, a. 1, ad 3: "licet per hoc nomen 'Deus' non intelligamus de Deo quid est, intelligamus de eo quid non est; et ideo ad significandum istam naturam ignotam imponimus ei istud nomen (Although by this name 'God' we do not understand what God is, we understand from it what he is not, and therefore we apply this name to him to signify this unknown nature)" (ed. Boyle and Boyle).

¹⁷ *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1.

¹⁸ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 13, ad 1: "sic ei quasi ignoto coniungamur."

Father.”¹⁹ Josef Pieper once observed that the vocation of the Christian philosopher is not to offer arguments based on revelation, but to help contemporary philosophers remain open in their arguments and in their reflections to the unfathomable and inexhaustible mystery of the natural world.²⁰ This requires love. Jacques Maritain, toward the end of his life, reflected that “*Unless one loves the truth, one is not a man. And to love the truth is to love it above everything, because we know that Truth is God Himself.*”²¹ Ralph McInerny comments approvingly on this passage.²² In spite of his many disagreements with Maritain, McInerny offers a moving appreciation of him as someone with whom he would have loved to argue and to spend an evening. Indeed, Professor McInerny invites us to reflect: “How many modern or contemporary philosophers would one want to be alone with in an elevator, let alone in conversation for half an hour?”²³ In Maritain, by contrast, “one encounters a person of whom one can say: How I would like to be like that! For it is a question of being as much as or more than knowing.”²⁴ This, I suspect, is what Ralph would say to his disciple were he here to follow Professor O’Callaghan’s argument: I do not agree with you, John, but I would spend an evening in argument with you anytime. N.V

¹⁹ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 5 (Marietti no. 940): “*ad fidem necessaria est nobis attractio patris.*” In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Aquinas develops a theology of how God, through the humanity of Christ and the action of the Spirit, draws the unbeliever to faith in him. See especially his portrayal of Christ’s encounter with the Samaritan woman in *Super Ioan*, 4, lec. 1–5 (568–663).

²⁰ Josef Pieper, “Philosophy and the Sense for Mystery,” in *For Love of Wisdom: Essays on the Nature of Philosophy*, ed. Berthold Wald, trans. Roger Wasserman (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 307–309.

²¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 85; cited in Ralph McInerny, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain: A Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 203.

²² McInerny, *Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain*, 203–204.

²³ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁴ *Ibid.* McInerny continues: “Wasn’t this the genius of Maritain’s treatment of the question of Christian philosophy? Arguments are won or lost, critics obtuse or otherwise are constant; our grasp of truth even after a long lifetime brings the awareness of how little one knows” (*ibid.*).