

ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROBLEM OF GOD

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THE PHRASE, "the problem of God," is of distinctively modern coinage; it gives its characteristic ring when dropped on the surface of the modern mind. However, the problem itself is ancient, as old as the oldest traditions of the Bible. It is, incidentally, only within the tradition of biblical religion that God is so exhibited as to give rise to a problem of God; just as it is only within this tradition, as wedded to a culture in that region of the spirit which is known as the West, that human intelligence has been so cultivated that it grasps the God of the Bible as a problem. I mention the point only in passing; it could readily be demonstrated. The purpose here is simply to sketch out a sort of historical-analytical summary of the problem of God, chiefly with a view to indicating its structure and the variant modes of its position, as discerned in the different phases of the problem. There are two broad phases, from the standpoint both of history and of content.

First, there is the biblical problem. This is the problem of God as it arises on the level of the religious existence. It is the problem of the presence of God, or of the "living" God, in the biblical sense of the adjective. Its correspondent solution is in terms of what the Scriptures call the "knowledge" of God.

Second, there is the patristic and medieval problem. It arises on the level of theological understanding. It is the problem of the intelligibility of God. And its correspondent solution is in terms of systematic metaphysical conception and statement. This effort at systematization is inchoative with the Fathers; it reaches its definitive stage with St. Thomas.

In addition, there is the problem of the godless man, which is simply the obverse, as it were, of the problem of God. Like the problem of God, it arises on the level of human freedom. And its solution is by a dictate of will, a decision to ignore God. The decision is of variant tenor and tonality. Today, in the postmodern era, this decision is invested with a uniqueness that makes it new in history. Today, therefore, the problem of God has taken on a new form.

These, in brief, are the three areas of the problem that will be discussed here, still without going beyond the bounds of brevity.

THE PROBLEM OF GOD IN THE BIBLE

Naturally enough, the problem has two phases, as the revelation of God moved through two phases, preparatory and definitive.

The Old Testament

Since the purpose here is illustration, not exhaustive treatment, only one text need be adduced, Ex 3:13-14, the towering text, in the Elohist tradition, that contains the revelation of the divine Name. In God's answer to Moses' question, as restating the question itself, the essential structure and content of the OT problem of God sufficiently appears. The whole range of exegetical difficulties raised by the enigmatic Hebrew text, 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh, are well known and may be here omitted. Only one exegetical certainty seems to be available, scil., that the divine answer to Moses' question somehow bears on the is-ness of God. For the rest, the issue is one of adequate theological understanding of the text. The issue may be most simply stated by asking what the Hebrew people "heard," as they listened to the oral recitation of the text through the long generations that preceded the literary work of the Elohist. They listened with the inner ear of Hebrew faith. And what they heard was, in fact, what the words meant, what the mind of the author was. Speaker, hearer, editor, all shared the one mind. We therefore today must "read out" of the text what the people of old "heard in" the text. There seems to be sufficient reason and adequate authority for saying that in earliest times the people heard in the divine Name, not the absoluteness of the divine existence (this sense struck upon a later ear, more attuned to metaphysical resonances), nor the universal creative power of God (though this too is a possible sense), but rather the promise of the presence of God among His people, the promise that Yahweh had just made to Moses, His emissary (v. 12). Somehow to keep the paronomasia of the Hebrew text, the translation may run thus: "I shall be there as who I am shall I be there."

In a sense, God refuses Moses' question as put; it is not, and cannot be, given to men to know the Name of God, His full concrete identity,

who and what He is in Himself. At the same time, God gives a three-fold revelation of Himself.

"I shall be there," with you (cf. v. 12), with the people (cf. vv. 15 ff.). The affirmation is not formally that God is, but that He is-with Moses and the people. God's answer rephrases, as it were, Moses' question to make it a legitimate question, put by man to God. And the answer bears on God's *Dasein* and *Mitsein*, not formally on His *Sein* (it seems impossible to avoid the German vocabulary). The answer, therefore, in this segment of it, is a revelation of the divine will rather than of the divine being. God affirms His will to be present, to relate Himself actively to the destinies of the people whom He has chosen, through the emissary whom He has likewise chosen. The Name of God thus revealed receives its paraphrase, and exegesis, in the recurrent prophetic affirmation of God's "dwelling" among His people (Za 2:10; Ez 37:26-27; *et al.*). His Name is Emmanuel (Is 8:8), "the Lord is there" (Ez 48:35). The people are a people precisely because of His "going with" them (Ex 33:16). In our more philosophical terms, God first reveals His immanence in the sacred history of Israel.

"I shall be there as who I am." This, again in our philosophical terms, is the revelation of the divine transcendence. "Who I am"—this is for man forever the mystery. The Name of God remains unknown and unknowable; or, in the other constant image, the "face" of the Lord cannot be seen (Ex 33:20). This aspect of the divine self-revelation is elaborated by Isaiah, and chiefly by Deutero-Isaiah, the "theologian of the divine Name," in his doctrine of God as the Holy One, and the Holy One of Israel, who is in the midst of the people, but who "hides Himself" (Is 45:15).

"As who I am shall I be there." The Name of the Lord is His own incommunicable secret; but He gives Himself to be known as the Power. It is as the Power that He is present. He manifests in act the two powers that are distinctively and unsharedly His—the power to judge and the power to save. He is present in wrath, judging the infidelity of His people; He is also present in faithful goodness (or however one chooses to translate the untranslatable word *hesed*). In this respect the exegesis of the divine Name in Ex 3:14 is given in Ex 34:6-7, the theophany at Sinai. To use our own vocabulary, God here reveals His transparency; for presence is transparency, as absence is opaque-

ness. Through His wonderful works of judgment and rescue God transpires to His people. He comes to be known under the many names wherewith men name Him as they experience His wrath as well as His faithful will to rescue. These many names are of human mintage; they are the language of men, used in the first instance by men about men. No one of them, therefore, nor the whole sum of them, can make known the Name of God, which is ineffable. In another sense, however, they do make known His Name: "As who I am shall I be there." That is, these many names reveal the God who is "living," who freely presents Himself to the people, here and now. They answer Moses' prayer: "Now then, if I have really found favor with thee, pray let me know thy ways, and so know thee" (Ex 33:13). God makes known His "ways," which are uniquely His; and from His "ways" men name Him and so know Him.

Thus the Old Testament states the problem of God. One may speak of a problem inasmuch as the statement is in terms of possible alternatives, presence or absence, presence and absence. The mode of statement is intersubjective; for the question is not whether God is and what God is, but whether God is-with the people and what God is-to the people. Or, in the more characteristic Hebrew conception, the question is implicit in another of Moses' prayers: "Pray let the Lord go with us" (Ex 34:9).

The answer to the problem of God is returned by the Old Testament in terms of all that the Hebrew meant by the "knowledge" of God. The term does not, of course, simply mean cognition; it would be rendered more closely by "recognition." The whole man is involved. For a man to "know" God is for him to make a total response to what he has "heard" of God. For the Hebrew, knowledge was in general not a matter of seeing, which is a Greek notion, but of hearing—and in the first instance, of hearing the word of God, or more broadly as well as more correctly, of hearing the story of God's ways with His people, inherent in which is the statement of God's will and purpose, His demands and promises. In brief, to know God is to recognize His presence, His mystery, and His action of judgment and salvation (immanence, transcendence, transference).

The knowledge of God is not the simple affirmation, "God exists," but rather: "Yahweh is our God." And implicit in this proposition is

the affirmation that God first “knew” the people, that is, He chose them as His own; He cares for them as His own; and He will Himself mysteriously decide their destiny, whether they will be led to the Land or lost in the desert. Correspondingly, for man to “know” God is for him to make God his God and Lord, to consent to the exigences imposed by God’s care, and to submit to God’s judgments. Thus to know God is to recognize and reciprocate the supreme divine promise: “I will go along myself, and lead you” (Ex 33:14). It is to be led by Yahweh, to go along with Him, in that manner of “search” (cf. Ps 14:2) for God which is already a finding of, and a reverent adhesion to, the Holy One of Israel, whose Name is hidden and unknown, but whose many names reveal His power, will, and purpose (cf. Hos 6:3, 6). Stated with banal abstractness, the knowledge of God is the biblical formula for the total vital relation, both religious and moral, of Israel to the God of the Alliance. It is the answer to the problem of God as conceived in the Old Testament.

The New Testament

The New Testament transposes the ancient problem of God into the new “problem of Jesus.” It is the ancient problem in a new form—the problem, namely, of the Name of God, which is to say, the problem of God’s presence, of His mystery, of His historical action of judgment and rescue. Jesus Himself put the problem when He asked, in effect: “Who am I? What is my Name?” (Mk 8:27–29; Mt 16:14–17; Lk 9:18–20). The question is stated, as in the Old Testament, in intersubjective terms, or, if you will, in terms of man’s religious existence: “Who am I, I who am here, in this moment? What am I to you, to the people, to all men?” And the question, as the whole New Testament makes clear, is twofold in its implications. First, am I, who am here in this moment, he who is to come? That is, am I the Messiah? Second, who and what is the Messiah? What is his proper Name, that reveals the mystery behind his office?

The New Testament answer, of course, is contained in the acclamation of the early Christian community: “Lord Jesus!” Implicit in the cry is the new Christian experience and faith: “Jesus, who was with **us**, **is** the Lord, and He is our Lord, and He is with us still, here, in this **moment**, and always.” The affirmation again is of the divine presence,

and of the divine mystery, and of the divine action through which the Name of God transpires. Broadened to the fulness of the New Testament revelation, the affirmation is the fulfilment of the answer given to Moses' question in Ex 3:13. Only now the answer reads: "We shall be there as who we are shall we be there." The Son is here, sent by the Father, with whom the Father inseparably comes (Jn 14:23); Father and Son are here, breathing the Holy Spirit, sending the Holy Spirit, who is the Gift, and who is now given. The Three are here as who They are, the triunely Holy One, the Holy Trinity, the One God, whose Name is still unknown and ineffable (Jn 1:18). As who They are the Three are here, known under the many names that had long been used but are now laden with new meaning, because they are now read off by men from the new *magnalia Dei*, the Son's ransoming deed of love, and the Spirit's constant "glorification" of the Son (Jn 16:14) in the Church. Through these deeds of judgment and rescue the Name of God newly transpires: the God (*ho theos*) of the Old Testament is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father. Thus the ancient understanding, "Yahweh is here," is transformed into a new sense of the reality and mystery of the presence of God. And the ancient anxiety is transcended by a new certainty; for now the Lord has said, what He had never said before, that His presence is definitive: "I am with you all the days, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). The warrant for the promise is God's fidelity, not simply to the word spoken for Him by the Prophet, but to His own Word, in whom He uttered Himself eternally, and through whom He made His proper Name known in time (Mt 11:27).

One may speak of the "problem of Jesus" as the New Testament form of the problem of God, because again alternatives are proposed, not only the ancient ones, God present or God absent, but also new ones, God or man, God and man. And the answer demanded by the New Testament is again in terms of "knowledge" in the biblical sense. The Pauline term is *epignōsis*, which becomes with him the technical theological expression for the decisive knowledge of God—the assent and consent, the search and finding, the conversion and adhesion: to God that also goes by the name of faith. This *epignōsis*, this "knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4), is somehow a share in the Son's knowledge of the Father (cf. Mt 11:27, where the verbal form is used). It

comes to men, like all things else, from the Father through the Son, the Word who breathes the Love whereby the Christian cries out: "Abba" (Rom 8:15). This knowledge, therefore, centers first on the Son, who alone "reports the news" (Jn 1:18) that God is Father.

Moreover, this knowledge is again no mere cognition, nor even simply an assent to propositions that are eternally true. It is, as in the Old Testament, properly a "recognition," the recognition that the Lord is here, in this moment, presenting Himself and His will, which is to save, or on refusal of this will, to judge. What matters is to recognize the living God in "the moment of visitation" (Lk 19:42, 44), when the Word speaks, and when the Spirit leads (Rom 8:13). The recognition is practical; as in the Old Testament, it takes the form of a "going with" the Spirit, who is the Lord-with-us, as Christ is the Lord-of-us. Finally, this *epignōsis*, both as an affirmation of God's presence and as a practical recognition of it in each moment of visitation, is forever an unfinished thing, wanting always further fulness (cf. Col 1:9-11).

In the Bible, therefore, the problem of God is raised and answered formally on the level of the religious existence. The Old Testament answer is not final or definitive, any more than the Old Testament itself was final or definitive. The answer stands: "Yahweh is here." It admits no doubt, because Yahweh has "come down" (Ex 3:8). But it does admit anxiety, because Yahweh has come down freely; and He "is here" both in wrath and in goodness. Who then is to know which, in the end, will prevail—the wrath, which is really an absence, or the goodness, which is the presence? The New Testament answer, in contrast, admits neither doubt nor anxiety. It is definitive and final: "I shall not leave you" (Jn 14:18). Now and forever, man is not alone.

Two further remarks need to be made. First, in the Bible the problem of God, as a religious problem, receives its permanent formulation. Moses' question stands forever as the religious question: "Is God with us, here and now?" This is what the people need and want to know. (Here, incidentally, is the valid human anxiety that gives force to the seduction of idolatry, which is nothing but the temptation to "locate" the god in the midst of the people, to have him present, here and now.) The people also ask three other consequent questions. The God who is here (they ask), what is He to us? How (they further ask) do we come to know that He is here, and know too what He is to us? Lastly (they

ask), how shall we call upon our God—with what Name or names? These four questions, all interrelated, constitute the permanent religious problematic; they are the questions that the people of God continually ask and answer. They are the biblical questions, cast in the distinctively biblical mode or style of thought, which is interpersonal, historical-existential. The questions bear, in the first instance, not on what God is in Himself—on His existence and attributes; rather they bear on God's relation to His people—on His presence and attitudes.

However (and this is the second remark), implicit in the religious-biblical problematic is the theological-metaphysical problematic that would be wrought out by long centuries of effort at reflective understanding, carried on amid the clash of controversy within the Church and within the School, until the definitive systematization was made by St. Thomas. And this medieval triumph of the theological intelligence, retaining all its definitiveness, would serve to reopen the problem and inaugurate the modern phase of it. But that is another chapter.

THE PROBLEM OF GOD IN THE PATRISTIC ERA

The "knowledge of the truth," of which St. Paul speaks, is a knowledge of the full truth about God, and it is a full knowledge. There are no essential gaps in it, even though, as recognition, it must always grow. Would it then be true to say that for the Christian there are no more questions to be asked about God, or that there can be no further problem of God? In a sense, yes. Questioning is at an end; there remains only the quest for the living God—the endeavor to live in His presence, to adore His mystery, and to recognize each moment of His visitation. But in another sense, no. The very fact that the problem of God has been answered fully on the plane of the religious existence serves to move the problem into a new phase. A new series of questions arises; or, more exactly, the ancient questions return in a new form. Only now their thrust is not towards certainty of affirmation but towards adequacy of understanding.

It was inevitable that the new questions should arise. They are inherent in the biblical answers to the old human questions; they are likewise inherent in the questioning powers of the human intelligence in which the biblical answers took root. It happened that this human power to ask questions had been beautifully cultivated by the Hellenic

intelligence. So it happened, but providentially. In any case, it was in the world of Hellenistic culture that the new questions were asked, during the course of the Arian controversy.

Arius raised the first question. The New Testament had described the relation of the Logos to us. He is the intermediary between the Father and us, understanding "us" to mean "we-in-our-world." St. Paul had said: "For us, one God the Father, from whom all that is [goes forth], and we [go back] towards Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all that is [goes forth], and we [go back to the Father] through Him" (1 Cor 8:6). It is the doctrine of *exitus* and *reditus*; both are "through" Christ, the Word. He is the intermediary of creation (Jn 1:3; Col 1:16). He is likewise the intermediary of the knowledge of the Father in the pregnant biblical sense, whereby the "reconciliation" between God and man is effected (Col 1:20; Jn 1:18). "For His sake everything is, and through His agency everything is" (Heb 2:10). The Scripture thus affirms with full clarity and certainty the role and function of the Logos in regard of us-in-our-world. But further questions remained to be explicitly asked.

Arius asked them. If he had not, someone else would have; for they are not Hellenic but human questions. The power and need to ask them are inherent in the dynamism of intelligence, which is to know what *is*. Given the relation of the Logos to us, as described by Scripture, what *is* the Logos in Himself? The Scripture names Him "Son"; but what *is* it for the Logos to *be* Son? The Scripture says that He is "out of" the Father (Jn 16:28). But what *is* it for the Son to *be* out of the Father? What *is* His relation to the Father, as affirmed in the name "Son"? How, in a word, are the scriptural affirmations to be understood? What is the full "sense" of the Scripture?

This was the question that the 118 Fathers at Nicaea answered. It had to be answered, just as it had to be asked. On the answer to the question, what *is* the Logos-Son, depended the whole issue of human salvation; for if the Logos is not in Himself what Nicaea defined Him to be, He is in effect nothing to us. If, looking to Him, we cannot say, "The Lord is here with us," understanding the name "Lord" in its full divine sense, there is no value in making the affirmation at all. It does not bear the sense of a salvation accomplished. We are as the pagans, "without God (*atheoi*) in the world" (Eph 2:12). There is no salvation

for us in the name of the Arian Logos—a time-bound creature, as we are; out of the Father by a “making,” as we are; Son by a grace that holds no grace for us. The Nicene Faith, said Athanasius, declared the sense of Scripture. It defined as dogma, in the *homoousion*, the truth that Athanasius (chiefly) had elaborated as theology, scil., that the Son *is* all that the Father *is*, “*excepto Patris nomine*.” This is the sense of Scripture, which names the Son by all the saving names wherewith it names the Father, under exception only of the Name of Father.

It is not, of course, to our purpose here to dwell upon the enormous historical significance of the Nicene definition, resident in the fact that it sanctioned for the first time the transcendence of the dominant scriptural mode of understanding and statement (which is interpersonal, historical-existential) in favor of the dogmatic mode of understanding and statement (which is absolute, essential-existential). The new dogma was new; and at the same time it simply declared the sense of the Scripture. The *homoousion* is *in* the Scripture; and at the same time it represents a growth in understanding of the Scripture. At the moment, however, the only explicit point is that in the patristic era, crowned by Nicaea (and later by Chalcedon), the New Testament problem of God, which is the problem of Jesus, moved into a new phase and received an answer that was at once new and traditional. The scriptural affirmation stood unchanged: “Jesus, the Lord, is here with us.” But the new Arian (and human) question had transformed the issue from one of presence to one of being. The new explicit question was, whether Jesus, who is-with-us, *is* the Lord. The alteration in the state of the question was subtle, if you will, but real. The problem of Jesus moved into a new universe of discourse, which was not that of intersubjectivity but of metaphysic. The issue was still, in a sense, “is-ness,” but in a new sense. The conception, “to be-with,” is not yet formally the conception, “to be.” But since “is-ness” is in both somehow at stake, the new and old universes of discourse were coinherent. Which is why the new dogmatic definition, bearing on what the Son is-in-Himself, simply declared the sense of the old scriptural description, bearing on what the Son is-to-us.

Arius, therefore, raised in a new form the first two questions in the problematic—the related questions of existence and essence, whether the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God; and what is the Son—or more

explicitly, how and why the Son is Son, scil., how is He “out of” the Father, and therefore what is He “to” the Father? The two other questions remained, concerning our knowledge of God and concerning the names of God. Inevitably they would be raised again, even though they had been answered—in fact, precisely because they had been answered. Eunomius raised them.

He raised them for his own reasons, which had little or nothing to do with scriptural interpretation. In any case, someone in the end would have raised them as a problem in theological understanding of the Scripture. There are, in fact, two series of texts. One asserts that God is unknown, hidden from men, “dwelling in a light unapproachable, whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16). The other asserts that God is known, “not far from anyone of us” (Acts 17:27), His invisibilities visible in the world of nature (Rom 1:20), and, more particularly, heard of and grasped in His mighty works in history (Heb 1:2). Man’s condition, therefore, is at once a nescience (*agnōsia*) and a knowledge (*gnōsis*). But what can this mean? Is it contradiction or simply paradox? In what sense is the Christian to be both gnostic and agnostic? The Scripture does not answer; it is not the kind of question that Scripture answers.

Eunomius essayed an answer. “I know God,” he said, “as God knows Himself.” He knew the very Name of God, that it was *agennētos*, the Unoriginate. And knowing this, he knew what God is. As for the many names of God strewn throughout the sacred pages (he further said), they are verbalism, all synonyms, that say nothing about God, since God is to be known only by the one Name. The issue drawn by this facile dialectician was not academic. His agnosticism and gnosticism, both of them misplaced, made wreckage of Christianity. If God is known as He knows Himself, He is not transcendent to human intelligence; He is not mystery; that is, He is not God. “Si comprehendisti, non est Deus,” St. Augustine would say. On the other hand, if God is not really known by the many names given Him from the events of the sacred history and from the sacral cosmos, He cannot be known at all; He is not present; He is not our God.

The first task of the Fathers—Basil, the two Gregories, Chrysostom—was to witness to the faith affirmed in the Scripture. They dwelt on the primary scriptural theme: *akatalēptos ho theos*, as John

Damascene summed it up. They forbade "busy scrutiny" of the mystery of God, and thus reminded man of his creaturely state, which is a state of ignorance of God. They also dwelt on the Pauline theme, *to gnōston tou theou*. The unapproachable Light has shone through the web of history and through the fabric of the world; man is, or can be, in a state of knowledge of God, and thus somehow have God present, as his God. There was then the further task of setting the two scriptural themes in harmony—a sort of contrapuntal harmony. How and why is God at once unknown and known?

The question was put, not to faith itself, which simply affirmed the fact, but to the theological intelligence, to reason illumined by faith. The answer was found by the arts of reason, chiefly by reason's great art, which is to make distinctions. Aristotle had long since distinguished the two chief questions that direct all intellectual inquiry, *an est (hoti estin, poios estin)*, and *quid est (ti estin, hopōs estin)*. With Basil this distinction first appears in the service of the Christian faith against the impiety of Eunomius. We know that God is; we do not know what God is. We know what God is not, scil., that He is not like anything within the order of His creation (this is the chiefest thing that man must know about God, on pain of idolatry). We do not know how or why God is what He is, in the mode of being that transcends the whole order of creation. Thus man's *gnōsis* and his *agnōsia* are rightly situated.

There was then the further issue of the many names of God. Do they constitute a true *gnōsis* or are they sheer useless verbalism? Do they give man some manner of true understanding of God, or are they simply the projection onto God of man's understanding of himself and of his world, in such wise that God becomes a mere idol fashioned by the techniques of human intelligence? How is it that names taken by men from human experience can become names of God, who is totally unlike anything in human experience, the Holy One, utterly other than His creation? Thus the problem of God, as raised in the patristic era on the level of theological understanding, resolves itself into the celebrated problem of analogy, whose history has run since then, and is still unfinished. The details of the patristic solution do not concern us here: what matters for our purpose is to note the inevitable

appearance of the problem of God in this new form. Faith itself does not solve the problem; as stated in the Scripture, the faith simply puts the problem. God refuses to give to man His one Name; it is man who names God with many names. This is all the Scripture says, in effect. It adds the clue that, although God is totally unlike His creation, His creation is somehow like Him, since His "glory" is in it. But the Scripture does not explain how this pale similitude, so completely overshadowed by a greater dissimilitude, can be made the starting point of a dialectical movement of human intelligence, whose term is a true knowledge of the Unknowable. Until this was explained, the scriptural affirmations could still indeed be made, but in a vacuity of understanding that was dangerous, as the Eunomian impiety had demonstrated. In the things of God it is perilous to misplace one's agnosticism. One risks losing one's God. In other words, the people of God, who have God in their midst by their knowledge of Him, also need to have in their midst a proper theology of that knowledge.

The patristic theology of the divine names was, in a sense, only inchoative, that is, as a piece of systematic thought. The structure of the dialectical movement known later as the "threefold way" was laid down; but it was not wrought out with philosophical nicety. At that, it was adequate for the patristic purpose, which was rather polemic than speculative—the defense of the scriptural faith rather than its scientific exposition. However, the patristic theology was, in another sense, a complete achievement, that is, as a piece of religious thought. The achievement consisted in transforming one paradox into another, with the result that they reciprocally illumined each other and together cast light on the common truth that lay at the basis of both. The biblical paradox, that God is at once known and unknown, was transformed into the theological paradox, that the true knowledge of God is an ignorance. "In the things of God the confession of ignorance is great knowledge," as Cyril of Jerusalem put it (the Greek text contains the two contrasting words whose assonance cannot be reproduced in English: *en tois gar peri theou megalē gnōsis to tēn agnōsian homologein*). The great transcendent truth that both paradoxes brought sharply into focus was that God is uniquely an object of knowledge, because God uniquely is.

THE PROBLEM OF GOD IN ST. THOMAS

Ten centuries after the Eunomian controversy, St. Thomas carried to completion the inchoative patristic analysis of the problem of God on the level of theological understanding, which is the problem of the intelligibility of God. He also made a complete systematic statement of the answer. The structure of the problem is constituted by the four interrelated questions that had lain in a different form beneath the text of Scripture and had begun formally to appear in the patristic era. Now they are sharply stated in the absolute mode of metaphysical discourse (1, q. 3, proem.). And they are dealt with in the first thirteen questions of the First Part (and elsewhere) with firm and fully developed scientific method. The interest is not polemic, as with the Fathers, but speculative in the Scholastic style. The four questions are explored and answered under employment of a metaphysic of causality, a full gnoseology, and a developed doctrine of analogy. The result was that both the problem of God and the answer were put, for the first time in the history of theology, in a state of systematic understanding.

The achievement represented both the culmination of centuries of collective thought, patristic and Scholastic, and also the personal triumph of a uniquely penetrating intelligence. And the achievement was definitive. Much argument later went on, and still goes on, with regard to the Five Ways of finding God, the systematic ordering of the divine attributes, the Threefold Way of knowing God, etc. But the argument is hardly more than critical commentary on a masterpiece of thought, whose structure remains unshaken. So true is this that even today the main line of progress in the tradition, the main line of growth in the understanding of the tradition with regard to the problem of God, lie in a direction that St. Thomas did not choose to take, scil., the philosophical analysis of the concept of "presence," in terms of which the biblical problem of God is stated. There is also the exploration of the cognitive value of metaphor and symbol and sign—a value that St. Thomas perhaps passed over too quickly, if indeed he did not deny it.

Only one aspect of St. Thomas' achievement calls for comment here, since it is not often enough signalized. I mean his pervasive concern, throughout the whole of his probing inquiry into the problem of God,

to protect against prying scrutiny the mystery of the divine transcendence. This is the basic biblical truth, that God is the Holy One, whose Name is ineffable. St. Thomas states the truth in metaphysical form: "One thing about God remains completely unknown in this life, namely, what God is" (*In Rom.*, c. 1, lect. 6). He states the truth so often that some of his commentators have become uncomfortable at the patent poverty of the knowledge of God that he permits to man in this life. His doctrine of analogy, for instance, pretends to do no more than rescue our discourse about God from sheer equivocation (cf. *C. gent.* 1, 33). He makes utterly clear that our knowledge of God consists, in the end, only in the making of affirmations about Him that are certain and true. We can and do answer the question, *an est Deus? an est Deus talis?* This, of course, is a great thing. It insures God's presence to us and our presence to Him. But this knowledge, for all its tensile strength, remains tenuous, since St. Thomas adheres rigidly to what Sertillanges has called an "agnosticism of definition." In the end, our presence to God is to One Unknown: "ei quasi ignoto coniungamur" (1, q. 12, a. 13, ad 1m). We do not know what He is, to whom we are present and who is present to us. We only know what He is not. The philosophical assertion is as apodictic as the biblical assertion that God is the Holy One, who hides Himself.

In fact, St. Thomas' concern is to enforce upon man with all the resources of metaphysics and gnoseology the fact that all human knowledge of God ends in ignorance; that it is, in its consummation, an ignorance. This had been the patristic doctrine, which was itself simply the echo of the awesome "as who I am" of Ex 3:14. What St. Thomas did was to give a scientific demonstration that so it is—a demonstration that embodied an understanding of why it must be so. He transposed the dictum of Cyril of Jerusalem, quoted above, into a state of scientific understanding. The biblical doctrine that God is wholly unlike His creation is transposed into the gnoseological technique of the *via remotionis*; and its exigences are remorselessly followed. After we have removed from God all similarity to the corporal and to the spiritual as we know them, "there remains in our intelligence only 'that He is,' nothing else; hence the mind is in a certain confusion. As the final step, however, we even remove from Him this very is-ness, as is-ness is found in creatures. And then the mind dwells in a darkness, as it were,

of ignorance. And it is by this ignorance, as long as this life lasts, that we are best united to God, as Dionysius says. This is the darkness in which God is said to dwell" (*In 1 Sent.*, dist. 8, q. 1, a. 1, ad 4m).

However, St. Thomas also demonstrated, what the Fathers had implied, that the confession of our ignorance of God is not to be made effortlessly, at the very outset. In that case, it would be simply an ignorance, not a knowledge. Our ignorance of God becomes a true knowledge of Him only when it is reached, as St. Thomas reached it, at the end of a laborious inquiry, firmly and flexibly disciplined by the method of the Threefold Way, which is itself nothing but the transcription into methodology of the biblical doctrine that God is the Holy One hidden in the midst of His people and His world. The way of man to the knowledge of God is to follow all the scattered lights that the Logos has strewn throughout history and across the face of the heavens and the earth, until they all fuse in the darkness that is the unapproachable Light. Then, when the resources of human thought and language are exhausted, man has recourse to the language of adoration, which is silence.

THE PROBLEM OF THE GODLESS MAN

The problem of God has, as its obverse, the problem of the godless man, the *a-theos*. It is better to put the problem thus concretely, rather than to speak of the "problem of atheism." It is not as if atheism were some sort of doctrine or intellectual position that, as such, presented a problem, needed to be made intelligible, and could be understood. The problem only becomes a problem when it is concretely stated in terms of the godless man, who is existent and present in history, as God Himself is concretely existent and present in history. The reality of the problem appears in the fact that, within the religious tradition derivative from the Bible, the phrase, "the godless man," asserts a contradiction *in adiecto*. St. John Chrysostom was simply stating the central truth of this tradition in his famous dictum: "To be a man is to fear God." The presence of God, says the Scripture in both Testaments, is integral to the very structure, as it were, of man's historical existence, just as God, who is the Author of nature, is integral to the nature of man. Therefore the man who does not fear God somehow

does not exist, and his nature is somehow not human. On the other hand, there he is. That is the problem.

The godless man does and can exist only because the problem of God is put, not simply to man's intelligence but more fundamentally to his freedom. It has already been shown that this is true of the problem as it rises on the level of the religious existence. God has presented Himself in history, as the Mystery that He is, but as knowable in His active presence in the here-and-now. The act of man that responds to this free act of God is not some necessary act of cognition, extorted by the evidence, that God exists. It is the free act of recognition that "Yahweh is here." As the recognition must be free, it implies the possibility of a contrary dictate of will, which is some sort of refusal. Out of this latter free decision there arises what the Bible calls "ignorance" of God.

The word may have a more kindly sense, as when the Psalmist prays for forgiveness of his "ignorances" (Ps 25:7, LXX, *agnoiias*; cf. Acts 3:17). More commonly it contrasts with the biblical sense of the "knowledge" of God and denotes its religious and moral opposite, which is a wilful "ignoring" of God, a culpable refusal to recognize Him (e.g., Wis 14:22; Eph 4:17-19). Thus to ignore God is not merely to be god-less, as if godlessness were some sort of neutral state of mind. The decision to ignore God commonly entails a commitment to the spiritual "emptiness" of idolatry, and this in turns leads to inner moral disorder and social evil (e.g., Gal 4:8; Rom 1:26-32, after the classic OT doctrine, Wis 14:21-31). Ignorance of God, therefore, is not some unfortunate lapse of intelligence, a mistakenness in the order of ideas, into which a man may fall in all good will. Its root lies in a free decision that is sinful. A man is godless in consequence of a choice. He chooses against "going with" God; he chooses, that is, against the knowledge of God. His choice is ignorance, that is, to "go without" God.

The godless man may have as many forms as there are men who are godless; the decision is personal. Nevertheless, as the problem of God arises on two major levels, so on each of them types of the godless man appear.

The Bible distinguishes three types of godless men, on the level of religious existence. First, there is the "fool," who "said to himself, 'There is no God'" (Ps 14:1; cf. 10:4). In the biblical context it is

quite clear what he meant to deny. His free dictate of refusal falls on the presence of God, and more particularly on the presence of God in judgment on his wickedness: "He says to himself, 'God has forgotten; He has hidden His face; He will never see' " (Ps 10:11). This is senseless, because the judgments of God are inescapable. The only greater folly is the refusal to recognize the presence of God in its other active mode, at the moment when His saving power appears (cf. Lk 19:14). This is the atheism of the people of God, in whose midst God is present, asserting His will, which is that the people "go with" Him or be lost. This ignorance of God is the essential common sin of all mankind, the impious folly into which all of us fall who in the here-and-now of the given moment freely decide to ignore God.

Second, there are the godless nations, as the Bible uses the term "nations" or "peoples," scil., in a religious, not ethnic or political, sense. They are the "peoples who do not know God" (e.g., Jer 10:25), "who do not know the God and will not listen to the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Th 1:8). Their sin is not to know what God is, scil., that He is not to be confused with His creation; that He is the God, the one Lord, who "dwells above the round of the earth" (Is 41:22). They are idolaters, who worship the work of their own hands. Upon them the prophetic tradition of Israel, continued in the New Testament, pours withering scorn. They are the godless men who nullify themselves by worshipping nullities. Their gods are "nothing," whose works are "nothingness" (Is 41:24). And "those who make them become like them" (Ps 115:8); they become nonentities, absurdities, hollow men, emptied of what makes a man. Their posterity is still with us. The work of their own hands, which they worship, is now other than the little figurines whose making Isaiah ironically describes (44:9-20); but the prophetic judgment still stands: "The lover of ashes, his heart deluded, is gone astray. He will not save himself nor ever say: 'That which I have had in hand, is it not a snare?' " (v. 20).

Finally, there is the type of godless man whom the Sage of Israel describes, having come upon him in the Hellenistic world. His atheism is that of the man of learning, the atheism of philosophy: "It may be that they but lose the way in their search for God and in their will to find Him. Absorbed in His works, they strive to fathom them; and they let themselves be caught in outward appearances, so beautiful is

what they see" (Wis 13:6-7). It is the classic excuse: *kala ta blepomena*. Nonetheless, "even they are not to be excused" (v. 8). Here, in a sense, is the prototype of the godless man of the modern world.

Say, for the argument, that the modern world ran from the Renaissance of the *quattrocento* to the Marxist Manifesto. The typically modern godless man would be difficult to describe with all nicety. Recourse must therefore be had to the broad brush, under due acknowledgment of Lord Acton's strictures on the use of that disfiguring instrument. If it be true to say that every type of the godless man is characterized by the tenor and tonality of the basic dictate of the will whereby he chooses to ignore God, one would have to say that the modern godless man is characterized by his will to understand and explain the world without God.

To explain the genesis of this will would be a lengthy task in intellectual history. Certainly an important factor was the medieval achievement itself. First, the problem of God was transposed into a problem of understanding—theological, metaphysical, gnoseological, linguistic. Second, the reception of Aristotle had the effect of transforming the universe, both material and human, into the proper object of man's understanding, to be explored and accounted for, as a subsistent order of being, in terms of the principles of being and the laws of thought. Third, the essential philosophical problem came into view—a problem that is in the first instance felt as a difficulty against the existence of God. I mean the problem of the coexistence of the infinite and the finite, the necessary and the contingent, the eternal and the temporal. If God is, how can the world be? There seems to be no "room," as it were, for the world "outside of" God. Hence the temptation to draw God down, so to speak, into the world, in some form of pantheistic idealism. But this, in the end, is to explain the world without God, as is evident. On the other hand, there the world is, in full empirical reality; and it must be somehow intelligible, as empirical reality. Hence the temptation to dismiss God, so to speak, from the world and from the concerns of intelligence. Again the world is to be explained without God, in terms of some sort of materialism, more or less humanistic. In either case, the same basic will appears, scil., to ignore God in the course of the effort to understand the world. (This is, of course, much too rapid an account of the matter; there was further, for instance, the

rise of Science and of the Baconian concept of knowledge as power; and much more besides.)

The modern man's explicit rejection fell on God as the principle of the intelligibility and explanation of the world. And it took two major forms. There was the refusal of God as being Himself unintelligible, inaccessible to human intelligence; it is visible in the variant forms of positivist agnosticism. This ignorance of God is an atheism of despair—man's despair of the resources of his own intelligence. And there was the refusal of God as simply irrelevant, as not needed in the enterprise either of philosophy or of science. "Je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse," said Laplace to Napoleon. The famous remark sufficiently suggests the temper of the atheism that was typical of the Enlightenment. It was an atheism of intelligence—of man's pride in the resources of human intelligence.

In both cases, the explicit rejection was of the "God of explanation," so called (and so rather injuriously called, as if God were somehow functional to man's need of understanding). It should, however, be noted that, coupled with this rejection, there went another, which fell upon the God of history, the living God, present in the midst of His people. This rejection took the form of "ant clericalism," as the euphemism had it. It was the refusal to permit the Church, the Temple in which God is present, to be present and active in the public life of the civil people. Religion, it was decreed, is a purely private affair; it is no concern of the nation. The decree marked the reappearance in history, in a new form, of "the people who do not know God."

There is justice in the recent judgment of John MacMurray, that the whole of modern philosophy is, in its logic, atheist; it is pervaded by the will to understand the world without God. Modern politics, one may add, is likewise atheist in its logic; it is pervaded by the will to establish public order without God. It remains only to note this statement by Mr. J. N. Findlay: "For I am by temperament a Protestant, and I tend toward atheism as the purest form of Protestantism." In other words, the religion of modernity, which was Protestantism, is atheist in its logic. Mr. Findlay's reason, as given, is valid. The tendency of his Protestant temperament is towards avoidance of idolatry; but in the logic of this tendency, pursued as a philosopher pursues logic, there lies the denial of the presence of God. This is biblical atheism. God may in-

deed be, but He cannot be here—in the person of Jesus, or in the institution of the Church. That would be idolatry. Thus an ironical twist is given to the Psalmist's text. In the modern context he who says to himself, "God is here," is the fool.

The godless man who is typical of the postmodern era is still more difficult to describe. He has no prototype in history; he is a new phenomenon. Again his characteristic is a will to ignorance of God, but a will that has a direction and a temper not seen hitherto. It is not simply a will to disregard, refuse, and reject God; it is a new will actively to oppose God. Moreover, the God who is opposed is not the "God of the philosophers" but the God of the Bible; not only the God who Is but the God who Acts, who made the world, governs history, and guides man to his destiny. This living God and the knowledge of Him are now actively opposed, as through long centuries they have been disregarded or refused, in the name of man's freedom. Only now freedom is newly conceived. This much is common to the two major types of the postmodern godless man; in other respects they differ.

First, there is the Marxist type, the godless man of the Communist Revolution. To him freedom is the recognition of the necessities inherent in the materialist dialectic of history. By this "freedom" man becomes the master of history, endowed with the power to make sense out of history, that is, to give it a meaning and a direction, toward the Utopian goal of a world without misery. And the necessary condition of movement toward this goal is the "suppression of God," in Marx's phrase. It is not now a matter of maintaining, with the Enlightenment, that God is not needed in order to understand the world. The Marxist will is not to understand the world but to transform it. And to this will God is a positive obstacle. He and the knowledge of Him are the source of man's "alienation," in the pregnant Marxist sense, and of man's impotence to alter the conditions of misery in which he lives. Therefore the knowledge of God is to be eradicated from the midst of the new people. And, under due regard for tactical delays, the suppression of God is to be total—from private as well as from the public life. Marx and his heirs were not deceived by the silly slogan of the modern godless man, that religion is a purely private affair. They had the genius to see that religion, even in the form of private faith, is the most public of all public affairs. No fool, therefore, is to be permitted to say in the

privacy of his own heart, "God is here." This is precisely the folly that would foil the Revolution. Therefore it must be actively opposed.

The newnesses that the godless man on the Marxist model exhibits are obvious. His opposition to God is not founded on some personal will to go his own way, as in the case of the biblical fool; nor on some collective will to worship only Reason, as in the case of the French *philosophes*. Marxist atheism has its roots in fact—in the social fact of human misery. It is an "atheism of exasperation." At the bottom of it, in its purest form, is a moral absolute—that evil has no right to exist. Hence it is not simply a thing of intelligence but of great passion. Marx was no Voltaire, nor was he in the line of all the "village atheists," the little schoolmasters, or university professors, whose mark was a scornful disdain of *les préjudices*. Marx had a passionate hatred of God, which has survived in the militance of his followers. Moreover, this active opposition to God is to be the basic political force creative of the new postmodern people. This too is a new thing, that atheism should be not only a practical attitude (which it had always been in the individual case) but a public philosophy, the operative consensus in terms of which the City is to be built, the programmatic basis from which the social liberation of man is to be projected. The godless man is to be writ large as the godless People, organized for action in history, not only without God but against Him. (Unfortunately, we have not in English the equivalent of the German *gottwidrig*, which conveys better than "god-less" the positive practical character of the new atheism.)

Finally, as the Marxist godless man is new in his origins, so he is climactically new in the scope that he envisages for his historical efforts. His goal is nothing less than the solution of the problem of evil. He understands—what is true—that no solution to the problem is ultimately acceptable to man unless it is practical, that is, unless it means the deliverance of man from evil. This, therefore, is what he undertakes. Moreover, he understands—what is also true—that only he can thus practically solve the problem of evil who has the power to bring good out of evil. This is, in fact, the unique prerogative of the divine power. This is why God can permit evil and show "forbearance" towards it (the *anochē* of Rom 3:26), because He can bring good out of evil and somehow make it serve, at the advent of the *kairos*, unto the

“vindication of His justice” (*ibid.*). The Marxist godless man assumes for himself this prerogative. It forms the ultimate basis of the ethic of the Revolution. Evil may be permitted and done—and only that evil may be permitted and done—which serves the cause of the Revolution. Out of present misery, permitted or inflicted, the godless man can bring the good. The resolution of the problem of evil—and the problem needs resolution in terms of action, not simply solution in terms of understanding—will be accomplished when the *kairos* comes, the advent of Utopia, when the salvific justice of the godless man will be vindicated.

Moreover, the *kairos* is not to be simply awaited. Its advent is the essential work of the working class. The *eschaton* of history, which is destined to arrive within the span of history, is to be the product of history, the achievement of the new godless people who do the work of history. The new *Heilsgeschichte*, inaugurated by the new godless people, has the same term as the ancient *Heilsgeschichte*, inaugurated when the living God “came down” to His people to resolve, by His action, the problem of their misery in Egypt. The new godless man is God. And God is now the nonentity, whose work is nothingness, the work of the destruction of man, which must at every turn be actively opposed. The living God is the death of man. He must be done to death. The sentence pronounced on God by the godless man of the modern world, that God is dead, will be executed by the postmodern man, who is not simply the Intelligence who can understand and explain the world, but the Power who can judge and save the world.

The new God-opposed man manifests a newly-sure confidence, as befits one who has not merely discarded God but supplanted Him. He is no Condorcet, full of the pride of reason, basking complacently in *les lumières*. His reliance is not that of Comte, a naive trust in the resources of science and technology. His seat is not on the summit of the Cartesian dream. He does not pretend to be the emperor of the world. He wills to be only the servant of history. He is, if you will, the *contrefaçon* of the Servant of Yahweh, of whom the Second Isaiah sang. He is selfless, ascetic, committed to the suffering of constant work. And if he wills to dominate the world, it is only that so he may save it. He wills his own death, which is the withering away of the state, the armature of his power, as the ransom of the Many, in order that so the Many

may rise to the new life of the classless society. The event is invisible now, but he confidently sees it coming; the invisible is always visible to faith.

A second type of godless man stamps the present era as postmodern. He is the new kind of philosopher, whose will is for freedom, newly conceived as the sole value in human life. The origins of his godlessness, as in the case of the Marxian atheist, are again in fact, not in any sort of mere idea. The fact from which he starts is presented in Camus' vision of the world in *The Rebel*—a circumscribed garden, entirely surrounded by death; and beyond death, nothing; and all the time death makes incursions into the garden in all the forms that human death takes—war, the cruelty of concentration camps, innocence abused, loyalty betrayed, honor traduced, failure, defeat, disease. The new godless philosopher views this vision, not with cynicism but with tenderness for man who stands under such great menace. His thought is antipodal to that of the confident Enlightenment. It is full of the sense of darkness, of the fragility of existence, of man's finitude, of the unpredictabilities of history. In a word, it is full of anxiety, like the heart of man himself.

The will of this philosopher is certainly not to disprove the existence of God, nor even to trouble himself, as his modern forbears used to, with proving that the traditional proofs do not prove. For him, exist or not, God is dead—that is, absent and silent. The fact is not to be reasoned about but accepted. And in this situation the philosopher's will is to give man sole charge of his own existence. Man must rescue and recover himself—the self which is freedom, an absolute autonomy, to be asserted as the sole supreme value in an otherwise absurd world. But this will to freedom, in this sense of freedom, requires, as its complement, a practical attitude of active opposition to God. The opposition is not against the God about whom men may say that He exists, and about whom men may argue—if they like—whether He is, what He is, how He is known, how He is named. The opposition is against the God who affirms Himself to be living, present, active in history. The reasons are obvious. If God is so present in the midst of men, man is dispossessed of his freedom. If man is to be required to “go with” a God who is so present, man's existence is transformed into a destiny which he did not himself choose. If God is so present, man is being

made by God; he is not free to make himself. The living God is the death of man. Therefore in the name of man's will to live, to be free, to "ex-sist," to make himself *de nihilo*—in this name the living God is to be opposed with all energy.

This sketch of the new God-opposed philosopher, like the foregoing sketch of the new God-opposed City-maker, is far too rapid even to be justly anatomical. Both may, however, serve the single purpose, which is simply to indicate that in the postmodern era the problem of God has been raised in a historically unique form. One might, with some justice, consider that the problem as raised by the modern godless enlightened man stood in a manner of diminishing continuity with the medieval problem as structured by St. Thomas. In both cases the problem was at least conceived to be the intelligibility of God. In the postmodern era this whole problem has been dismissed. If God is dead, as He is, why argue whether He be intelligible? On the other hand, it is obvious that God is still a problem, never more so than now, both to those who "go with" God in the search to know Him, and to the new men who "go against" God in an effort to destroy the knowledge of Him.

The first issue, then, is to define the current new mode of position of the ancient problem of God. It is clearly not just a problem in argument, though argument still retains its traditional high usages. Moreover, the call of the moment is not just for a prophet, who will indignantly denounce the consummated impiety of the new historical fool, who speaks not only to himself but to all the people. The nearest thing one can say is that the ancient biblical position of the problem of God has returned, but in so new a modality that the postmodern problem remains unique. Since it is always the adversary who states the issue, one might say that today's problem is to be stated in terms of the "death" or "life" of God. The four questions will then read: whether God is living, here and now; what is the life of God, in this moment of history; how is God in our knowledge, in the biblical sense of knowledge; how is God being named by us, in the face of the new men who say that He has no name.

If these are the questions, it is clear that it is not simply for the Schoolmen to answer them; the theoretical answer is necessary and valid but not enough. The questions are put to the people of God; and their answer must be practical, programmatic, expressed as postmodern

atheism expresses itself—in a total attitude and style of life. The formula for the answer is not to be found in the Old Testament but in the New. And if a single formula could be found, as it cannot, it might be Col 1:15–20, with its foregoing context. What the postmodern world needs is that St. Paul's prayer should be made and answered; that the people of God should "come to the complete recognition of His will" (v. 9), the Father's will, which is that the risen Christ "should in everything hold the primacy" (v. 18). He is the fulness of the living presence of God both in the cosmos and in history (v. 19), the newly realized "glory" of God whose vision made the seraphim sing (Is 6:3). Through Him the invisible Father is made visible, because He is the Image (v. 15). Through Him the cosmos becomes intelligible, because in Him it was created (v. 16). Through Him history is given its sense, because He is the "principle" of that historical action which is the Church (v. 18), whose members are "empowered with all power" (v. 11) by His indwelling Spirit. Through Him, finally, all man's many alienations end in reconciliation, because this is the meaning of His blood (v. 20). What He is and does sets the Christian program.