

# The Challenge of God

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“Classical theism,” refers to St. Thomas Aquinas’ *de deo uno* in the *Summa Theologia*, which is also known as the Doctrine of God. Over time there have been many people who have affirmed Aquinas’ teachings about God, while others have strongly disagreed and worked to disprove him. Aquinas’ critics often try to debunk one if not all of the seven attributes he gives to God: simplicity, impassability, immutability, perfection, infinite, eternal, and his oneness. The final six attributes all stem from God’s simplicity, and if any of them can be disproven then simplicity is also disproven thus rendering all of Aquinas’ work in the *de deo uno* invalid. Unfortunately these critics misunderstand the purpose of the *de deo uno*; it is meant to be a guide for what language we use about God. In addition to misunderstanding the mission of the *de deo uno* these critics also over look the very topic Aquinas stressed the most: we can never truly know God’s essence because God is beyond our abilities to comprehend.

It is important to remember that it was not St. Thomas’ intention to create a doctrine of God that all Christians should follow, it was meant to be used as a teaching document for priests and other religious members of the Church to teach the laity about God. This being said I feel that most of the people who disagree with Aquinas’ works confuse the *Summa* with other church dogma. It is possible that many of these people find justification in their thoughts from the leaders of the Reformation: Martin Luther and John Calvin. Both Calvin and Luther had strong opinions of the Church and the manner in which it acted, however neither of their movements were directed towards the ideas put forth in the *Summa*. For Luther “God is only known in the

cross and in suffering (1 Cor. 1:25)<sup>1</sup>,” this is brought forth from his desire for justification through scripture alone. Here Luther’s argument seems to challenge God’s immutability according to Aquinas, however it is important to note that God does suffer for Aquinas; he does so in his humanity, as Jesus Christ, not in his divinity. In Luther’s “Large Catechism” he would go on to confirm God’s simplicity by saying, “we know however, that God’s power, arm, hand, nature, face, Spirit, wisdom, ect., are all one thing; for apart from the creation there is nothing but one simple Deity himself.”<sup>2</sup>

After the Reformation, one could say things got a little crazy. It is as though some of the “great religious experts” came out of the woodwork without significant credentials in the time period known as modernity. Modernity brought about not only significant advances in the sciences, but it also is when the great philosophical thinkers emerge. Many of these great thinkers delve into the theological world, such as René Descartes. Descartes’ mission in his work was to map every idea he had ever thought. This decision to leave behind dogmatic starting points forms the basis of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He touches upon the topic of God and God’s existence in the third section of *Meditations*, where he draws influence from St. Augustine.<sup>3</sup> It is in this third section that Descartes explains his two exercises that “reflect on the ideas he perceives most vividly and distinctly in his immediate consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> The first exercise determines the distinction between the “formal” reality of an idea and its objective

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

reality, or the actual existence of an idea and the degree of perfection it represents. Within this exercise Descartes ranks things “based on their degree of independent existences” beginning with the infinite substance, or God, followed by finite substances, humans, and their modes or accidents, which are their attributes.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this ranking system and his concept of formal and objective reality Descartes concludes that “what is more perfect cannot arise from what is less perfect,” i.e. God cannot come from us because we are less perfect than God.<sup>6</sup> He also can infer that “the idea of God demands God for its cause: only a perfect and infinite reality could cause the idea in his mind of a perfect and infinite being.”<sup>7</sup>

In his second exercise Descartes asks “could I exist if there were no God?” To answer this question he considers all possible sources for his existence, these include himself, his parents, his always having existed or some cause less perfect than God.<sup>8</sup> To respond to these different sources of his existence Lois Malcolm explains that Descartes observed that “if he created himself he would be perfect,” however he finds that he is not perfect.<sup>9</sup> When Descartes tackles the idea of his parents being the source of his existence he felt that “asking them where they came from leads to infinite regress.”<sup>10</sup> Malcolm also says that Descartes finds that he could not have always existed because every moment of his existence is sustained by the power that initially created it, and that a cause less perfect than God could not be the

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

cause of his existence because “a perfect idea cannot come from an imperfect cause.”<sup>11</sup> It is from these two exercises that Descartes concludes that “the idea of God is neither a sense perception nor a product of his imagination, it must be innate, as his idea of himself is innate. He could not be what he is--an imperfect, finite being--and still have the idea of a perfect, infinite God if God in reality did not exist.”<sup>12</sup> from scratch in order to rid his brain of an “evil demon” that may have corrupted his thoughts. Descartes was skeptical of everything, even God; in order to overcome this “evil demon” problem he claimed “to leave behind every dogmatic starting point and every presupposition.”<sup>13</sup> Descartes wrote off all ideas that were accepted and developed before him, not because he felt that those ideas were incorrect, but because he feared this so-called “evil demon” corrupting his thoughts. In the end he came to affirm God’s perfection, existence, and being the source of creation.

Another well know modern thinker is Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher who is often called the “father of modern liberal theology.”<sup>14</sup> Schleiermacher rejected theology as “knowing” such as Hegel had suggested and “doing” or ethics as Kant had suggested in his reduction of religion to morality. According to Kärkkäinen, Schleiermacher had a different focus completely; he explained this by saying, “while Kant placed the locus of religion in ethics, and Hegel placed it in reason, Schleiermacher suggested that proper locus of religion is in ‘feeling,’ a subjective experience of intuition, or, as he put it, the ‘feeling of absolute dependence.’”<sup>15</sup> Schleiermacher’s suggestion of feeling is meant as an intuitive, pre-reflexive experience of God, rather than an emotional attachment. It is important to recognize that Schleiermacher stressed the idea of feeling as an experience of absolute dependency over morality and knowledge of God because if

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<sup>11</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 205-206

<sup>13</sup> Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 108.

<sup>14</sup> Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 227.

<sup>15</sup> Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 117.

one only talks and thinks about God in these two ways he is nothing more than an ideal being to imitate. For Schleiermacher “all talk about God has to be rooted in our immediate experience of self-consciousness. When we reflect on this experience we find that we are in a reciprocal relationship with the rest of nature and with other selves. But within this experience, we find that we are also aware of being ‘absolutely dependent’ on a ‘whence’--an unconditioned reality that affects everything yet is not reciprocally related to it in the same way that the rest of life is. Neither merely a ‘knowing’ (as in doctrinal orthodoxy) nor merely a ‘doing’ (as in pietism or a religion reduced to ethics), nor even simply an emotion, this ‘feeling’ of absolute dependence is a universal part of life.”<sup>16</sup> Even in this very argument Schleiermacher presents against Kant and Hegel he affirms St. Thomas Aquinas, who argues in question 43 of the *Summa*, that creation is God dependent for its existence, but God is not dependent on creation for his existence.

Although the great philosophical minds of the Modern Era attempted to debunk the majority of St. Thomas Aquinas’ work, it appears that their efforts in doing so were done in vain. For example, in Schleiermacher’s argument there is very little said on the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. In his book, *The Christian Faith*, “[within] almost eight hundred pages, the doctrine of the Trinity receives only fourteen pages.”<sup>17</sup> In the *Summa Theologica*, St. Aquinas devoted a great deal of time and space to cover all aspects of the Trinity, and “because the doctrine of the Trinity is essential to our understanding of God in Aquinas, and neither Schleiermacher nor Hegel disproved it, modernity did not fundamentally challenge what mattered most even if it did challenge some of the proofs for God’s existence.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Malcolm, Lois. *God: The Sources of Christian Theology*. First ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 227.

<sup>17</sup> Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 118.

<sup>18</sup> Long, Duane S. Marquette University Email. November 2013. :)

In Post-Modernity, theologians began to branch away from the normal boundaries one finds in theology. It is in this era that one can feel that the focus of theologians moves away from the *de deo uno* to God's relationship with humanity. For example Gustavo Gutiérrez's book *A Theology of Liberation* moves away from the European school of thought and refocuses Latin American theology. The majority of Latin Americans live in poverty, for Gutiérrez it was important to make the God of the rich people the God of the poor. To do this Gutiérrez emphasizes the work of Jesus as an image of solidarity with the poor. Later generations of Latin American liberation theologians would continue his work. Jon Sobrino often relates the oppressed peoples of Latin America to Jesus by calling them the "crucified peoples," an idea he borrowed for Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Crucified God*. This idea set forth by Sobrino can be seen in his book *the Companions of Jesus* where he discusses the deaths of his close friends at the Universidad de Centroamericana.

Although most of the Post-Modern thinkers do not challenge the attributes given to God by Aquinas there are two movements that sought to combat the "substance metaphysics" brought forth in the *Summa*. These two movements were process theology and open theism. Process theology was a movement founded by Alfred North Whitehead and seeks to answer the theoretical question of evil. For Whitehead the concept of evil and its ability to exist in the world causes God to be imperfect, that he is lacking something. Whitehead also describes God as "an actual entity" and says "it is fundamental to the metaphysical doctrine of the philosophy of organism, that the notion of an actual entity as the unchanging subject of change is completely abandoned. An actual entity is at once the subject experiencing and the superject of its experience."<sup>19</sup> Being an actual entity puts God on the same level as creation, which means God

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<sup>19</sup> Whitehead, Alfred N. *Process and Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1978. 29.

has some sort of deficiency that only creation can fix. We are dependent on God and God is dependent on us according to process theology. Open theism on the other hand, can be seen as a shift from Aristotle to Hegel. David Ray Griffin, a prominent open theist, sets forth the formal problem of theodicy in “eight logical steps.” Within these eight “logical steps” one may take issue with numbers three and five both of which talk about the concept of evil. If God is all powerful, all knowing, and a perfect, good being why is there evil in the world? For Aquinas God does not will evil, he desires the good that will come from this evil. These two questions also challenge the choice of free will, in which humanity has the option to disobey God or to follow him.

In summation, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote the *Summa Theologica* in order to create a way in which we can speak about the greatness and mystery of God. Aquinas never claimed to know anything concrete about God because for him all knowledge of God’s essence was beyond our capacity. Throughout the centuries many theologians and philosophers have tried to debunk Aquinas’ work but all of these works have been in vain.