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Faith, Reason and the Existence of God

The proposition that the existence of God is demonstrable by rational argument is doubted by nearly all philosophical opinion today and is thought by most Christian theologians to be incompatible with Christian faith. This book argues that, on the contrary, there are reasons of faith why in principle the existence of God should be thought rationally demonstrable and that it is worthwhile revisiting the theology of Thomas Aquinas to see why this is so. The book further suggests that philosophical objections to proofs of God's existence rely upon an attenuated and impoverished conception of reason which theologians of all monotheistic traditions might wish to reject. Denys Turner proposes that on broader and deeper conception of it, human rationality is open to the 'sacramental shape' of creation as such and in its exercise of rational proof of God it in some way participates in that sacramentality of all things.

DENYS TURNER is Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity and Fellow of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Marxism and Christianity* (1983), *Eros and Allegory* (1995), *The Darkness of God* (1995) and *Faith Seeking* (2002).

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Deus vere [est] subiectum huius scientiae
Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*
1a q1 a7 *corp.*

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Preface

This monograph is intentionally narrow in focus: perhaps some will think perversely so. Beyond offering reasons of a philosophical kind for resisting some versions of the opinion, very commonly held, that the existence of God is incapable of rational demonstration, I do no more than to give further reasons of a theological nature why Christians should think, as a matter of faith, that the existence of God is rationally demonstrable, as a dogmatic decree of the first Vatican Council says. But nowhere in this essay do I offer any argument intended as proof of the existence of God, nor do I examine from the standpoint of validity any of the arguments which historically have been offered as proofs. This is because all the issues which appear to matter theologically speaking in connection with proofs of the existence of God arise in connection with the possibility in principle of a proof, and not with the validity of any supposed proof in particular. Hence, out of a desire to stick to the point, I have resisted a wider discussion which would have distracted from it. But some will find this restraint pedantic. At least they have been warned.

Also, since hardly any theologians nowadays think the existence of God is rationally provable, there will be those who wonder why I bother defending a cause quite so lost as this one. One reason for taking this trouble is that most theologians today do not so much think that the existence of God cannot be proved as seem altogether to have given up thinking about the issues involved, and simply assume – probably on unexamined arguments from Kant – the impossibility of it. Not to think a thing is not the same as thinking that it is not, and when once there is anything at all that theologians have stopped feeling the need to rethink, it is perhaps time to stop being a theologian in case it is the theology itself which has caused the thinking to stop, and to become a philosopher, or at least to ask some philosophical questions theologians should be asking for themselves. So it is in this matter more than in most. At any rate, one issue is plainly philosophical: theologians in the main seem to think the proposition to be beyond challenge that the existence of God cannot be proved, on any defensible account of rational proof. But that is a ground of logic

and epistemology, and the most ardent opponent of theological rationalism will have to concede that what counts for the validity of rational proof cannot itself be a matter of faith. And if upon close examination the purely philosophical issues at stake appear to intimidate the theologians on account of their technical complexity, then it is that the theologians seem happier to fall back into their own territory and rule out rational proof on theological grounds, even on grounds of faith itself, which is what they more commonly do today.

And when it comes to faith, here it is proclaimed by some as if it were dogma that the existence of God is beyond rational demonstration in this sense at least, that anything you could prove the existence of could not be the true God of faith. Such theologians appear to be telling us that you can have your proof and your 'God of reason' if you like, so long as you keep the business of proving God off the territory of faith, thereby disclosing the underlying, and to me curious, belief that faith has a 'territory' from which it is necessary to exclude at least some rational discourses. In any case, it is hard to know how one is supposed to contest that sort of claim, since, in the forms in which it is most frequently asserted, it is put beyond all possibility of contestation. For it comes near to being claimed analytically – as part of what it means to speak of God – that God's existence cannot be proved; or sometimes it seems as if, rather than a truth being claimed, it is a stipulation being laid down: 'I am not going to allow that you are talking about the same God I am talking about if your God's existence is rationally provable, I don't care what you say.' But such an attitude approximates to mere stubbornness, and to that extent may be discounted.

If they are not analytic, or a mere stipulation, what are the grounds for saying that the assertion of the rational provability of God's existence is contrary to faith? After all, if it is claimed as a substantive truth of some kind that the existence of the God of faith could not be demonstrable by reason, as having to do with the nature of reason, or of faith, or of both, then it must be possible to imagine the claim's being false, or its being contested on some grounds. Here, at any rate, one is on territory that once upon a time was in fact contested: for the bishops of the first Vatican Council in 1870 declared it to be an article of faith that the existence of God can be known by reason alone. And if there were any at all prepared to take the first Vatican Council seriously on this matter – and nowadays Catholic theologians do in scarcely greater numbers or degree of enthusiasm than your average Barthian Protestant – then a contestation with excellent prospects of theological progress in view could be anticipated. Alas, hardly anyone I know of will join me in the exploration

of the possibility that the bishops of the first Vatican Council were right – and, after all, they might be. And if you say there is no need to argue about the matter, because they could not be right, then I say you are no theologian and I do not want to argue with you anyway – which comes to the same thing. For a person stops being a theologian just when he or she thinks there is nothing left to be argued about.

I have written this book, therefore, because I think that there is something to argue about, an issue can be stated with refreshing straightforwardness and clarity, between those for whom, on grounds of faith, the existence of God could not be rationally demonstrable, and those for whom, on grounds of faith, the existence of God must be rationally demonstrable. Also, the issue being refreshingly straightforward and clear, I can state my own position with, I hope, straightforwardness and clarity: I rather think that the bishops of the Vatican Council were right on a score of general principle in saying that to deny the rational demonstrability of the existence of God on grounds of faith is to get something importantly wrong not just about reason but also about the nature of faith.

But I have to confess that in what ensues I do not always argue the case with that directness that might be hoped for by some, for what at first was intended as a secondary and oblique approach to the issue took over as the primary one as I became increasingly interested to discover, particularly in Cambridge, where I had moved some four years ago, a fashion for enlisting Thomas Aquinas in support of the position to which I was opposed. And that puzzled me because I had always thought that it was from Thomas that I had acquired the conviction of the demonstrability of God's existence – and the bishops of the Vatican Council no doubt were of the same mind. Yet here were so many thinkers and scholars for whom I had acquired the greatest respect, some followers of the school of 'Radical Orthodoxy', others of a more mainstream Barthian persuasion, yet others influenced by Eastern and patristic traditions of theology, all telling me that, in accordance with a programme of 'revisionist' Thomism once popular among French Catholic theologians, I must read Thomas as more of an Augustinian and Platonist than would be consistent with the theological 'rationalism' I had attributed to him.

Just in principle, and in advance either of the scholarly evidence in the matter of interpretation of Thomas, or of arguments about the substantive issues, I was reluctant to abandon my Thomas of rational proof, for one reason that, as a Christian myself, I want to be able to talk and debate without prejudice with Jews and Muslims about God. And, for another, it seemed to me that, deprived of my 'rationalist' Thomas, not only I, but

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the Western Christian tradition as a whole, would thereby be deprived of its one significant representative of a theological alternative to its pervasive Augustinianism, an alternative which offers prospects, not otherwise available to a mentality less confident of the theological claims of reason, of being able to challenge on its own terms the atheological rationalism of our modern times. There *is* an argument to be had with Dawkins and Grayling about the existence of God; there is a potentiality for agreement as to what the issue is about; and there is an equality of terms between the Christian theist and the atheist as to how, in principle, the issue is to be settled – that is to say, as to the standards of argument which are to be met on either side. In short, if Christians cannot agree with atheists about the existence of God, at least there is a case for seeing the disagreement as capable of being conducted on shared rational grounds, even if it is also necessary to contest with most atheists on the nature of reason itself, as in this essay I am much exercised to do. And Christians today need to restore lines of connection with theological traditions unafraid to acknowledge the demands made on them by such standards of rationality. Christians today need, therefore, my ‘rational’ Thomas: as for Barthians, is not Karl Barth himself quite enough for them? They do not need a Thomas Aquinas reconfigured by Catholics in Barth’s image.

But there were other reasons of a more personal sort for retrieving this ‘rationalist’ Thomas from the clutches of the Augustinian ‘revisionists’. Some years ago I devoted a monograph to the traditions of ‘mystical theology’ in late-antique and medieval Western Christian thought. I called that book *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and in it I studied some authorities central to the Western Christian traditions from Augustine to John of the Cross, for all of whom the God of Christian faith is unknown and unknowable; traditions which are, however, notably lacking in that silence incumbent upon them concerning that of which, as they themselves say, ‘one cannot speak’. Those traditions, in fact, embody complex and subtle accounts of the relations between speech and silence, between what cannot be said and the language in which that unsayability is gestured towards, a complexity whose embodiment within the articulation of the various theologies of those traditions constitutes their character, I argued, as ‘mystical theologies’.

Among the variety of responses which that monograph evoked two struck me of such particular importance as to convince me that at some point or other I would have to reply to them. The first came from my predecessor in the Norris-Hulse Chair at Cambridge, Professor Nicholas Lash, who in private correspondence wondered why, within the canon of

those included in my studies of ‘mystical theologians’, I had not included Thomas Aquinas, it being his view that Thomas met the condition I had imposed by way of excluding him, of being a ‘Neoplatonist’. The second and much more pervasive comment was put in its most learned form by a theologian and historian no less respected, Professor Bernard McGinn of the University of Chicago. It was his opinion that I had in that work over-egged the apophatic pudding to the point of apparently denying that we can say anything true of God, and that I had to an anorexic degree restricted the diet of ‘mystical experience’, thus implausibly excluding from my canon of mystical theologians some who were self-evidently members of it, above all the manifestly ‘experientialist’ Bernard of Clairvaux.

Of course, it might seem very obvious that a tradition of thinking about theological language according to which ‘all talk about God ultimately fails’, as the ‘mystical theologians’ generally say, would have to be epistemologically at odds with a tradition according to which the existence of God is rationally demonstrable. For if ‘the natural power of human reason’ is capable ‘with certainty’ of knowing ‘God, the source and end of all things’, as the first Vatican Council declares, it would seem to follow, and with like certainty, that human language is after all capable of getting some sort of grip on the God thus known. It would seem, therefore, that an apophatic emphasis could not be happily wed with the ‘rational’, and for sure, historically, the inevitable divorce proceedings have preoccupied the attention of the theological judges since at least the fourteenth century, when the apparent incompatibilities between the ‘mystical’ and the academic or ‘scholastic’ theologians had seemed to have become irreconcilable, driving an oxymoronic wedge between the ‘theological’ and the ‘mystical’, the more the one, the less the other.

Theological offspring of this divorce, especially contemporary enthusiasts for the ‘apophatic’, might feel that they at least have good grounds in ‘negative theology’, and so in ‘the mystical’, for abandoning the case for a rationally demonstrable God, just as it has for much longer seemed to many, and on other grounds, that the distinctive gratuitousness of faith precludes such a God’s being given to our native, unaided, rational powers. Therefore, I should make it clear from the outset, first, that I did not exclude the study of Thomas from *The Darkness of God* because I judged him not to be among the company of ‘mystical theologians’; on the contrary, I regard Thomas Aquinas as a mystical theologian *par excellence*. Next, I excluded Thomas Aquinas from that study on the grounds that he offered a significant departure from the general run of ‘Neoplatonist’ forms of ‘mystical theology’ – and incidentally, though less controversially, I excluded Bernard of Clairvaux on the same grounds of

non-Platonism, not because of his emphasis on ‘the book of experience’. Further, I do not deny that Thomas is much influenced by some elements within the Neoplatonic traditions, and especially by Augustine, but I could see no good reasons for concluding that Thomas’s differences with the ‘Neoplatonists’ were such as to diminish his credentials as a ‘mystical theologian’, on some standards represented by Augustine or Bonaventure or Eckhart; on the contrary, I thought I saw no problem of consistency between his ‘rationalism’ and his Christian ‘mysticism’. Which brings me to the aim of this present work, which is, in short, to demonstrate – in full harmony with the ‘apophatic’ arguments I presented in the earlier essay – that for Thomas, to prove the existence of God is to prove the existence of a mystery, that to show God to exist is to show how, in the end, the human mind loses its grip on the meaning of ‘exists’; such a demonstration is therefore designed to show that within creation itself, within our deepest human experience of the world, that mystery of unknowable existence is somehow always present within the world simply in its character of being created.

Hence, I should warn any Christian readers who might persevere to the end of this essay in the hope of finding it there, that they will be disappointed to discover nothing in my case for rational proof of God which derives from some easily dismissed ‘Enlightenment’ pretentiousness of reason, as if harbouring aggressive designs upon territory to which it has no right against the claims of faith. Neither will they find any defence of a unitarian ‘God of reason’ set in some terms of contrast and contest with a trinitarian ‘God of faith’. Nor yet will they find in this essay, any more than they fairly could in *The Darkness of God*, that exaggerated ‘apophaticism’ which can barely distinguish itself from a sophisticated form of atheism. They will find that I do say – following Thomas – that ‘we do not know what God is’. But they will not find me saying, any more than Thomas says, that we can know no truths about God, or that we have no way of removing falsehoods. They will not find me demoting faith from its priority over reason. But they will find me resisting such claims made for faith as would in turn deny reason its right to enter on its own terms into that mystery of creation which shows it to have been made, and so in a sense to be given – thus, also in a certain primitive sense, to be a grace, and a gift of love.

And they will find these things to be said and not said to a wider, and only partially stated, end, within which the narrower focus of the strict argument of this essay serves in but a limited degree. We are witness in our times and culture, particularly within the English context, to a failure of intellectual nerve. I refer to an intellectual timidity and not moral, or rather, I refer to that form of moral timidity which is primarily intellectual

in character. But I refer to ‘intellect’ here in a rather special sense, which will be familiar to those who are students of the great patristic and medieval theological traditions but has otherwise been very nearly completely lost within our own. For us today, the word ‘intellect’ has become so narrowed in meaning – reduced to a capacity for those attenuated forms of ratiocination whose paradigms are those of mathematical argument, or else of empirical justification – that we are scarcely able to read about intellect or reason in our own earlier traditions of theology without grossly misreading them. My colleague Dr Anna Williams is in the course of completing what I know will be a major and influential study – much needed – of those broader and deeper conceptions of ‘intellect’ and of ‘reason’ which are to be found in the Greek and Latin theological traditions of East and West, and I offer but a few preliminary reflections on the same. But this much can safely be said, that, for Thomas, as for the long tradition which he inherits, you begin to occupy the place of intellect when reason asks the sorts of question the answers to which you know are beyond the power of reason to comprehend. They are questions, therefore, which have a double character: for they arise, as questions, out of our human experience of the world; but the answers, we know, must lie beyond our comprehension, and therefore beyond the experience out of which they arise. And that sense that reason, at the end of its tether, becomes an *intellectus*, and that just where it does, it meets with the God who is beyond its grasp, is, I argue, the structuring principle of the ‘five ways’ of the *Summa Theologiae*.

It is a depressing thought that much theology today serves in effect to reinforce ideologically the cultural pressures to deny a place to reason and intellect in that expanded ancient sense, and so to the asking of those questions which could not be answered, preferring, it would seem, to offer answers on grounds which, being merely the ‘choices’ of faith, can be rejected if one happens to choose otherwise. If faith is merely a matter of choice, then the most natural choice is to reject it as banal. There is something to be said, therefore, for attempting to remind Christians, if no one else, of an older conception of ‘intellect’, according to which faith can be genuinely present only within a mind compelled by its immanent energies to engage with the mysterious ‘givenness’ of creation, whether or not it does so in the manner of academic theology – which, as Thomas sensibly comments, hardly anyone will be able, or need, to do. This is not to say, of course, that there is within our human power some immanent demand for faith, as if reason could know in advance what is needed to supplement it. But it is to say that a faith is impoverished and denatured which is so understood as to entail resistance to, or denial of, the natural dynamism of intellect, of which it is in some way the perfection. It is in

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the nature of faith that it is *quaerens intellectum*; but an *intellectus* which is not allowed to press its own *quaestio* to that limit which is in fact the unlimited mystery of creation can be partner only to an impoverished and much diminished faith. And that is why the first Vatican Council declares it to be a matter of *faith* that reason can know God. And I think Thomas agrees.

Acknowledgements

My first, and principal, debt of gratitude is to my wife, Marie, who not only has helped me with advice about some details of the text of this work, but has throughout the long and painfully slow process of its composition selflessly provided me with the kind of support and encouragement without which that process could not have been easily endured. Nor can I imagine ever having completed this book without her having created the sort of personal and domestic circumstances in which alone academic writers can work. Hidden as such support is, none but its recipient can fully appreciate the magnitude of the debt owed.

Other kinds of indebtedness are with similar infrequency acknowledged. All academics know how very great theirs is in the production of a monograph such as this to the daily converse they have enjoyed with colleagues and students. It is normally somewhat more difficult to identify precisely where within those conversations one's own voice is to be distinguished from those of such partners in intellectual enquiry. But in the case of this present work I have been able to identify explicitly the contributions of several scholar colleagues, both senior and junior members of my Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge and elsewhere, who have offered comments on earlier drafts which in some cases caused me to adopt significantly different argument strategies than those I had at first envisaged, and in all cases required of me some important response. I have, in consequence, been able to incorporate some of these comments into the text itself and to acknowledge their authorship *in situ*, so that in places within the text it has become as palpable as it is invariably true that the final result is the outcome of long-running and many-sided conversations between academics and friends.

If, first, I acknowledge my indebtedness to my colleague Dr Catherine Pickstock, this is because I feel myself singularly privileged to have worked alongside her since I came to Cambridge some four years ago, and to find myself almost continually in a quandary as to whether, and if so how far, we disagree as to many of the issues canvassed in this book – and just as much as to the issues canvassed in her own many writings. For

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I have found that quandary to be altogether a matter of creative stimulus. I have had a similar experience in a more recent teaching collaboration with my colleague Dr Anna Williams, and with both colleagues the one thing of which I am certain is that if we do disagree with one another, it is on intellectual ground occupied in common by all three of us in different ways, for, as the reader will find me often asseverating in this book, *eadem est scientia oppositorum*, or, roughly, worthwhile disagreements are on common terms of dispute. It has been a pleasure and a privilege both to occupy that common ground and to dispute with them.

That said, it is to a cohort of outstanding PhD students at Cambridge that much of the eventual shape of this book can be attributed. Susannah Ticciati had much to do with how I constructed the argument in relation to a 'Barthian' perspective in chapter 1, indeed an almost endless series of emails between us contributed so much to this chapter that in the end I found myself engaging almost more with her views than I do with Barth's own. In that same first chapter, the intervention of Dr Karen Kilby, my former colleague at the University of Birmingham, now of the University of Nottingham, prevented my making at least two foolish errors of interpretation. Fr Christopher Hilton offered a number of helpful and clarifying comments on my exposition of Bonaventure in chapter 3. Without my acquaintance with Férdia Stone-Davis's research on theology and music I should not even have thought of writing as I have, however naively I may have responded to her views, about music in chapter 6, nor, without Vittorio Montemaggi's work on Dante, poetry and theology, should I have understood the importance and relevance to my case of the 'rhetorical' dimension of human rationality discussed in chapter 5 – though here the earlier influence of a former PhD student in the University of Birmingham, Dr Rebecca Stephens, was also of decisive importance to me. It was Rebecca's work on Marguerite Porete which caused me to understand what Eckhart's vernacular sermons 'do' by means of their 'saying'. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, formerly of the Cambridge Divinity Faculty, now a PhD student in Columbia University, offered invaluable assistance with an extensive revision of chapter 8, and Hannah Pauly, then a final-year undergraduate in Cambridge, contributed an important point of clarification in the interpretation of Nietzsche. With Kevin Loughton I engaged in a long-running debate, by no means yet concluded, concerning the argument of chapter 10: his persistence in pressing me to be clear has left us still in disagreement, but little in an academic career can equal the pleasures of such constructive discussions and debates as I have enjoyed with Kevin, as with Susannah, Karen, Chris, Férdia,

Vittorio, Rebecca, Mary-Jane and Hannah over the time of this book's gestation.

It goes without saying that none of these scholar friends and colleagues may be held responsible for the use I have made of their contributions. Even as I thank them they will observe how often I have stubbornly persisted in views with which I know they disagree. Moreover, since some of their contributions, as I have incorporated them into the text, had their origin in comments made *ad hominem* on earlier drafts – and often orally or in the transitory medium of electronic mail – they should not necessarily or always be taken to be the final, formed opinions of their authors, even where they are attributed to them by name. I stand by what I have said, but I cannot in the same way expect them to be held to comments made on my text out of views of their own which were and are, obviously, still in the process of formation.

Finally, the person with whom I have most intimately engaged in the conversations out of which this book has emerged, and my longest-standing academic friend and conversation-partner, has been Professor Oliver Davies, of King's College, London. My intellectual and theological debts to Oliver over several decades are more pervasive than apparent, but are in any case profound.

It is, therefore, to this group of friends, and many others not mentioned by name, who have in various ways helped to make this work at least a good deal better than it would otherwise have been, that I dedicate this book, as an expression of my gratitude for the truly exhilarating experience of having worked with them.