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# Michael J. Dodds, "The One Creator God in Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology."

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**Michael J. Dodds.** *The One Creator God in Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology.* Catholic University of America Press 2020. 229 pp. \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780813232874).

One of the trademarks of St. Thomas Aquinas's philosophy is that God's existence can be known with certainty apart from the influence of authoritative, divine revelation. Aquinas also maintained that the Christian revelation does not stretch the shape of reason in a direction that is unnatural to it. To be precise, revelatory truth claims elevate and strengthen what normally functioning individuals naturally desire to know about God. This longstanding belief among Thomists reached something of a high point at the First Vatican Council on April 24, 1870 when the Catholic bishops declared that God's existence can be known through the natural light of human reason. Correlatively, the Council's declaration on the existence and attributes of God was not chosen incidentally, but was defined deliberately for the purposes of safeguarding the faithful. Thus, the denial of Thomistic theism inevitably departs from the plain teaching of the Magisterium.

Many Thomist philosophers defended the Council's teaching well into the middle of the twentieth century. But almost immediately after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Catholic thinkers began to neglect Thomistic philosophy, and, in some cases, argued that it was irrelevant or even problematic for the mysteries of faith. Pope John Paul II sought to remedy the gradual decline of Catholic philosophy in his well-received encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio* (1998). By the start of the new millennium, many commentators began to speak of a fourth revival of Thomism.

The Dominican theologian Michael Dodds has added considerably to this revival by establishing Thomism as a defensible philosophy in the contemporary milieu. In particular, his new book will serve as an introductory level text that begins with an exposition of Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God and how they are related to the physical sciences. For Dodds, science can be used to illustrate the underlying metaphysical schema of the proofs, but they are not scientific arguments *per se*: 'We have a better chance of understanding the argument [the First Way] if we begin not with wheels and levers but with potency and act, which characterize motion and change in a more general sense. To do so, we must move beyond the realm of empirical science to the philosophy of nature' (33). Dodds is exemplary in making complicated ideas accessible for intelligent laypersons who are interested in the foundations of Christianity.

Not content merely to delineate a distinction between classical and modern conceptions of God, Dodds spends a considerable amount of time discussing how Aquinas argued for the divine attributes. Many of the chapters on the attributes show the beauty of Aquinas's distinguished philosophical vision in the face of modern conceptions of God. We should keep in mind that the rise of modern theism was not a trivial matter. To be sure, it was precisely this outlook that unwittingly helped to foster the possibility of atheism. After introducing the reader to the life of Aquinas and his five proofs, Dodds explains how we can know and name God. He also includes several chapters on omniscience, divine will, love, justice, compassion, providence, and omnipotence.

A major highlight of the book demonstrates how Aquinas struck a fine balance in affirming both the knowability of God's existence and the unknowability of the divine essence. As Dodds reminds us, we can know *that* God exists, but we cannot know *what* he is (only what he is *not*). Aquinas's theology is therefore 'a sustained defense of that unfathomable mystery. Yet his theology does not entirely consist of *not* statements. Our words can truly 'signify the divine substance ... Aquinas's remarkable achievement is to have developed a most comprehensive theology, while never pretending to comprehend the God about whom he speaks' (8).

The implications of Aquinas's proofs are seen throughout the book, contrasting greatly with modern depictions of God and his attributes. Dodds affirms that '[c]ontemporary theology often makes the mistake of viewing God's transcendence and immanence as a zero-sum game: the more God is said to be transcendent, the less he can be called immanent, and vice versa. Rightly understood, however, God's utter immanence in creation can be affirmed precisely because of God's absolute transcendence' (69). Thomistic theism is situated in between the extremes of pantheism and panentheism on the one hand, and deism (i.e., modern theism) on the other.

Proceeding to several chapters on the divine attributes, Dodds notes that immutability has come under fire in many contemporary debates. But proponents of divine mutability often mischaracterize the attribute of immutability. The latter 'is often presented as deistic, distant, and indifferent to creation.' By contrast, Aquinas 'sees no contradiction between God's loving intimacy in creation. In fact, the immutable God is often found to be more truly loving than a changeable God' (72). We should ascribe immutability to the First Cause because its essence *is* to exist. Essence, it may be added, correlates with the notion of potentiality. Unlike created realities, the First Cause does not have the potential for anything, including the ability to change.

Since the First Cause is similar to and dissimilar from created, limited realities, we are not left with complete agnosticism about the divine nature. Rather, we can make meaningful statements about God's essence. Dodds states, 'Aquinas has listed three ways we know God: causality, negation, and eminence. Beginning with creatures, we come to know God as "the cause of them all" (the way of causality), and that "creatures differ from him" (the way of negation), and that he "superexceeds them all" (the way of eminence)... Since we cannot know what God *is*, Aquinas will be concerned here not so much with what God is, but with what we can *say* about him' (83, 84). Thus, true statements about the divine nature are philosophically cogent and coherent.

But what about the allegation that the God of classical theism is 'deistic, distant, and indifferent to creation?' In the chapter on 'divine love, and compassion,' Dodds provides another insightful explication and defense of Aquinas's philosophy. Since there is will in God (110-117), one might posit love within the Cause as well: 'To the extent that love and other passions, such as anger, and sorrow, imply imperfection or limitation in us, they are not attributed to God or are applied only metaphorically. To the extent that passions such as "love and joy and delight" imply no perfection, however, they are attributed properly to God in an eminent way' (119).

Some contemporary theologians have argued that divine omnibenevolence should coincide with 'a suffering God,' but Aquinas and his followers depart from this viewpoint. Instead, the divine will is the act by which God loves himself and all created realities. 'A suffering God,' says Dodds, 'can never be devoid of self-interest since he must always be concerned in some way with the relief of *his own* suffering. This is quite different from the agapeic love of the impassible God.... The concern of the impassible God is not for himself but for the creature' (123). It might be added that a God who suffers will necessarily have to undergo change to feel the pain of human beings. But, as we have already seen, in Aquinas's view, there is no room for divine mutability, let alone for a God who is not intimately present to creation at all times. 'In this, the compassion of the impassible God manifests greater intimacy than the suffering of the passible God. A suffering God must always be in some sense removed from his people as he "reacts" to their distress with *his own* divine suffering that is distinct from *theirs*. In contrast, the impassible God is simply one with his people in *their* suffering' (124).

Perhaps the best feature of Dodds' book is the succinct and pertinent remarks he makes about Aquinas's philosophy of God in the light of the more fashionable viewpoints among academic theologians and philosophers of religion who teach and write about the nature of the divine. It is easy to

come away from this volume with the strong impression that Dodds has spent a considerable amount of time navigating these waters and investigating how Aquinas remains a viable philosophical theologian in the postconciliar period. I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in Aquinas's theology of God, especially as it relates to the divine nature and how the Common Doctor still has the resources to remain within the ranks of contemporary theologians.

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