

Faith, Reason and the Existence of God

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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

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

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.

1 Clarifications and issues

Faith and proof: Vatican I

Within theological circles in our times there can scarcely be a proposition less likely to meet with approval than that which, on 24 April 1870, the first Vatican Council decreed to be a matter of faith, to be upheld by all Christians, namely:

that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: *ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things which have been made* [Rm 1, 20]. It was, however, pleasing to his wisdom and goodness to reveal himself and the eternal laws of his will to the human race by another, and that a supernatural, way. This is how the Apostle puts it: *In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son* [Heb 1, 1–2].¹

Hence,

The perpetual agreement of the catholic church has maintained and maintains this too: that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards its source, but also as regards its object. With regard to the source, we know at the one level by natural reason, at the other level by divine faith. With regard to the object, besides those things to which natural reason can attain, there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, are incapable of being known. (Ibid., p. 808)

Nonetheless,

Since human beings are totally dependent on God as their creator and lord, and created reason is completely subject to uncreated truth, we are obliged to yield to God the revealer full submission of intellect and will by faith. This faith, which is the beginning of human salvation, the catholic church professes to be a supernatural virtue . . . (Ibid., p. 807)

¹ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, in Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils II, Trent to Vatican II*, London: Sheed & Ward, p. 806.

Moreover,

Even though faith is above reason, there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, since it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason. God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever be in opposition to truth . . . Therefore, we define that every assertion contrary to the truth of enlightened faith is totally false. (Ibid., pp. 808–9)

On the strength of these considerations, therefore, the first Vatican Council issued the following canons:

2.1 If anyone says that the one, true God, our creator and lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason: let him be anathema. (Ibid., p. 810)

And,

3.2 If anyone says that divine faith is not to be distinguished from natural knowledge about God and moral matters, and consequently that for divine faith it is not required that revealed truth should be believed because of the authority of God who reveals it: let him be anathema. (Ibid., p. 810)

Faith and proof: clarifications

Since the purpose of this essay is to provide a theological and philosophical defence of these propositions of the Vatican Council, some preliminary comments by way of clarification seem appropriate. We should first note that these statements are decrees of a council of a Christian church taking responsibility for its own proper concerns, which are with the accurate statement of the nature of Christian faith and belief. As such none of them, not even canon 2.1 above – which is *about* what the natural light of reason can know of God – are intended to be philosophical statements, whose truth is proposed as known by ‘the natural light of reason’. That canon is intended as a statement of faith, concerning what a true understanding of faith entails about the capacity of human reason to know God, namely that it *is* possible for human reason to know God and that the God of faith is one and the same God as the God who can be known by reason. But as such, it is not, as it were, some pretentious, cross-disciplinary claim to a merely arbitrary epistemic hegemony of faith as if, say, equivalently, a microbiologist were on grounds of some need of microbiological theory absurdly to require the mathematician to come up with a particular mathematical result regardless of whether it could be defended on mathematical grounds. For, as we shall see (though only towards the end of this essay), if, on grounds of faith, it seems necessary

to conclude that the existence of God is rationally demonstrable, then it must also be the case that that demonstrability of God's existence is knowable rationally – or, at the very least, it must be possible rationally to rebut counter-claims. For, as the Vatican Council says, even though faith is 'above reason', there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, for God has created both, and 'God cannot deny himself'. Faith cannot invent rational truths for itself of which reason could not know on its own terms.

However, the proposition that faith can know of a purely rational possibility might, at first blush, seem to contain a logical oddity if one notes further that the council offers no support for any particular way of knowing the existence of God by the light of reason, except to say that it can be known thus 'with certainty from the things that have been made'. And since I take the expression 'known with certainty' to mean that the existence of God can be formally and validly proved by rational argument, the logical oddity would seem to be that of declaring *a priori* that a proposition is rationally demonstrable in the absence of any commitment to how and by what means that proposition might be demonstrated. But it is not clear that there is any real logical oddity there, since, as mathematicians say is the case, there are mathematical procedures for proving the provability of a theorem which are not themselves proofs of the theorem; and, in another sort of case, there is no problem knowing that whether there is or is not a cat on the mat is an issue which can be settled empirically even if you have no idea where the cat or the mat actually is or of how to find either of them. That the council knows of the provability of the existence of God by faith without commitment to any particular proof is not, on that same account at least, logically incoherent.

Conversely, the council's claim for a hegemony of faith in respect of reason's capacity is not merely a matter, as it were, of faith's external relations with an alternative source of knowledge of God. Lying within the claim for an autonomous rational theological capacity is a concern with the necessary condition of faith's own self-articulation through the exercise of reason *within* faith, that is to say, with what reason must be capable of in its own terms if it is to serve its purpose within faith's self-exploration as *quaerens intellectum*. The council's decree is as if to say: if human reason is to serve faith, and so theology, within that strategy of 'seeking understanding', then it must be equipped so to do. And the view of Vatican I seems to be that that capacity of reason must be such that the certain knowledge of God from creatures lies within its own reach strictly as reason. Hence, it is not so much that having to hand some rational proof of the existence of God is required by faith, still less that faith can dictate which arguments validly prove it. The council's decree is negative:

to deny reason that capacity in principle is so to attenuate its scope as to limit excessively its service to faith.

But even as thus moderately interpreted (and nowhere in this essay do I defend a stronger interpretation than that), the Vatican Council's doctrinal decree would seem to stand in more than one form of conflict with most philosophical and theological opinion of recent times. To consider just three such opinions, it stands in conflict in one way with the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in another with the Protestant theology of Karl Barth, and in yet a third way with certain schools of thought within Roman Catholic theology in the twentieth century.

The 'Kantian' objection

As to Kant, the Vatican decree that the demonstrability of the existence of God by reason alone must be conceded on grounds of faith is *prima facie* exactly to reverse the priorities argued for in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that it is on grounds of faith that such rational demonstrability must be denied. But the conflict is more complex and less direct than any such simple opposition of terms might suggest, if only because Kant argues at length and on purely philosophical grounds not only that all actual arguments for the existence of God fail of validity,² but also that all possible arguments of speculative reason for the existence of God must in principle so fail.³ Moreover, when Kant says that he has 'found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for faith',⁴ what he means by 'faith' is not the faith the council refers to, Christian faith as such, the divine gift of participation in God's own self-knowledge, but rather a rational moral faith, what he calls a 'postulate of practical reason'. In fact, what is at stake for Kant is the fundamental principle of his 'critical' philosophy, for which all forms of transcendent rational speculation must be denied in so far as to do so is required for the possibility of morality's proper freedom and rationality.

In summary, Kant's argument rests on the proposition that moral agents are free agents. But we cannot know, Kant argues, that we are free agents on the strength of any experience of freedom, for as natural beings our knowledge is limited by the constraints of 'experience' to appearances, and within the limits of appearance our actions are entirely subject to the necessities of causal law. Hence, within the limits of human experience freedom is excluded. Nonetheless, if we cannot 'experience'

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B599–642, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan, 1965, pp. 487–514.

³ *Ibid.*, B659–70, pp. 525–531. ⁴ *Ibid.*, Bxxx, Preface to 2nd edn, p. 29.

freedom, or establish it on the strength of any inference directly from sensory experience, we can ‘think’ – postulate – it, because we know that were we not free, then moral obligation would be impossible: for ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. But moral obligation is possible, for the experience of it is a fact. Therefore, we are compelled to ‘think’ freedom as the condition of the possibility of moral experience, even if it can in no sense be an object of that, or any other, direct experience, for, as Kant says, ‘we do not understand [freedom]; but we know it as the condition of the moral law which we do know’.⁵

If in one way freedom is thus a ‘postulate of practical reason’, so in another way are God and personal immortality. For practical reason can be sure of its hold on our minds and wills as categorical moral obligation only on condition that a moral order as such can be guaranteed. And that there is a moral order requires that virtue in its connection with human happiness is secured untroubled by the arbitrary vicissitudes of our secular condition (in which, *de facto*, they are frequently sundered). But an essential, and not merely contingent, connection between virtue and happiness can be guaranteed only by God and only if we survive beyond the arbitrary circumstances of our *pre-mortem* existence.⁶ However, none of these three, God, freedom or immortality, is given to us in any possible experience. All are postulates of practical reason and are in that sense ‘faith’ (*Glaube*) in that they are known not by any demonstrations of speculative reason from the world of appearance – ‘nature’ – but only as the conditions of the possibility of morality.

Moreover, it is not just that, as ‘postulates’, they *are not* ‘given in experience’. In that morality is possible, they *could not be* knowable within the limits of experience; and therefore the possibility of a demonstration of the existence of God *must be* ruled out for speculative reason in the name of practical reason. For if it were possible speculatively to demonstrate God’s existence, or our freedom and immortality, ‘from the consideration of created things’ (as Vatican I puts it), then that freedom on which the possibility of morality depends would be cancelled thereby. For if causality *in* the world of appearances could be demonstrated to apply transcendently *of* the world – and that is what such a demonstration of God’s existence would have to show – then, just as natural causality within

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and introd. Lewis W. Beck, New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956, Preface, p. 4.

⁶ Kant is, of course, quite clear that happiness cannot be a proper *motive* of virtue, or of moral obligation generally. The connectedness of virtue with happiness must, however, be secured if moral obligation is to be construed as properly rational, that is to say, as having the character of an *order*. On all this see *Critique of Practical Reason*, II.II.v., pp. 128–36.

the world of ‘appearances’ rules out freedom as an object of experience, so a causality supposed to have application in the transcendent realm beyond appearances would have to rule out freedom there too, and with it the possibility of morality. In order, therefore, to make room for ‘faith’, that is for human freedom, immortality and God, and so for morality, the pretentious claim of speculative reason to a transcendent reach has to be denied it. And so Kant tells us that ‘all attempts to employ reason in any merely speculative manner are altogether fruitless and by their very nature null and void, and . . . the principles of its employment in the study of nature do not lead to any theology whatever. Consequently, the only theology of reason which is possible is that which is based on moral laws’.⁷ Hence, the teaching of the Vatican Council that Christian faith entails the possibility of speculative rational proof of God stands in more or less straightforward conflict with Kant’s view that moral faith, if not Christian faith as such, excludes just that possibility. At any rate, what the Vatican Council affirms is just that which Kant denies.

The ‘Barthian’ objection

One different kind of ground for contesting the propositions of the Vatican Council – I shall characterise it in terms which are broadly ‘Barthian’ – is distinguishable from Kant’s in that on this account an authentically Christian faith rules out the standpoint of natural theology as rivalling Christian faith as if with an alternative ‘standpoint of unbelief’, as Alvin Plantinga puts it.⁸ On this account of Barth’s position, natural theology is a form of betrayal of the divine purposes of creation, for it would seem that, for a natural theology (these are Plantinga’s words again), ‘belief in God is rationally acceptable only if it is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of reason’, from which it would seem to follow that a natural theologian’s ‘ultimate commitment is to the deliverances of reason rather than to God’.⁹ This is, perhaps, rather to overstate the case, and the ‘Barthian’ point can be more sensitively put¹⁰ as consisting less in a hostility to rational proof on the sort of general epistemological grounds on which Kant opposed it than in a subtler and more complex objection

⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B664, p. 528.

⁸ This is the reading of Barth’s position as expounded by Alvin Plantinga in his ‘Reason and Belief in God’, in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁰ I am much obliged to Susannah Ticciati, PhD student in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, and to Dr Karen Kilby of the Department of Theology at the University of Nottingham, for advice which saved me from some egregious errors of interpretation in this chapter.

to the ‘standpoint’ occupied subjectively by the would-be natural theologian. What seems most to trouble Barth about the project of ‘natural theology’ in principle is the sort of theological mentality, the intellectual and moral disposition, which motivates it, attaching value to it as to some sort of theological starting point preliminary to, and so ‘outside’, faith. And it might just about be fair to say that, for Barth, such a mentality amounts in effect to a ‘standpoint of unbelief’ because the standpoint of faith – understood as the *act* of faith itself in response to our gratuitous *election* – is such as completely to relativise any purely ‘natural’ standpoint, or standpoint of creation. A ‘natural standpoint’ can have no true purchase on God precisely in so far as any epistemologically autonomous claims are made for it. For the Christian knows that there *is* nothing ‘on the outside’ of election, and so neither ‘outside’ of Christ, not even creation itself. As Barth himself says, ‘it is impossible to separate the knowledge of God the Creator and of his work from the knowledge of God’s dealings with *man*. Only when we keep before us what the triune God has done for us men in Jesus Christ can we realise what is involved in God the Creator and His work.’¹¹ Nor has there ever been a condition of ‘pure creation’, as if to say: there was, chronologically first, the *ex nihilo* of creation, and then, afterwards, the *ex nihilo* of election. On the contrary, for Karl Barth, the creation of the world *ex nihilo* is already and always has been itself within our election *ex nihilo* for, as Susannah Ticciati puts it, ‘election is God’s gratuitous decision to create in the first place: a decision made in (and also by and for) Jesus Christ. Christ is thus the “space” in which creation comes into being, and exists.’¹² The *ex nihilo* gratuitousness of creation is properly understood only as occurring within and for the gratuitousness of election in Christ.

It follows from this that any attempt to occupy a ‘standpoint of creation’ *independently* of our election in Jesus Christ will succeed only at the unacceptably high cost of rupturing the nexus between election and creation, thus to set them in *opposition* to each other, the outcome being inevitable: ‘always, when man has tried to read the truth from sun, moon and stars or from himself, the result has been an idol’.¹³ Since creation *ex nihilo* is, on Barth’s account, *already* our election in Christ, a standpoint of ‘pure’ creation such as appears to be presupposed to the project of natural theology is a standpoint which amounts to the *rejection* of Christ, in whom creation and election are one. In short, the standpoint for which creation is, as Barth puts it, ‘a vestibule in which natural theology might

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson, London: SCM Press, 1949, p. 43.

¹² In a written comment on an earlier draft of this chapter.

¹³ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 43.

find a place'¹⁴ is a symptom of that dislocation and disruption of creation and of our epistemic relation with it which is sin, the improper desire and design of a human reaching out to God by some route other than that which God himself has given us. The natural theologian's distinction between creation and election therefore inevitably becomes a disjunction.

Within that 'fallen' perspective, then, a natural theology appears possible, but only so as to reconfigure the relationship of radical dependence of creature on Creator, and so of the radical asymmetry between them which is implied by the *ex nihilo* of election, misrepresenting it as one of reciprocity and symmetry between the creaturely knowing subject and God as object known. That standpoint of creation, in so far as it is construed as accessible to rational powers alone, would therefore appear, on this 'Barthian' view, to tie God and creation into a relationship which, being governed by reason and bound by its logic, obliterates the freedom of both by obliterating the gratuitousness of their *ex nihilo*. Faith, by contrast, the response to election, is our re-entry into that creation which is at once 'new' and at the same time 'originary', a relationship which continually questions the 'natural' relationship of creature to Creator; it disrupts the seeming epistemic security of a fallen rationality and calls into question the stabilising reciprocities and symmetries between knowing subject and object known which a purely rational standpoint would seem to imply as obtaining between creature and Creator. And so it is our election, our 'new creation' by faith and grace, which is the true *creatio ex nihilo*, relativising every natural standpoint, for our election is given by God in absolute freedom, and is embraced in the absolute freedom of faith by the believer.

Susannah Ticciati therefore puts the case against 'natural theology' succinctly and somewhat more subtly than does Plantinga. She writes,¹⁵ in Barthian spirit, that

election is to be understood as more fundamental than creation. This gives rise to a historical ontology in which there is no point of stability other than God's faithful activity of questioning, which calls everything else into question. A rational proof of the existence of God would be such a stable point outside this activity of God. But in so far as God brings the questioning and reasoning self itself into question, such a 'proof', being a function of the rationality of this self, is also called into question and uprooted. It is possible [consistently with this] to concede that the human's purpose exists in asking questions about that which lies beyond human comprehension, but such questioning results in a historical transformation in which the human being probes deeper and deeper into God and self [and] there is nothing outside this historical transformation that assures the existence of God at the end of the questioning . . . Only God's faithful interrogation can constitute this assurance and continuity. All else is continually uprooted in its being transformed.

¹⁴ Ibid. ¹⁵ In a written comment on an earlier draft of this chapter.

It is not, therefore, Karl Barth himself who sees the natural standpoint of creation and that of election as polarised. Rather, it is Barth's view that creation and election *become* polarised within any theological project which allows for an independent natural theology. Consequently, the position of Vatican I does on this account stand condemned – in principle – in so far as it allows room for the possibility of a purely rational and certain knowledge of God. I shall examine in the next chapter one, neo-Barthian, revival of an aspect of this critique of natural theology, that of Colin Gunton, who supposes that any 'natural' doctrine of creation, such as is found (as both he and I believe) in Thomas Aquinas, must work against the freedom of God to create and the freedom of the creature's response. Such a reading of what is implied by Thomas's theology of creation cannot, I shall argue, be defended. In the meantime, however, some provisional comment is required on the general proposition that the standpoint of faith precludes the possibility of any standpoint of 'pure' creation 'external' to it, and so external to faith's historical specificity as the divine 'election' – as any such standpoint as that of a natural theology would seem to make claim to.

Powerfully as Ticciati's case is made, it seems to share with Barth's the likelihood of its being truer in what it affirms than in what it denies, for while the 'Barthian' and the Vatican Council are at one in affirming the epistemic authority of faith over reason, and the primacy of the historical events of salvation over the non-historical, timeless, standpoint of 'nature', all that would seem obviously to follow from that priority is the tautology that faith must exclude as false any standpoint which is defined or posited as 'natural' in some sense of 'natural' which *a priori* rivals faith as a 'standpoint'. At any rate we should at least note – if at this stage of the argument we do no more than note it – that when Barth says that 'what God does as the Creator can in the Christian sense only be seen and understood as a reflection, as a shadowing forth of [the] inner relationship between God the Father and the Son',¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas agrees¹⁷ with the reservation that in thus far agreeing with Barth he appears to observe no inconsistency with saying also that the Creator God can be known by reason. For Thomas, Barth is right except for his 'only'. Indeed, otherwise than on the assumptions of a Kantian agnostic rational

¹⁶ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 43.

¹⁷ The 'Father has caused the creature through his Word, which is the Son; and through his Love, which is the Holy Spirit. On this account it is the processions of the Persons which are the source-principles of the production of creatures in so far as they include the essential attributes of knowledge and will.' – 'Et Deus Pater operatus est creaturam per suum Verbum, quod est Filius; et per suum Amorem, qui est Spiritus Sanctus. Et secundum hoc processiones Personarum sunt rationes productionis creaturarum, in quantum includant essentialia attributa, quae sunt scientia et voluntas.' *ST* 1a q45 a6 corp.

epistemology – ever present in the background to Barth’s theology – there seem to be no *a priori* grounds for supposing that a standpoint of faith must be so understood as to rule out a natural standpoint *however* defined. For that would amount to the proposition that there can be no theological standpoint ‘external’ to Christian faith *simpliciter*, however consistent with faith that standpoint may be construed to be – it would be the externality to faith as such which would be excluded, or ‘abrogated’. And such an account of faith would seem to be prescriptive in a manner too *a priori*, since it would rule out in advance and simply by *fiat* what might upon investigation turn out to be a real possibility, namely that reason possesses some theological potential in its own right. It is not clear why, as against that possibility, a dichotomy between ‘history’, even ‘salvation history’, and the timelessness of ‘ahistorical reason’ should be so polarised *a priori* as it appears to be in Barth.

Secondly, ‘questioning’, even the divine ‘questioning’, can always yield more than one answer, and for sure there will be those strategies of theistic proof which are – and perhaps those strategies of theistic proof which are not – radically subverted by God’s interrogation of them through and in faith: and Barth is right that a philosophical form of idolatry is always a possibility. But it ought not to be supposed *a priori* that ‘reason’ cannot, by its own powers, ever achieve a truly radical *ex nihilo*, that it cannot itself challenge any merely rationalist ‘normalisation’ of the relation between creature and Creator. On the contrary, it is my case that Thomas’s proofs of God’s existence have precisely that character of challenge to any such ‘normalisation’: they too question any epistemic ‘symmetry’ between the knowing subject and the God known. As we shall see, the proofs prove a radically *unknowable* God, and so just as radically ‘question’ the cognitive subject as such: the apophaticism of the proofs already radically destabilises the epistemic subject; they throw down any form of idolatrous and pretentious rationalism. And by contrast with any *fiat* of faith which would rule out that apophatic possibility in advance, it seems that the Vatican Council’s decree insists only upon leaving it open, as a condition required by faith’s epistemic superiority to reason. The difference between Ticciati’s ‘Barthian’ case and that of the Vatican Council would therefore appear to be direct in this degree that, for the ‘Barthian’, a natural theology in principle and however defined would, whereas for the Vatican Council it would not, necessarily offer such a rival standpoint, the council leaving entirely open the question of how a natural standpoint not in conflict with faith might be construed.

The ‘open-ended’ character of the Vatican decrees seems therefore to have been intentionally self-limiting: those decrees are designed simply to exclude an exclusiveness of faith, disallowing any account of the

relation between a standpoint of natural theology and a standpoint of faith as being mutually exclusive, whether construed 'objectively' as alternative sources of truth about God, or 'subjectively' as regards the acts of response respectively of reason to creation and of faith to the divine election. They are not mutually exclusive 'objectively', for 'it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason. God cannot deny himself nor can truth ever be in opposition to truth.' Not 'subjectively', for the charge of 'unfaithfulness' would seem relevant only to a case made for a natural theology according to which faith needs it as supplying a cause, motive, or object of personal faith. And no such case is made by Vatican I.

And so some clarifications at least as to what the Vatican Council does not say or imply seem at this stage to be possible. To maintain that the existence of God is in principle rationally provable is not to hand over one's 'ultimate commitment to the deliverances of reason rather than to God' or to 'make reason a judge over Christ';¹⁸ nor is to say, as the Vatican Council says, that the possibility of rational knowledge of God is *entailed* by faith, to place faith's authority in thrall to a merely theoretical rational possibility; nor yet is it to place a rational condition upon the possibility of personal faith in Jesus Christ: none of these consequences follows from the Vatican Council's decrees if, as I hope to show,¹⁹ it is precisely on account of Christ that this confidence in reason is justified. In any case, nothing is said by the Vatican Council to suggest that the act of faith presupposes an *actual* proof of God; nor is anything affirmed about the credibility of what faith assents to being dependent upon anyone's actually knowing even the *possibility* of rational proof, for you can truly believe and not know that God can be known with certainty by reason: obviously nearly every Christian in fact does, and there is nothing inconsistent with the Vatican Council's decrees in that fact. What is claimed is only that the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who is so related to the world known by our rational natures that his existence is capable of being known from that world, as Paul says; that the mind which believes, the intellect to which the gift of faith is given, is a mind and intellect created with some capacity of its own to *recognise* what is given to it in that revelation, a capacity which could, at least theoretically, be expanded out into a formal proof of the existence of God. It may be that no actual valid proof is ever discovered; the Vatican Council does not imagine that faith would thereby be weakened for want of rational support. But *suppose*

¹⁸ As Plantinga describes Barth as concluding, see Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', p. 71.

¹⁹ See chapter 10 below.

the thing could be done: then on the Vatican's view neither is faith thereby threatened. Hence, there is something misguided in the account of faith for which even the attempt to prove, never mind successfully proving, the existence of God would entail faith's downfall as a personal act of complete trust in God. And by no means is this to say, as Plantinga's 'Barth' appears to think, that 'belief in God is [thereby deemed to be] rationally acceptable only if it is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of reason'.²⁰ No such proposition is maintained or implied by the decrees of the Vatican Council.

The objection of the 'nouvelle théologie'

A third sort of grounds for contesting the propositions of Vatican I – on my account of them – draws the issues closer in with the sources in Thomas Aquinas on which my defence of them partly relies, and causes me to anticipate here a distinction which, by the end of this essay, will turn out to be all-important. Put in its plainest form, my case is that there are reasons of faith for maintaining that the existence of God must be demonstrable by reason alone, and that by 'demonstrable' is meant that the existence of God is a true conclusion validly drawn by inference from premises known to be true about the world. Moreover, it is my belief that Thomas Aquinas maintains just this proposition about the relation between reason and faith. This first proposition, however, needs to be carefully distinguished from a second, which is that the existence of God is knowable with certainty by reason *but only* within and as presupposing the context of faith, and that it is only in such terms that Thomas's proofs of the existence of God are to be understood, for that, it is said, is how he views them.

It would be misleading to align with any one theological school all those who reject the first proposition in favour of the second, whether either is taken absolutely and in itself or as a reading of Thomas Aquinas' mind on the matter. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the influence in the first half of the twentieth century of the so-called 'nouvelle théologie' of revisionist Thomism, especially in the version of it promoted by the French Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac, has decisively shifted contemporary readings of Thomas in favour of the second proposition. As a result there is by now very largely a consensus among Catholic theologians in a series of general propositions which, if not exclusively to be attributed to de Lubac's influence, certainly characterise it. First, it is said²¹ – here

²⁰ Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', p. 71.

²¹ What follows is not meant as a formal paraphrase of de Lubac, but is rather a set of propositions which, under the powerful influence of de Lubac's thought, would seem

occupying some common ground with the ‘broadly Barthian’ position just described – that to suppose that reason can, by virtue of its own native powers, ‘know God with certainty’ is to suppose the existence of a pure abstraction – ‘reason alone’ – which has no historical actuality. For there is not, and never has been, any actual human condition of ‘pure nature’ in which ‘pure reason’ could operate. Nature, and so reason, has always historically been graced, and any proposition about ‘nature’ or ‘reason’ which neglects this fact of history’s *always* having lain under the divine providential and salvific action is bound to presuppose, or entail, an unacceptable dichotomy between creation and redemption, or between ‘secular’ and ‘salvation’ history, or, most likely, both. Thomas, it is said, made no such presupposition, and permitted no such entailment.

Consequently, whatever reason may attain to by way of knowledge of God – and on this account ‘reason’ can know God with certainty – it can attain only in so far as reason at least implicitly presupposes something that it cannot by its own powers know, even if, at the same time, it *needs* to know it. For secondly, there is in all human beings a natural desire for beatitude, for a happiness so complete that the desire for it could not be satisfied by the contemplation of any God which reason alone could know, but only by the vision of God of a directness and immediacy which reason is absolutely powerless to achieve and of which it cannot even know the possibility. Therefore, what human beings naturally desire cannot be satisfied by what human beings can naturally know. It follows from this, thirdly, that even that natural *desire* for God, which must be frustrated by the incompleteness of the contemplation of any naturally known God, cannot be known in its full character of frustration, except from the standpoint of faith. For it is only by faith that we can know of the possibility of that complete vision of God to which human reason fails to attain. Hence, the ‘noble genius’ of the pagan philosophers – of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and Proclus – who *did* know God by reason, and who, as Thomas says, could experience only a ‘great anguish’ of frustration at reason’s limitedness, did not know the true nature even of their anguish, for they did not, and could not, know that goal of human desire and knowledge by the standard of which theirs fell short. It follows from this, as Kerr puts it, that if the pagan philosophers did know God, nonetheless ‘Thomas clearly thinks that the proposition “God exists”, held as true by a non-Christian on the basis of theistic proofs, does not

to represent a minimum consensus among contemporary interpreters of Thomas, especially, but no longer exclusively, on the European continent. For de Lubac himself see *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques*, Paris: Aubier, 1946; 2nd edn, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991. This work has no English translation, but see his *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967.

mean the same as the proposition “God exists” held by a believer’. He adds by way of emphasis that the distinction here is not that between two ways, the pagan and the Christian, of knowing the same truth of God’s existence, meaning the same by it, but that ‘even the proposition [itself] “God exists” means something radically different when held on the basis of philosophy and “under the conditions that faith determines”’,²² thereby seeming to imply, if not exactly affirming, a conclusion not easy to distinguish from that of Karl Barth, namely that a ‘God of reason’ is a *false* God. As Barth says: ‘God is always the One who has made Himself known to man in His own revelation, and not the one man thinks out for himself and describes as God. There is a perfectly clear division there already, epistemologically, between the true God and the false gods.’²³ In short, on this account it is false to say what I propose to argue in this essay, that we know by faith that the existence of God is knowable by reason alone, for what can be known by reason – operating as no doubt it can, in purely philosophical mode – could not be one and the same God as he who is known by faith. Moreover, on this account, it is false to say that Thomas maintains any such proposition.

In clarification, therefore, of how I propose to conduct the argument of this essay, I should say, first, that I do not propose to contest with those who defend these propositions of the ‘nouvelle théologie’, step by step, text by text, over the exegesis of Thomas’s position – for such would require a very different sort of book from this, and in any case it has already been written by Fergus Kerr, albeit from a standpoint of Thomistic interpretation opposed to mine. I shall rather more simply make out the best case I can manage in support of my reading of Thomas. Moreover, I do not propose to respond directly to the challenge thrown down to my defence of the first, substantive, proposition by those of the ‘nouvelle théologie’ tendency who defend the second proposition, if only because, as in the case of Barthian neo-orthodoxies, it seems to me that they are broadly right in what they affirm, wrong only in what they deny. For in general I think it true that Thomas’s proofs of the existence of God, the ‘five ways’ of *Summa Theologiae* la q2 a3, are in fact arguments set out by a Christian theologian attending to Christian theological purposes, not by a theologian masquerading for some purpose or other as a pagan philosopher. I fully accept that the ‘five ways’ are therefore proposed as proofs within a context of faith and of Christian practice, and so of theological instruction, of personal and sacramental worship and of a prayer whose

²² See Thomas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.48; Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, p. 67.

²³ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 15.

consummation lies only in the supernatural vision of God in himself. But I deny that it follows from these undoubted truths about the context in which Thomas sets these ‘proofs’, that their character *as proofs* depends logically upon that context’s being presupposed to them; I deny, in short, that they could stand as proofs only in so far as they presuppose the truths of faith within which they are set. At any rate, it does not *follow* from the fact that, for Thomas, these proofs form part of a wider and explicitly theological argument-strategy, that they lack the formal features of a valid rational argument in their own right. Nor do I think that Thomas believes this conclusion to follow: indeed, I shall argue that he thinks it false.

The ‘formal’ and ‘material’ objects of faith and reason

As a first step in setting out how this argument will proceed, let us note a crucial ambiguity in Kerr’s conclusion from the propositions of the ‘nouvelle théologie’ that the ‘God exists’ of the philosopher’s reason ‘means something radically different’ from the ‘God exists’ affirmed by the Christian ‘under the conditions of faith’. This is partly, but only partly, true, and to see in what sense it is true and in what sense false, we can ask: why does the Vatican Council, in distinguishing what it calls ‘two orders of knowledge’, distinguish them not only in respect of their source – the one being the product of reason, the other of divine faith and revelation – but also in respect of their ‘object’? The question matters, for long before the ‘nouvelle théologie’ – at least since Pascal – there has been a quite generalised scepticism abroad whether, even supposing you could demonstrate a ‘God of reason’, that God of reason could be demonstrated to be the same God as the ‘God of faith’.²⁴ The answer to that question lies in the council’s implicit reliance upon an ancient scholastic distinction between the ‘material’ and the ‘formal’ objects of knowledge: we can be acquainted with the same material object by sight and by touch; but sight acquaints us with it in respect of its colour, touch in respect of its sensitivity to temperature; so what they acquaint us with is the same thing materially – I see what is warm, I feel what is red – but differing formally: it is not *as* warm that I see it, not *as* red that I feel it. Hence, the knowledge they yield is in either case determined by its formal object, the material object being the same for both.

²⁴ ‘Le Dieu des Chrestiens ne consiste pas en un Dieu simplement autheur des veritez géométriques et de l’ordre des éléments; c’est la part des Payens et des Epicuriens . . . Mais le Dieu de l’Abraham, le Dieu d’Isaac, le Dieu de Jacob, le Dieu des Chrestiens, est un Dieu d’amour et de consolation.’ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. H. F. Stewart, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950, pp. 6–8.

This is not a wholly implausible way of construing the relationship between the God of the philosophers and the God of faith – the same God can be known under different descriptions, as ‘warm’ and ‘red’ are, and within different relations of knowing, as touching and seeing stand in differing relations of immediacy to their objects. And in fact the analogy with the different formal objects of the senses has, within the history of the subject, been employed directly, especially in the late Middle Ages. Giles of Rome, who (rather unconvincingly) thought of himself as a disciple of Thomas Aquinas, explained that the God of the philosophers is known as it were ‘by sight’, and the God of the theologians by ‘touch’ and ‘taste’; for the philosophers know God ‘at a distance’ and intellectually across a gap crossed not by means of direct experience but by means of evidence and inference, and so through a medium, as sight sees; whereas, through grace and revelation, the theologian is in an immediate and direct experiential contact with God, as touch and taste are with their objects – touch and taste being analogies for the immediacy of love’s knowledge.²⁵ There is something to be said for this way of construing the relationship between the ‘God of the philosophers’ and the ‘God of faith’, for to do so is at least to acknowledge that the manner in which an object is perceived – the cognitive relation to it in which one stands – is determined by the descriptions under which it is perceived, while allowing that *what* is perceived in either case is one and the same object. As the philosophers say, the descriptions under which an object is perceived may be ‘intentionally’ distinct but ‘extensionally’ equivalent: the Morning Star is the same star as the Evening Star, though ‘Morning Star’ does not mean the same as ‘Evening Star’. So it is, on Giles’s analogy, with the natural and revealed knowledge of God.

Not every theologian, however, could have welcomed Giles’s polarisation of philosophical detachment – ‘seeing’ – in opposition to theological experientialism – ‘touching’ and ‘tasting’ – and Thomas Aquinas nowhere does, providing us with a probably more helpful, because less polarised, account of sameness and difference of ‘object’. What I see at a distance is a dark patch I can distinguish as a human being moving towards me. When it is close enough to me, I can see that it is Peter. When the object was at a distance what I saw *was* Peter, but it was not *as* Peter that I

²⁵ ‘If we wish to speak of the contemplative life in terms drawn from the senses, we could, in a manner of speaking . . . say that the contemplation of the philosophers gives delight to hearing and sight; whereas the spiritual contemplation of the theologians gives delight to taste, smell and touch.’ See my *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995, p. 364. I have translated this passage from Giles’s text, misattributed to Thomas Aquinas, in the Venice edition (1745) of Thomas’s *Opera Omnia* I.

saw him. Thus the God of reason in relation to the God of faith.²⁶ The God the philosopher knows *is* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of Jesus Christ; but the philosopher cannot, otherwise than by the reports of faith, know her God *as* the God of faith.²⁷ This is the meaning of that famous, and famously derided, formula which Thomas Aquinas appends at the end of each of his ‘five ways’: *et hoc omnes dicunt Deum*.²⁸ As Thomas concedes, the proofs of God prove very little indeed, but just enough: as ‘proofs’ they fall into that class of ‘demonstrations’ which merely show *that* something exists by way of explanation (*demonstratio quia*), from which, no doubt some properties are derivable which must hold true of whatever thus far explains. But they are not explanations of ‘effects’ by way of what we demonstrate about them from the nature of their cause (*demonstratio propter quid*)²⁹ because in any case (as we shall see³⁰) we do not and cannot know the nature of God, we do not know what God is. Haldane explains:³¹ we can know from the fact that the water pressure to my shower is lower than in the rest of the system that there is a blockage in the inflow pipe to my shower-head. But just because I do not thus far know that what is obstructing the water supply is a small piece of masonry, as the plumber later discovers, it does not follow that what I know as ‘blockage’ is not what the plumber discovers to be a small piece of masonry, even though ‘blockage’ and ‘small piece of masonry’ do not mean the same. In parallel it should not be supposed that, having demonstrated the existence of a ‘prime mover’ or of a ‘necessary being’, Thomas imagines that ‘all people’ know God under such descriptions, still less that they worship God under such descriptions, even less still that they could love God under such descriptions. For this reason it is undoubtedly true that, as Kerr says, the ‘God exists’ of the philosopher does not *mean the same as* the ‘God exists’ known under the conditions of faith. And of course, in affirming that the God of his ‘five ways’ is what all people call by that name, he is by no means affirming that they do mean the same. The Latin *et hoc omnes dicunt Deum* should be translated not as ‘this is how all people speak of God’ or even that ‘this is what all people *mean* when they speak of God’, for manifestly they do not, and Thomas knows this: it should rather be translated as ‘and this is the God all people speak of’. The descriptions of the philosopher and of the ordinary believer are, as I have put it, extensionally equivalent; but of course they do not mean the same thing. How, then, do we know that these ‘Gods’ are extensionally equivalent, are one and the

²⁶ *ST* Ia q2 al ad1. ²⁷ *ST* Ia q2 al ad 1. ²⁸ *ST* Ia q2 a3 *corp.*

²⁹ *ST* Ia q2 a2 *corp.* ³⁰ See pp. 40–3 below.

³¹ J. J. C. Smart and John J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 143.

same God? Only by faith: reason alone could not know that – it is the plumber, after all, not I, who knows that the blockage is a small piece of masonry.

Therefore, all the decrees of the first Vatican Council quoted above are statements of, or articulations of statements of, faith alone, for ‘human beings are totally dependent on God as their creator and lord, and created reason is completely subject to uncreated truth’. So much by way of initial clarification.

Issues

What, then, are the issues, and how will the argument proceed? As to the issues, two very broad questions are the subject of this essay: first, is a natural theology – the claim that the existence of the one true God can be known by human reason alone – possible? And this is a philosophical question. For even if the Vatican decrees are statements intended as articulations of faith, and are not proposed on philosophical grounds, nonetheless what they make a claim for is a rational, philosophical, possibility. That being so, it is a claim in principle vulnerable to philosophical counter-argument, namely to the demonstration that the existence of God could not in principle be proved, as many philosophers other than Kant have in fact argued. Moreover, if the possibility of proving the existence of God is said to be entailed by the nature of faith, as the Vatican Council says it is, then it would after all seem to follow as the ‘Barthians’ would have it that, in accordance with its account of faith, faith itself is logically, if not in fact, vulnerable to philosophical refutation, that is to say, it is refutable via its philosophically refutable entailment. And this much I concede to be true, that faith *is* logically vulnerable to philosophical, as also to empirical, refutation. For there are possibly true, if in fact false, states of affairs such that, if they were actually true, then Christian faith would be false: manifestly the claim to the existence of the historical person of Jesus is an empirical claim, and so it logically *could be* false, and if it were, then all Christian faith must fail. But note that even this does not place faith in thrall to the ‘deliverances of reason’ or of ‘history’, as the ‘Barthians’ would say, for the Vatican Council is emphatic: there cannot be any conflict between faith and reason, and such is the epistemic superiority of faith over reason that ‘every assertion contrary to the truth of enlightened faith is totally false’.

At this point, then, it is necessary to enter one further point of clarification. The Vatican Council declares that it is ‘contrary to faith’, and therefore false, to say that the existence of God cannot be known with certainty by reason. It follows, on this account, that philosophical

arguments, such as those of Kant, which purport to show the impossibility for speculative reason of the demonstrability of God, must fail on their own terms of philosophy. The case here seems to be in most ways epistemologically parallel to that of belief in the resurrection of Jesus. For if, in faith, you maintain that the body of Jesus, which was his in his *pre-mortem* natural life, is one and the same with that body of Jesus which is now raised by the Father to immortality, then your faith would appear to be in principle vulnerable to empirical refutation. And so indeed it is – in principle and as to its epistemic standing. For if, as is logically possible, the archaeological discovery were to be made of the bones of Jesus' natural body preserved somewhere in the deserts of Palestine, then it could not be true that that identical body was raised by the Father to immortality, and belief in the resurrection – in those terms – would turn out to be false and indefensible. And this, of course, is the reason why many theologians today, wishing to preserve the epistemic autonomy of faith, deny that the resurrection of Jesus requires belief in the numerical identity of Jesus' *pre-mortem* and raised bodies. For if that numerical identity obtained, then it would have to follow that the tomb in which Jesus was buried must have been empty on the third day after his death, and that, some say, would appear to make an object of faith out of a merely empirical fact. But such a ploy, fraught as it is with conceptual difficulties about personal identity,³² is not needed in the defence of faith's epistemic precedence over reason, for to maintain on grounds of faith that the tomb was empty is not to entail that its being empty or not ceases to be a matter of plain empirical fact; neither, conversely, is the empirical standing of the claim that it was empty such as to place faith in thrall to empirically factual refutation.

For if it is true that the dead body of Jesus is that identical body which was raised by the Father, then it is true that no such archaeological remains will be discovered, for they could not exist – and you will know that in faith. For any true proposition, just in so far as it is true (and however known to be true), rules out the possibility of there being any facts conclusively to falsify it. And this entailment holds even for empirical

³² Quite how such theologians propose to guarantee the continuing identity of the *pre-mortem* person Jesus with him who is raised, without appeal to some non-bodily, and so potentially 'dualist', criterion of personal identity (which they seem equally inclined to reject) is not often made clear. Could one also be permitted to note here that just because belief in the resurrection of Jesus is logically defeasible by evidence that the tomb was not empty, it does not follow that the resurrection of Jesus can be believed on the evidence that it was empty, or that resurrection faith is reduced to some empirical, quasi-historical, fact? 'If resurrection-belief is true, then the tomb was empty' is not reducible to 'Belief in the resurrection is belief that the tomb was empty', even on the condition that, were the tomb not empty, resurrection belief would be false.

truths. It is a common fallacy (having its origin in Plato) to infer from the *de dicto* necessity of the proposition, 'What is known is true', the *de re* conclusion, 'Only the necessarily true is known.' Just because if it is true that Jesus' body was raised from the dead then necessarily there are no bodily remains resting in Palestine, it does not follow that there being no remains of Jesus' dead body in Palestine is a necessary and not an empirical truth. As Thomas Aquinas says, so long as the proposition 'Socrates is sitting' is true, then necessarily Socrates is sitting. But it does not follow from this that Socrates' sitting is necessary, for 'Socrates is sitting' is plainly a contingent truth. He just has to stand up and walk away, and the proposition 'Socrates is sitting' becomes false.³³ In the same way, even if we know for certain that, Jesus having been raised from the dead, there cannot be such bodily remains awaiting archaeological discovery, it remains an empirical truth that there are none such and an empirical falsehood that there are such.

The case is thus far analogous to the relationship between faith and reason generally, on the Vatican Council's account. If, in faith, you maintain that the existence of God is rationally demonstrable, then it follows that there cannot be any philosophical arguments which succeed in demonstrating the impossibility of such a proof. Of course, the force of the 'cannot' here is such that the proposition 'Rational proof of God is impossible' is false; but it is not nonsense to think it true, the proposition being quite plainly intelligible. For which reason, it does not follow from the falsity of that proposition, that there are no philosophical arguments to be had with those philosophers who, contrary to what faith entails, maintain it. Hence, on the Vatican Council's account of the relationship between faith and rational proof, while it would seem worthwhile for apologetic reasons to show if you can that Kant is wrong philosophically, it will not matter from the point of view of your personal faith if Kant's philosophical arguments are too much for you and you are not intellectually up to pulling off a refutation. No more does it matter from the point of view of your personal faith if you cannot get a satisfactory rational demonstration of the existence of God off the ground, or even if no one ever does. But theologians ought to view it as a role of theirs, as far as they are able, to rebut any philosophical argument to the effect that a proof of the existence of God is a rational impossibility. Even then, though any such rebuttal will have to be philosophical in kind, from the fact that there is a genuine philosophical argument to be had about the possibility of proof of God it does not follow that faith is thereby placed in thrall to the debatable outcome of a rational argument. And much of the argument of this book

³³ ST 1a q14 a13 ad3.

is concerned with such philosophical rebuttals: for in this matter, the truth lies in whatever survives the *elenchus*, that is, in whatever survives the refutation of the counter-arguments.

Defending the rational possibility of proof of God against philosophical objections is therefore one main purpose of this essay; that purpose is connected intimately, however, with a second question: is the Vatican Council right about what Christian faith entails by way of rational proof? Is it perhaps true, after all, that the case for the possibility of a natural theology – even if it can be defended in philosophical argument – is inconsistent with what Christians claim for the God of faith? Are the ‘God of reason’ and the ‘God of faith’ the same God? The answer which is most common among Christian theologians today is that a correct understanding of faith excludes in principle the possibility that the God believed in by Christian faith can be known to exist without faith. For a theologically pretentious ‘reason’, it is said, is a reason which seeks to occupy the territory proper to faith’s knowledge of God with that to which it can attain from within its own resources; and such could offer nothing theologically but the displacement of the God of faith, truly revealed in Jesus Christ, by means of an idolatrously diminished godlet of reason’s own devising. A god known through creatures is, it seems to be thought, a god limited by the scale of creatures, for, it will be said, however extrapolated from creatures and projected upon an infinite object, such a god could be no more, logically, than an infinitely inflated creature. A god whom creatures can know *by* reason is a god all too knowable because all too creaturely, being inevitably contained *within the bounds* of reason: hence, a God known by reason is not the true God but an idolatrous displacement. Much of the argument of this essay is designed as a rebuttal of just that inference.

The argument

The decrees of the Vatican Council maintain, then, that we know by faith that it is possible to know God by human reason with certainty. In what follows I propose to defend this proposition in three distinct but interlocking stages, which relate, respectively, to ‘reason’, to ‘the knowledge of God’, and to ‘certainty’. First, then, I will consider on what account of ‘reason’ it can be said that rational knowledge of God can be had, here showing that in a certain general character human reason replicates, as it were ‘by anticipation’ and in an inchoate way, the ‘shape’ of faith itself, first because the shape of reason in its deployment in proof of God ‘anticipates’ that interactivity of ‘affirmative’ and ‘negative’, of the ‘cataphatic’ and ‘apophatic’ moments, which are inherent to the epistemic structure and dynamic of faith itself. Reason, in this respect, therefore has the same

'shape' as faith, for, at any rate according to Thomas, while we may and must speak of God, and while we can show by reason the necessity of doing so, we know that we do not know what God is, whether by reason or by faith. And showing this will occupy us in chapters 2 and 3.

As a second stage of argument in chapters 4, 5 and 6 I shall attempt to clarify more fully what Thomas means by 'reason'. I argue for a much expanded conception of what reason is by comparison with our contemporary conceptions of it, here showing that in its complex character on the one hand of being inherently self-transcendent, and on the other hand of being firmly rooted in our nature as animals, reason possesses, now by a more particular 'anticipation' of faith, the 'shape' of the sacramental, an openness of embodied existence to that which altogether lies beyond its grasp. And that will conclude the argument of Part One.

Part Two will, then, be concerned with the nature of the divine unknowability, for what reason could know about God is principally that if it is indeed God that it knows, then what it knows is unutterable mystery. But within the inevitable discussion of some medieval, as also of some recent, accounts of the apophatic – essentially the business of determining the nature of God's unknowability – the central problem for my argument begins to press with ever greater urgency. If the 'gulf' of unknowability must be fixed so unfathomably deep between the human mind and God as it must – on pain otherwise of an idolatrous theological reductivism – then how could reason in principle be said to bridge it by means of its own native resources of 'proof'? And the solution to that problem forms the agenda for Part Three.

Part Three, then, is concerned with the nature of that 'certainty' with which reason may be said to know God and so with the nature of 'proof' – for I take it that reason's characteristic certainty lies in proof in a strict sense, such that 'proof' is obtained when a conclusion is validly drawn by inference from true premises. Specifically, I argue that reason can demonstrate the intelligibility of a *question* – a question which therefore lies within its own reach – but one of such ultimacy that its *answer* must be unknowable, and that the name of that unknowable answer must be 'God'. Here, though, the argument becomes increasingly complex and impossible to paraphrase in advance, for, in the course of seeking to clarify the 'argument-strategy' of Thomas's proofs of God the link needs to be established between that narrower expression of reason which consists in 'ratiocination' from premises to conclusion in the course of proof, and that broader sense of 'reason' which, in chapter 6, was said to possess the 'shape' of the sacramental. For only through that link may the central proposition of this essay be secured, namely that not only does reason as deployed in proof of God have the *shape* of the sacramental, but

also that this is so because creation as such – the world's being created – is itself quasi-sacramental and that reason is a sort of human participation in that 'sacramentality' of the world. It is, that is to say, in its grasp of the world as brought to be 'out of nothing' that reason knows God: indeed, it is just that knowledge of the world in its character as created – and so in its form of the sacramental – which *is* our rational knowledge of God. And here my argument ends, leaving unsaid and merely gestured towards, perhaps for another occasion, much that needs to be added of a Christological character by way of securing it fully in place: for, as everyone knows, any account of sacramentality gets its form and character from a Christology, the human nature of Christ being the form and character of every sacrament. Hence it is precisely because of what is revealed to us in Christ that we know that reason too, as the Vatican Council says, can 'know the one true God, our creator and lord, with certainty from the things which have been made'.