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Deus Absconditus: A Dialogue

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Abstract

In the tradition of both Cicero and Hume, this paper explores the nature of God in dialogic form. Set at the tomb of Thomas Aquinas, in a church that is now a museum, the dialogue focuses on the central question of divine hiddenness, offering a novel alternative to both the atheistic interpretation of hiddenness in terms of divine amoral aloofness and the theistic account of hiddenness in terms of human indolence. Phenomenologically speaking, God the creator, in order to be God the creator, must be hidden to creatures. Divine hiddenness is, therefore, natural and does not necessarily call into question the moral status of God or of humans.

Keywords

God, Hiddenness, Phenomenology, Aquinas, Creation

While enjoying a sojourn at my university's Rome campus last spring, a student came to me, breathless, after a free travel weekend. 'Professor', she spurted out, 'you will never believe the conversation I overhead this weekend'. 'Why? Where did you go, and what did you hear?' 'I was in France at this amazing gothic church. While half listening to a tour, I overheard a truly fascinating conversation happening nearby, which I wrote down as soon as I returned to my Airbnb. Here's a copy. You *must* read it'.

With the thought that this might be of interest to a wider audience, I share the following lightly edited version of the student's transcript. Since the names of the overheard interlocutors are unknown, I have taken the liberty of naming one 'Thea' and the other 'Theo'. Following hints from both Thea and Theo, I have referred to the eavesdropper-turned-interlocutor as 'Stranger'. I have also added several citations where I could find them. Naturally, I am responsible for the title and section headings.

TOUR GUIDE: Here we are in the Museum-Church of the Jacobins, which preserves the medieval motherhouse of the Dominican religious order. I'd like to begin by pointing out the newest addition to

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the structure, the dangling neon lights in each of the seven arches, representing the colors of the rainbow. Do you hear how it is accompanied by a soundtrack of outside street noises? The city of Toulouse bought the installation by the artist, Sarkis, to make it a permanent enhancement of this space, for, as the placard explains, 'The past does not pass when the artists bring it back to the present'.

THEA: Neon lights, city sounds, chaotic tour groups: This is hardly a way to honor a saint.

THEO: What are you talking about? This is a museum.

THEA: According to this sign, there in the shiny metallic box are the mortal remains of the medieval philosopher-theologian, Thomas Aquinas.

THEO: Here? Is that so? How splendid.

THEA: Splendid?

THEO: What are our churches —as Nietzsche wryly observed—but sepulchers to the god that is dead?[1] And how fitting that the great Catholic authority, Thomas Aquinas, should be interred in a museum, since he, like the god he served, is but a vestige of the past.

THEA: Thomas Aquinas hardly belongs to the past; he articulates the perennial philosophy, ever new, and he inspires devotees in every generation.

THEO: See all these groups of school children? They see what France once was, not what it is now, or will be in their future. Not a single one of them will ever be a Thomist, and I have a suspicion not a single one will ever meet a Thomist.

THEA: That may be, but Catholicism is in their bones.

THEO: In their bones? Most of these children aren't even baptized.

THEA: They are French. Charles the Hammer preserved the Christian religion for them against the spread of Islam in a decisive battle outside Toulouse in 732, and their cathedral at Chartres and their shrines in Paris remain wonders of the world.

THEO: Do you realize that there are more atheists than active theists in France? Though sixty percent of the French identify as Catholic only fifteen percent say they are practicing, and only five percent attend Mass weekly. Nearly *one third* of the French identify as atheist.[2] Christianity is the past, and, hence, this deconsecrated church is rightly a museum.

THEA: I do not deny that the church in France faces annihilation, but the rise of atheism and the decline of theism did not occur because of the passage of time; it occurred because we have changed, because we moderns have failed to turn and seek God.

[1] *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §125.

[2] https://www.europenowjournal.org/2019/10/02/the-catholic-ness-of-secular-france/

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THEO: You cannot be serious in stating you believe—sincerely believe—in this nonsense.

THEA: How can it be nonsense? After all, many of France's brightest lights have thought there was good reason to think God exists: Descartes, Pascal, Péguy, Maritain, to name a few.

THEO: Gaze up at the neon lights dangling from the Gothic arches. Hear the sound of the streets piped in. This is our life today. There is no god to be found here. God is not to be found. His hiddenness is an astounding fact of contemporary life.

THEA: I agree that contemporary life is noisy and distracted and that, accordingly, it is not easy to find God, but the fault is with our noisiness and distractedness.

THEO: We are not at fault, for the inescapable conclusion is that there is no God. After all, if he is supposed to be an all-loving person, he would go out of his way to make himself known. But he doesn't. So he must not exist.[3]

THEA: There is a God who is an all-loving person; he merely appears hidden to those today who do not sincerely seek him.

THEO: We did seek him and found him not.

THEA: You do not know what it is to seek. It is not an idle inquiry. It takes a lifetime of devotion; it is not the occupation of an idle afternoon.

THEO: That is quite a lot of time to devote to something that does not exist.

THEA: Pascal is right: God is hidden only because we do not seek him sincerely and ardently.[4]

THEO: And Nietzsche is right to discern in Pascal's obsession with God's hiddenness an underlying suspicion of divine immorality.[5] But there is an alternative, for the belief that God does not exist explains his hiddenness quite nicely. The simpler, more elegant, and, therefore, better explanation for hiddenness is non-existence.

An Alternative Explanation of Hiddenness

TOUR GUIDE: The most famous architectural feature of this church is the first column in the nave, which, in order to support the massive roof and allow for the enormous windows, has very elaborate ribbing, to most eyes resembling a giant palm tree. Do you see it there?

[3] For a more sophisticated statement of this line of argument, see J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[4] *Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, 1958), n. 194.

[5] *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), n. 91.

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STRANGER: Forgive me for eavesdropping on your conversation about *le Dieu caché*, but you are both mistaken. Your theism breeds atheism, and your atheism breeds theism. The theist presents God as the sort of thing that is just there to be found, like this palm tree column, and the atheist, not registering such a God, understandably denies its existence. As for me, I deny the God of both of you: the God that is affirmed and the God that is denied.

THEA: So you are an agnostic?

STRANGER: No, I am not in doubt whether the theist or the atheist is right. I am certain both of you are wrong.

THEA: Are you some sort of pagan then?

STRANGER: I represent a philosophical position older than either your theism or your atheism but it is not pagan per se. Rather it undercuts the presuppositions of theism and atheism in one blow.

THEO: Anything that gives me common cause with my theist friend is welcome but admittedly strange.

STRANGER: There is a shared dogmatic tendency in each of your positions, which can only be broken by asking, Why else might God be hidden?

THEO: Do you mean besides non-existence or moral aloofness?

STRANGER: Yes. Who or what is God, after all?

THEO: He is the person that believers pray to, mistakenly.

THEA: He is the God of Jesus Christ.

STRANGER: What is his philosophical identity? To what does 'God' refer?

THEA: Well, 'God' names the person who created heaven and earth.

THEO: Yes, *that*'s the God that doesn't exist.

STRANGER: There could be no person who is the creator of heaven and earth. I mean that if God exists as the creator, then he cannot possibly be a person; he cannot be the sort of thing that shows up in the whole in the way that people do. It is precisely because he is God the creator that he could not appear to be a creature alongside any other. Instead, we would need a different approach.

THEA: How could God create if he were not a person? Of course, God is a person.

STRANGER: It depends what we mean by 'person'. If it implies that God is an agent in the world akin to any other, then it is false. That is a basically pagan notion of the divine, and it ought to be denied, just as the atheists do.[6]

THEA: So you are saying that there is a non-person that created heaven and earth?

[6] On the contrast between the pagan and the Christian understanding, see Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

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STRANGER: Just in order to create everything that exists, God, whatever he is, cannot be the kind of agent in the world that we call 'person'.[7] Rather he must be radically unavailable in the world he creates, not a thing among things or a person among persons.

THEA: You seem to be dissolving God into nothing, and your position sounds like the agnosticism you deny.

THEO: You do agree, then, that God is withdrawn from our searches? The most natural explanation is that he does not exist.

STRANGER: God, to be the creator, must be hidden to creation in virtue of not being a creature. Consider mundane parallels. The potter is not part of the pot; the playwright is not part of the play; the painter is not part of the painting; the sculptor is not part of the sculpture. Never does the craft show the craftsperson directly. Instead, the work as it were hides its source; it captures our fancy, fills our attention, and crowds out other thoughts we might have.

THEO: Yes, but to be confronted with any work of art is to wonder about the artist. Think of these dangling lights. It is natural to wonder about the person who thought them up. Hence, the artist is not hidden as you suggest.

THEA: And yet it seems right to say that the artist does not show up in the same way that the art itself does. Sarkis is not one of his seven dangling neon lights. So the artist is not present in the same way as the art.

STRANGER: The art appears on one level and occupies our attention, but there always remains the possibility of turning our attention from the art to its source. And even though the source is not present in the way that the art is, we can still search for it. If God is the creator, and creation is analogous to human making, God will be hidden within what is made but what is made will indicate that it is made, which opens the possibility of an inquiry into the maker. Pascal pointed out that God is not to be found like the noonday sun, but he missed the real explanation for such hiddenness.[8] God is necessarily beyond the horizon of the world he makes; he is hidden because he is its creator. In this way, God is like the sun before it rises, the source of myriad manifestations without itself being manifest.

THEO: So we agree that God is hidden. That is especially important to me.

STRANGER: And me.

THEO: But we disagree as to why. Either he is hidden because he does not exist or we do not seek him earnestly enough, or now, as a third

[7] For the problematical character of 'person' when applied to God the creator, see, for example, Brian Davies, OP, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006), 93-94.

[8] *Pensées*, n. 242.

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possibility, because God, being the creator, is the sort of thing that hides itself.

STRANGER: 'Hides' imputes motives. God is hidden due to the logic of manifestation. That which makes manifest necessarily disappears behind what is made manifest. That which makes necessarily disappears behind that which is made. God is hidden, not hiding.

Objections

TOUR GUIDE: It was here in Toulouse that St. Dominic, who founded the Order of Preachers, met the members of the Albigensian heresy, and he decided to embrace a life of poverty in order to preach credibly to them about the Catholic faith. This church is one of the best examples of Southern Gothic architecture. Due to the Albigensians it is deliberately no frills, plainer in decoration than the Northern Gothic of Chartres, Paris, and Rouen.

THEO: The hiddenness *qua* creator argument is interesting, but it is novel, and as novel, it is not relevant in explaining traditional Christianity, the sort that has been eclipsed as its churches turn into museums.

THEA: I might add that this sort of hiddenness sounds heretical and is hardly compatible with the biblical message of a loving God. It smacks of deism, with its remote god, and its emphasis on hiddenness has the feel of Gnosticism. That's not the Christian God.

STRANGER: The hiddenness of God as creator is the traditional view of Christian philosophy and theology prior to modernity. You can find it in such diverse figures as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa. So its views are hardly novel. Moreover, the very idea of revelation presupposes natural hiddenness.

THEA: You are mistaken regarding traditional theism and the question of hiddenness. Take Aquinas here. He gives five proofs for the existence of God at the start of his *Summa*. He thereby begins by proving that there is such a person as God. He says that his first way is the most manifest, because it begins with the fact of movement and change in the world, which only a fool would deny.

STRANGER: Yes, let's take Aquinas. As the term of his proofs Aquinas establishes only the reality of the names we use of God. He uses some variety of the phrase, 'And this we call God', when he arrives at an unmoved mover or first efficient cause. I think a mundane parallel might help illumine what it means to establish the reality of a name. For much of human history, no one knew what to make of the bone-shaped stones unearthed in mountains. But then fossilization was discovered as a possibility, and now these bone-shaped stones can be taken as effects of absent species that serve as their cause. So, for example, we can today point to these fossils and name the absent species,

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T-rex. Similarly, finite beings may be on hand without creation being discovered as a possibility. The five ways serve to motivate us to see these finite beings as effects. The creator remains as hidden as ever, but now the creator can be referred to as such.

THEA: How can you say the existence of God is hidden? Aquinas's five ways make it manifest.

STRANGER: Aquinas says that the proofs only establish *that* there is a first cause; they do not clarify *what* that cause might be.[9] Instead, we have to use the *via negativa* to strip away our creaturely conceptions in order to prepare our minds to countenance what it must be for the first cause to be the first cause of all. We cannot understand the creator straightforwardly because he is the creator and our access, in this life, is mediated through creation. But we can generate a kind of understanding in a refracted way through analogy, by following up clues to be found in creation, clues that point to qualities in the source of those creatures. And one of these clues are human persons.

THEA: Aquinas establishes the rational foundation of theism. He proves there is a first person called 'God' who has all the attributes of persons.

STRANGER: Rational foundation, yes, but only by exhibiting the necessary mysteriousness of the abundant source of all existence, a source distinct from and obscured by all that comes forth from it. Only do we understand God, Aquinas writes, when we understand him to be beyond our understanding as the distinct cause of the world.[10]

THEA: I will grant you that Aquinas emphasizes the negative way, but what of the way of perfection? The creature not only masks but also reveals God.

STRANGER: The creature is indeed a pointer, but our progress in understanding God through analogy does not make God present to experience any more than intently studying Aquinas's *Summa* gives us a personal encounter with its absent author. Recall that Aquinas placed above philosophical inquiry not only theological inquiry about revelation but above all what he calls 'suffering' divine things.[11] Reason's use of analogy does not cancel God's experiential hiddenness.

THEO: Perhaps you can credibly maintain continuity with the Christian intellectual tradition. But if so, a central problem remains in the present. Creation is not a novel idea but an outmoded one. People have always told myths about the origin of everything. But today we know that matter came from the Big Bang, life came from Evolution, and mind came from our Big Brains. The simple truth is that we are the result of chance, not design.

[9] See Brian Davies, OP, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 25-57.

[10] *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c. 5; *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 61, a. 2, ad. 2.

[11] *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3

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STRANGER: I have in mind something different from both myth and science. Those inquiries seek to account for the origin of the order we experience in the cosmos. By creation, I mean that which accounts for the fact that there is anything to be ordered in any way. Any demiurge could design or arrange matter in a certain way, but God alone could create or generate all being, matter included.

THEO: But science explains all that there is to explain; there is nothing left for God to do.

STRANGER: Even when science has explained the order of all things as best it can, there remains unexplained the primary gift of existence, the fact that things are, and that is what creation *ex nihilo* accounts for.[12] And the giver of all is hidden by that which is given.

THEO: It is quite convenient to say the creator would be hidden because he has to be hidden. What sort of evidence might you adduce for it? In the absence of said evidence, this claim seems to beg the question. Why when we went to space did we not find any aether? Oh, one might say, that's because it is in the nature of aether to be hidden. No, in fact, it's because aether was a postulate used to explain something that does not need explanation; there is such a thing as empty space, though it be hard to imagine; similarly, there is such a thing as a causeless universe though it is hard for us to imagine.

STRANGER: The natural hiddenness of God does raise the philosophical question of manifestation. I mean of course one could simply preach or bear witness to the hidden God, as do the apostles and Pascal. But one can also perform a philosophical indication or clarification of the reality of the hidden source.

THEO: But here you will have to repeat the traditional theistic proofs, none of which are convincing today.

STRANGER: The reason these proofs are unconvincing is that they are framed as proofs for one being among many as though we were setting out to prove aether or another planet to explain observed gravitational disturbances. But the aim of any proof in the Christian tradition is to clarify how God is to be understood if indeed he is the creator. The work of the proof comes not in introducing a new entity into the field of being but in getting us to see that the field of being cannot be the last horizon.

THEO: These are two things: clarifying God and inducing existential vertigo regarding things.

STRANGER: Yes, but they are two sides of one whole. The task of clarifying the hidden God amounts to having us take the whole no longer straightforwardly but indirectly, as something that intimates its hidden source.

[12] For this meaning of creation, see Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1982).

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THEA: What about religious experience? Doesn't that directly certify the truth of Christianity?

STRANGER: Religious experience is a welcome component of Christian life, but it does not undermine the fundamental fact of divine hiddenness. John of the Cross begins the 'Spiritual Canticle' by hymning the hidden God who arouses our love and remains distant. Yes, as creatures, God remains present to us but in a way that is imperceptible. And he can also be present through grace and consolations though he need not be. No matter how he is present, though, it is through a mode marked profoundly by hiddenness. God the creator is hidden and we encounter him in the hiddenness of the heart in a manner that is itself deeply and profoundly mysterious.

THEO: But if God really wanted to be known, why would he not send all of us dreams, as he did to Joseph, or knock us off our horses, as he did Paul? Either he does not wish to be known or you are mistaken in thinking he exists.

STRANGER: God is not present in the hurricane, in the earthquake, or in the conflagration but instead in the faintest of whispers.[13] Just in order to manifest himself as creator, God must allow himself to remain naturally hidden. If he were to become conspicuous, he would appear as a creature among creatures, as something other than the source of all. Instead, God remains hidden as such even as we know him through creatures and even as, in the life of faith, we remain hopeful for a true experiential encounter to come. As Paul says, 'We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face'.[14]

Aletheism Unveiled

TOUR GUIDE: When Thomas Aquinas died in 1274 at the Cistercian monastery of Fossanova in southern Italy, the monks refused to relinquish his remains to Aquinas's Dominican brothers. Nearly one hundred years later, Pope Urban V directed the Cistercian monks to send the relics to the Dominicans here in France, which they begrudgingly did the following year, 1369. Scholars argue that this move sought to solidify France's reputation as the premier Catholic country—and thus to establish the fittingness of the pope's residing in Avignon rather than Rome. But the monks kept the shoes of Aquinas's mule.

STRANGER: A generation of French children grew up reading Hergé's comic books featuring the adventures of an intrepid journalist named Tintin and his side-kick, Snowy the dog, as they solved crimes and ventured to exotic places; the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion has even

[13] 1 Kings 19:11-13.

[14] 1 Corinthians 13:12 (Douay-Rheims).

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argued that it is a deeply philosophical work, because it frames the world as an adventure.[15] I mention this because I say the question of God is analogous to the following: if we put ourselves into the shoes of the character, Tintin, we have to ask ourselves, how might we know of Hergé? For as we look about us, we see fellow characters: Snowy, Captain Haddock, Professor Calculus, and so on.

THEO: Yet we are in a position to see that Tintin is nothing but a creature of Hergé. What is in question is whether we are in a position to see that we are a creature of anything else.

STRANGER: The crucial thing is to register the fact that, just as Hergé belongs to a different presentational dimension than the world of Tintin, so should there be a creator of all, he likewise would belong to a different presentational dimension.

THEA: Certainly Hergé could draw himself into the comic book. In fact, if I am not mistaken, he did draw himself in occasionally as an extra, just like Hitchcock silently appeared as an extra in many of his movies.

STRANGER: It is common for artists to put themselves into their creations, but only we the viewer, who stand outside of the creation, are in a position to see them as the artists; the fellow creatures see nothing but a fellow creature. It would take an act of faith for the creature in creation to see another creature and regard that creature as at the same time the creator of the whole world.

THEO: Right, so it is just an issue of blind faith or an irrational choice.

STRANGER: Suppose you were Tintin. You might attend to how well drawn your world is. You might attend to the fact that time after time you get out of jams. You might further attend to the very existence of the world in which you live as well as the existence of your own self. These would point to a source outside the whole, a source hidden to those in the whole. Note though ordinarily you would focus on navigating the world; it would take a kind of redirection to attend to the question of the author of all. Adventuring would have to give way to philosophizing.

THEO: But Tintin is not real. He is just a projection of Hergé, and he accordingly does not have a point of view. But we are real. And there is something it is like to be us. Hence we cannot be a projection of a god.

STRANGER: Agreed. We cannot be the figment of anyone's imagination. Descartes established this beyond any shadow of doubt. Yet the world and ourselves are the sorts of things that seem to call for explanation. My point is that if there is to be a source of all, that source cannot

[15] Jean-Luc Marion, 'Terrifying, Wondrous Tintin', trans. Michael Syrotinski, *Yale French Studies*, no. 131/132 (2017): 222–36.

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be itself part of the world that is being explained. Hergé is not part of Tintin's world.

THEA: I don't understand how you can take issue with the theism I advocate. What you suggest seems to be a metaphorical illustration of my views.

STRANGER: I am offering analogies to motivate the insight that God's hiddenness admits of a simple explanation. The source of the whole world would by nature not be a part of the whole world. We can be motivated to see this through various analogies. But ultimately it is a question of the nature of presentation. It is a phenomenological necessity that the source of all should be hidden behind the all. What I am advocating, then, is a philosophical position that takes this as its constant theme. Instead of 'theism', I call it 'aletheism'.

THEA: Why aletheism? It sounds scandalous to pious ears.

STRANGER: The word 'atheist' is fashioned from the word for God, *theos*, and the alpha privative, *a*. An a-theist is an un-theist, a non-theist. The Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, uses the same negation attached to the word for hiddenness, *letheia*. Hence, truth is un-hiddenness. Alethic theism brings together the word for true, *alethic*, with the crucial sense of un-hiddenness, and the word for God, *theos*, in order to signify the way God may become manifest from out of his hiddenness. And alethic theism, elided, becomes *aletheism*.

THEO: It is clearly just a ploy to get atheists to reconsider theism.

STRANGER: On the contrary, it is an approach to God that privileges the question of hiddenness: '*Vere tu es Deus absconditus*, Truly you are the hidden God'.[16] In this way, it stands in contrast with other approaches that bypass the phenomenon and assume the ready availability of God. These other approaches are incredible because they are easily falsifiable. But God is hidden, so an approach that takes him seriously must make that fact thematic.

Why Atheism Today?

TOUR GUIDE: In the time of Napoleon, the church was made into a two-story military barracks, with horses stabled on the first floor. You can see the places on the columns cut to hold the massive floor beams placed to support the dormitory above. Later it served as an exhibition hall, a storage unit for artwork during the first world war, and, now, after a century of restoration, it is a museum.

STRANGER: God is naturally hidden as creator, but he is doubly hidden today, because his natural hiddenness is itself hidden to us. Hence, when we think of God we think of him within the world as a thing

[16] Isaiah 45:15.

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among things. The question only turns on whether he is a fact or a fiction. Yet if the world itself is a fiction, a real fiction mind you, and he is its author, he must be hidden: he cannot be on hand as a creature among creatures. It is our task to make his hiddenness manifest in its naturalness.

THEA: Why do you say God is 'doubly hidden' today?

STRANGER: The way we have framed this church repeats the way we have framed the world. We have framed it, *a priori*, as a monolithic, neutral space standing before our curious gaze. That it was once a pointer, a challenge, a provocation to turn in wonder and awe above and beyond, that has been hidden.

THEO: Let's not put the cart before the horse. These churches are deconsecrated because the god they honored is no God at all. He died, and, therefore, they are nothing but museums.

STRANGER: In a museum, you think of the artist, not the truth of the art. In the Louvre, there are Giotto, Da Vinci, and Caravaggio paintings. While their subject matter, saints and religious events, are quaint, there is a freshness and vigor to their craft. These painters are real geniuses. But you would not bend a knee or say a prayer before a painting in a museum, even if the painting had been intended for a church and you happened to be religious. Da Vinci's John the Baptist may be pointing heavenward, but your gaze is squarely fixed on the craft of Da Vinci, his use of chiaroscuro and the figure's perplexing smile. Hence, to regard this church as a museum, just in virtue of the logic of the museum as a neutral space, is to be directed to the human hands and minds that fashioned it but at the same time away from their purpose in fashioning it. You stare at the palm tree pillar rather than lift your soul heavenward. There is no prayer or preaching, only gawking and talking.

THEO: The difference between a museum and a church is just psychological. Nothing about the truth of God trades on it.

STRANGER: The phenomenologist, Edith Stein, says that the groundwork for her conversion from atheism came when she visited a historic cathedral, just to see the architecture, and spotted a single woman there, with her groceries, stopping in to pray.[17] The difference between taking a building as a museum and as a church has to do with the intentional structure of our experience.

THEA: I agree. In one of his letters, Pascal said that God had hidden himself in the last possible place, the Eucharist.[18] Behold the apparent

[17] *Life in a Jewish Family: Her Unfinished Autobiographical Account*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, OCD (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Press, 1986), 401.

[18] *Blaise Pascal, Oeuvre Complètes*, ed. J. Mesnard, Desclée de Brouwer, 1964-, III, 1037-1038, quoted in John McDade, 'Divine Disclosure and Concealment in Bach, Pascal and Levinas', *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 124-125.

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bread and wine, veil of flesh and blood. Yet that, too, is absent from this church, since it is in the custody of the secular state.

THEO: Let's be fair. To regard something as a museum is to regard it as a great good even though it does not carry any truth for us today. Look, I too mourned the burning of Notre Dame but just because it is part of the heritage of France. If some people still want to celebrate Mass there when it reopens, I have no objection. But it might make more sense just to preserve it as a place for all by turning it into a museum, just like this Church of the Jacobins, which I adore.

STRANGER: The medieval church with its vaulted ceilings, soaring heights, and marvelous prisms of stained glass, points in its very being beyond itself. We can attempt to frame it differently, horizontally instead of vertically, but in doing so we harm ourselves; we anesthetize our desire. Behold the truth of these medieval structures: the amazing movement of the human spirit toward the hidden source of all.

THEO: The transcendence is still there. Here in this church we experience the grandeur of the human spirit that projects such a glorious and harmonious vision of the world.

THEA: These columns stand tall because here the human is touched by the divine. As the psalmist sings, 'The just shall flourish like the palm tree. They that are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of the house of our God. They shall still increase in a fruitful old age: and shall be well treated'.[19]

Adieus

TOUR GUIDE: During the French Revolution, when the Dominican order was suppressed and this church surrendered to the state, Thomas's remains were moved a short distance away to the medieval pilgrimage church of St. Sernin under the care of the local bishop. It was not until 1974, the 700th anniversary of Thomas's death, that the Dominicans had his remains moved back to this, their refurbished but mothballed motherhouse.

STRANGER: Now you must excuse me: I want to take my children to St. Sernin, which is—thank God—still a church, as I am itching to lead them in Aquinas's hymn, *Devoutly I adore thee*, which refers to God as 'the hidden deity', *latens deitas*—hidden in his divinity on the cross and hidden in his divinity and his humanity in the Eucharist. *Adieu!* [*Exits*]

THEA: What a strange man but he has inspired me. [*Kneels down and makes the sign of the cross*.]

[19] Psalm 91:13 (Douay-Rheims).

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THEO: What on earth are you doing that for? You are the only one here doing that.

THEA: I am doing my part to change this museum back into a church. I am praying to God for the people here present, and I am asking Thomas Aquinas, whose bones have cured many, to cure the hearts and minds of each one of us from the twofold darkness into which we were born, sin and ignorance.[20]

THEO: Me too? I don't appreciate your bringing me into your nonsense.

THEA: What difference does it make? If God exists, I am doing you a favor; if he doesn't, there is no harm.

THEO: It is superstitious to think that an odd assortment of bones can hear let alone answer your prayers.

THEA: They can't, of course. But Thomas Aquinas, if God exists, persists, and if so, might attend to any that sought his presence by honoring the last vestige of his once imposing frame. The monks at Fossanova said the sight of his corpse caused the mule that carried him to die. Strange business. But when a blind monk touched his eyes to the now sightless eyes of Aquinas's corpse, the monk regained his vision. That was the first miracle of many attributed to his remains.

THEO: Mules die and the blind are cured. Why not another miracle now? Let me join your prayer: 'Thomas, if your god is not as dead as your bones, then kindly pray that I may see my way beyond this world to its hidden source. And if your God does indeed not exist, may my friend's faith go the way of your mule'.

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[20] Thomas Aquinas, 'Prayer before Study'.

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