New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12544

Naming God: Or Why Names are not Attributes

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Abstract

The article argues that philosophers of religion and theologians should pay less attention to the so-called 'classical attributes' of God and more attention to the neglected, but venerable, tradition of the divine names. Grounded in Scripture, these reflections are predicated on the doctrine of Creation, and what it is for human beings as creatures to speak of their Creator. The article demonstrates that, even the so-called 'classical attributes', when placed in the divine names tradition, are far from being mere 'natural theology' but Christological to the core and lead us, through intellect, into the mysteries of awe and prayer.

Keywords

God, Religious language, Names, Attributes, creation, *creatio ex nihilo*, Descartes, Philo, Aquinas, Bonaventure. Maimonides, Christ, revelation, Book of Revelation, Being

Let me clarify first that my subtitle, "Names are Not Attributes",[1] is not a question but an assertion, when it comes to the Divine Names. This in turn calls for some explanation.

There has for some time now been considerable distrust by theologians of the God of the philosophers. The topic is not a new one, of course, but recently it is focused on the God of the so-called "classical attributes" – eternal, immutable, omnipotent, one, simple. The theologians argue that the philosophers of religion are wasting their time defending the coherence of these divine attributes for this is not the God anyone wants to worship – and decidedly not the God of scripture. The criticism quarters on the long-standing Protestant rejection of "natural theology" but has been joined, to

[1] An earlier version of this paper appeared as 'Pourquois des noms ne sont pas des attributs,' in *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, vol.150/2018, IV, pp. 357-371.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12544 Published online by Cambridge University Press

my surprise, in just this past year by no less Catholic a figure than Pope Francis, in his new book *The Name of God is Mercy* (2016). Francis is deeply indebted to Cardinal Walter Kasper's book, *Mercy: the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian life* (New York, Paulist Press, 2013). There Kasper contends, in a book written with obvious pastoral intent, that mercy is the first attribute of God (p. 58) and indeed "is the name of God" (p. 81). The Cardinal hits out at "handbook theology" where the divine attributes that "are derived from God's metaphysical essence as Subsistent Being itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*): . . . simplicity, infinity, eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, and other attributes." "Here" Kasper notes, "we should merely point out that, within the parameters of the metaphysical attributes of God, there is scarcely room for a concept of mercy, which derives not from the metaphysical essence, but rather from the historical self-revelation of God." (p. 11) Kasper then takes his readers back to the *locus classicus* for the names and the naming of God – God's address to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3.15, and it is there I wish to go, too, after some little historical introduction.

In an essay entitled "The Essential Incoherence Descartes' Definition of Divinity", Jean-Luc Marion suggests that Descartes' definition/s of God in the *Discourse on Method* and related correspondence deserve attention as a new departure.[2] In "the period when Descartes wrote, to offer a definition of God (whatever its status) still amounted to taking a position on the theological terrain of the divine names. . . ." According to Marion, Descartes, beginning from "a rationality not theologically assured by Christian revelation, but metaphysically founded on the humanity of 'men, purely men'" [*Discourse on Method* Part 1], transposes what has been a theological issue, the problematic of the divine names, for "perhaps for the first time" into the "strictly metaphysical domain". Thus, Descartes can say in his *Conversation with Burman*: "By the name God I understand a substance infinite, eternal, immutable, all knowing, all powerful, and by which I myself and all other things (if it is true that any such exist) have been created and produced."

Whether or not blame can be pinned on Descartes, it seems that at some time in early modernity the divine names tradition faded away, especially in Protestant and Anglophone writings, and was replaced by discussions of the "classical attributes" – infinite, eternal, immutable, and so on – defended or attacked as free-standing philosophical assertions. That is what we find in Locke, Hobbes and Hume, and for that matter Richard Swinburne. The earlier "divine names" tradition, in which these attributes had their place, is almost

[2] Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Essential Incoherence of Descartes' Definition of divinity' in Amelie O. Rorty (ed), *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) pp. 297-338.

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completely occluded, even in Catholic circles. I imagine this is what Cardinal Kasper is objecting to in "handbook theology", the divine names are reduced to a rump of transcendentals – perhaps because the weight of Aquinas – to One, Good, Being, True.

The earlier divine names tradition, in which I wish to include the works of Aquinas and Bonaventure, placed these names amongst many others – all given in scripture that were classed and categorized in a number of ways. Medieval Christians were familiar with prayers and litanies invoking these names: Lamb, Watchman, Word, Light, Counsellor. Such names, some from the New Testament and many from the Old Testament, had formed the basis for praise and theological reflection for Origen, Chrysostom, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, Ambrose and many others.

In the marriage service of the Sarum Rite in pre-modern England, the heavenly choir was invoked to proclaim the names of the most high God: Messiah, Emmanuel, Firstborn, Alpha, Omega, Lamb, Serpent, Goat, Lion, Word, Worm, Splendour, Bridegroom, and many more. These names, all drawn from scripture as Dionysius had also insisted, were chanted, sung and invoked, in plainsong and polyphony, deeply bound to the worship of the church. We can quickly see that many of these names (and there are hundreds) could be thought of as "attributes" of God. Attributes suggests qualities that God possesses, so how is "worm" or "goat" and attribute? But all were names – names held to have been given in scripture and means by which to call upon the Lord in prayer, praise and supplication. It is here that we may find our greatest affinity with Muslim practices of reflection on the names of God, and some Jewish ones too.

In Christian use, certain of these scriptural names were privileged, not just the transcendentals but also those regarded as divine self-denominations – the relatively few names with which God appears to name himself in the scriptures. By the time of Aquinas and Bonaventure, two were especially privileged – Good, and "He Who Is", or "Being itself".

I want to sum up these opening remarks by saying that "attributes" at least in English, suggests qualities someone possesses like red hair, or being six feet tall. They have to do with "knowing about". Names are not just to do with knowing, and the names of God are not just to do with knowing God (though that is involved), but they are pre-eminently important for prayer, for praise, and for calling upon the name of the Lord. Names are important for being in relation – to call someone "Lord" or "Mum" is to indicate a relation to the addressee. Names of God are not, in the first instance, the fruits of natural theology, but are disclosed in scripture. With that let me turn to Philo of Alexandria.

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Philo was a Greek-speaking Jew of first century CE Alexandria and had been trained, as he proudly tells us, in the philosophy of his day: a fusion of Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic views.

Throughout his extensive writings, Philo shows himself to be very interested in names and in naming God. Plato was interested in the origins of language, and reasonably interested in naming, and even in naming God. This was difficult, Plato considered, but not impossible. For the Philo, however, naming God is an altogether more urgent matter and this, I suggest, stems from his birth in Judaism.

When he reflects on the difficulties of knowing and naming God, Philo writes as one aware of Greek philosophical literature and who anticipates the difficulties in applying its accepted precepts to naming the God of Israel. In particular he is aware of the implications of the Jewish teaching on God as the Creator.

Neither Plato nor Aristotle has a creator God. Plato's Demiurge moulds pre-existing matter, and Aristotle's God rolls along with the universe, oblivious to its particulars. Aristotle's God is not a personal God. Furthermore Aristotle's God is not really free, so to speak, of the universe. In his scheme, you could not have the universe without God, but nor could you have God without the Universe. Not so the Hebrew scriptures as read by Philo and the theologians of the early Church. These suggest a God who creates from nothing and does so under no compulsion – entirely freely. The theology of creation that nourished Philo and Jews of that period (including those who wrote the Christian New Testament) comes not just or even primarily from the Book of Genesis but from Isaiah and the Psalms, where God's role as creator of all that is persistently invoked in the course of describing his loving acts on behalf of Israel, and his sovereignty over winds, waves, and roaring mountains.

What is persistently attested, particularly in the Psalms and the Prophets, is that there is one God, YHWH, who made all that is and who alone is to be worshipped – points frequently made while praising the LORD'S power to save or redeem.

> Our help is in the Name of the LORD [YHWH],
> who made heaven and earth. (*Psalm 123.4*)

> I, and none else, am the first,
> I am also the last.
> My hand laid the foundation of the earth
> And my right hand spread out the heavens. (*Isaiah 48.12f.*)

Only God creates. And God creates and sustains, or holds in being, all that is. These are the pivots of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim teaching of *creatio ex nihilo*. God creates matter, time and space because, as the ancients saw long before modern physics, time is a function of space. *Creatio ex nihilo* emerged in Second Temple

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Judaism and passes into early Christianity where, after bedding down, it became foundational orthodoxy by the fourth century. It is not, to my mind, stated explicitly in scripture, but nor is it an exiguous "add-on" from Greek philosophy. On the contrary, *creatio ex nihilo* is not a teaching of Hellenistic philosophy at all, if by that you mean the classical sources. As David Sedley points out in his *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity*,

> That even a divine creator would, like any craftsman, have to use pre-existing materials is an assumption that the ancient Greeks apparently never questioned.'[3]

Philo believes that *God* has created the world out of non-being and has created time itself. Precisely because he was moving in the Greek milieu Philo had a need to distinguish his Jewish position from the common philosophy. He rejected outright Aristotle's idea that the universe is eternal (in the sense of everlasting), an idea which he saw as incompatible with providence. The cosmos is totally dependent on God and God in no sense dependent on the cosmos.

More to the point, Philo sees that the radical transcendence of the Creator God does not merely qualify but cripples what we can say of God. All our human language has been forged to speak of creatures and is necessarily limited when one is trying to speak of the One who is the Creator of space and time itself. As Moses Maimonides would later point out (and without any apparent acquaintance with Philo's writings), even to say "God exists" cannot be to say "God exists" in the way that we would say it of things. God is wholly other yet holds "all that is" in being. This is critical for Philo, not only for his doctrine of God but also for his reflections on naming God.

Already we see in Philo the fulcrum of subsequent debate and meditation on the Names and the naming of God in all three religions of radical monotheism: since God cannot strictly *be like* anything that is created, then we cannot *class* God or insert God into any category appropriate to our created kind. On the other hand, and equally from

[3] Sedley mentions *creatio ex nihilo* in order to distinguish it from the topic he is addressing in his book. *Creationism*, which *was* prevalent and contested amongst ancient philosophers and which he defines as "the thesis that the world's structure and contents can be adequately explained only by postulation at least one intelligent designer, a creator god." David Sedley, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2009), p. xvii.' Paul Blowers' excellent *Drama of the Divine Economy* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 2012) makes good use of Sedley and provides an extremely helpful guide to early creation theology. Greek philosophers had "creationisms" in abundance, they did not have the radically transcendent deity of Christian orthodoxy. If there were pagan precedents for this radical divine transcendence, it was certainly the language of scripture that was the driver for Philo, and Danielou is, I believe, correct in thinking him the first theorist of radical divine transcendence.

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his Jewish faith, Philo knew that God must not be left wholly in the realms of abstraction. Above all we must be able to name God, for the Hebrew "to pray" is "to call upon the Name of the LORD".

But it is here that Moses and the burning bush becomes so important. We cannot of our own: name God. But God, so Philo believes, has given us names by which to call upon him. No one, not even Abraham or Moses, could see God with the eyes of the body and nor yet, says Philo, can anyone fully apprehend God with the mind.

> Do not suppose the Existent (το ον) which truly exists is apprehended by any man; for we have no organ by which we can envisage it, neither in sense, for it is not perceptible by sense, nor yet in mind. *(de Mutatione Nominum II.7)*

Moses himself, according to Philo,

> searched everywhere and into everything in his desire to see clearly and plainly Him, the object of our much yearning, Who alone is good. *(de Mutatione. II.7)*

This is not simply the unknowability of things immaterial and unseen, like angels; all the Greek philosophers would agree that the gods cannot be seen in this sense. But, for Philo, the God of Israel alone by his very nature cannot be seen. From this it follows, according to Philo, that God cannot be named.

> It is a logical consequence that no personal name (ὀνομα κυριον) even can be properly assigned to the truly Existent. Note that when the prophet desires to know what he must answer to those who ask about His name, He says 'I am He that IS' (Ex.3.14), which is equivalent to 'My nature is to be, not to be spoken.' *(de Mutatione, II, 11).*

The nature of the argument is that God cannot be named with common names, or common nouns. We cannot, after the manner of Aristotle's account of naming, class God by genus or species, for God is beyond both. Nor, after the manner of Plato's *Cratylus* could any name be, in a strict sense, appropriate to God's nature. Names for humans and places may be of their nature "fitting" to the essence of that which they name, but this cannot be so in this one special case of naming God. No name can represent God's nature, no name is correct.[4] This Philo takes to be the purport of God's reply to Moses, "I Am He that IS".

In the midst of all this apparent Hellenism we need to remember that this is driven by his understanding of the God of his scriptures.

[4] See J. N. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists 80 B.C. to A.D.220* (London: Duckworth, 1977) p. 181. See Plato's *Cratylus* 430A-431E. Dillon says that it was the consensus, by Philo's time, that words were attached to things by nature and not convention.

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This remark is one of Philo's most endearing – Jewish sentiment reinforced by the categories of late antique grammar.

> .... 'I am He that IS' (Ex.3.14), which is equivalent to 'My nature is to be, not to be spoken.' Yet that the human race should not totally lack a title to give to the supreme goodness He allows them to use by licence of language, as though it were His proper name, the title of Lord God of the three natural orders, teaching, perfection, practice, which are symbolised in the records as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. *(de Mutatione. II.12-13)*

In the midst of metaphysics comes this non-sequitur of grace – God is unnameable but, as a concession, gives Moses a name so that the human race should not be bereft. The name Philo believes God gives Moses to be used as a proper name is "the Lord, the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob". This, Philo believes (textual critics would now say wrongly), is the name that is the name for all generations. Hebrew scholars now take Exodus 3.15 to say that the Tetragrammaton is the name "for all generations" but Philo appears to be unaware of the Tetragrammaton lying behind the Greek text of his LXX. Elsewhere however, Philo like Aquinas, identifies "He that is" (*ho on*) as serving as God's proper name (*de Cherubim* p. 27ff). There is no reason, of course, why more than one "licensed" name could not serve in this way. None of them, from Philo's point of view, is adequate. At the burning bush God says to Moses *ego eimi ho on*, which Philo glosses –"My nature is to be, not to be spoken."[5]

To sum up so far, if Jewish scriptures push Philo towards the assertion that God is unnameable (because God as Creator cannot be classed amongst creatures) then the same scripture solves the problem that then arises – how, if God is entirely unlike anything created, can God named at all? The question is more pressing for Philo than it is for the philosophers. His Creator God is more truly "other" than, say the God of Aristotle yet nonetheless, and guided by his scriptures, Philo wants to say we can not only "speak about" God ("name" God in that sense) but we can also name God for the purposes of address. God must be "named" if we are to be able to call upon Him. It is both because of our need and our incapacity that certain names have been "vouchsafed to us" by God. In philosophical terms, Philo sees God as giving Moses one or more rigid designator by which God may be named – that is, referring expressions such as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", which designate God, not by essential properties, but by what God has done or who God is for us. (Philo comments

[5] 'I am He that IS' (Ex.3.14), which is equivalent to "My nature is to be, not to be spoken" (Philo, *de. Mut.* II.12-13). The Tetragrammaton, YHWH technically has no meaning but resembles the Hebrew verb "to be" and is thus glossed as "I AM the One who is and Will Be".

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on the special honour that God paid to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.) The names, even the seemingly abstract names like "He that is" or "the Existent One" are anchored, for Philo, in God's self-disclosure to Moses.

Philo repeatedly links the disclosure of the name to Moses – He Who Is – back to the creation narratives of Genesis, the idea being that it is God who truly is, and all creaturely reality comes from God and has its being in God. This is not just an idiosyncrasy of working in the Greek language. We can see same connection made in the following glosses on the "ehyeh esher ehyeh" of Exodus 3.15 in the Targums, written in Aramaic:

> He who spoke and the world came into being, spoke, and everything came into being. (Pseudo-Jonathan 14a)
>
> He who said to the world, "Be", and it came into being, and who will again say to it: "Be", and it will be. (Fragmentary Targum 14a)V
>
> I have existed before the world was created and have existed after the world has been created. I am he who has been at your aid in the Egyptian exile, and I am he who will be at your aid in every generation. (Neofiti margin 2)[6]

Let me turn now, vaulting across many centuries, to Aquinas. Aquinas had run across a number of ancient theological debates on the names and their categorization early in his career when commenting on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, who, in turn, discussed the divisions of the names given by Ambrose and Augustine. Aquinas was also familiar with the divisions made by John Damascene and Pseudo-Dionysius and, while still assistant to Albertus Magnus, he had written up Albert's commentary on Dionysius's *Divine Names* as lecture notes.

Bonaventure, Aquinas's contemporary, devotes two of the middle chapters of *The Soul's Journey into God* to two privileged names for God and in doing so gives us a glimpse of the contemporary interest in the Names. He tells us that John Damascene "following Moses" says that "He Who Is" is God's primary name and that Dionysius the Areopagite, "following Christ" says that "the Good" is God's primary name. It is important to stress that both "Being" and "Good", while they appear to us to be philosophical ascriptions, were for Bonaventure and Aquinas, as for Dionysius himself, *scriptural* names for God: "He Who is" from Exodus and "Good" from Mark 10.18 and Luke 18.19.[7] Not only so but they were names of the highest order because, unlike praising titles like rock, fortress and shepherd,

[6] I am grateful to my colleague, Professor Graham Davies, for these references.
[7] Where Jesus asks "why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

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they were divine self-descriptions – names God was credited with giving to himself.

Aquinas, however, explicitly privileges the name revealed to Moses: "The One Who Is".[8] He gives us three reasons for doing so: because of its meaning (as not signifying any particular form, but rather existence itself); by virtue of its universality or indeterminacy (for, citing Damascene, "In this life our minds cannot grasp what God is in himself"), and because of its tense "for it signifies being in the present and this is especially appropriate to God whose being knows neither past nor future, as Augustine says." (*Summa Theologiae* Ia 13.12, citing *de Trinitate.* V.2)

Thomas cites Augustine but he is at the same time faithful to Maimonides who, expanding in *The Guide for the Perplexed* (I. 65) on the "I Am who I Am", explains that this name is given so that the Israelites might acquire "a true notion of the existence of God", for it is a name derived from the Hebrew "to be" (*hayah).* Scripture, Maimonides believes, makes it clear that "He is existent not through existence … that there is a necessarily existent thing that has never been, or ever will be, non-existent." (154-5) He adds, after some discussion of the Tetragrammaton (the "articulated name") that this absolute existence implies that He shall always be. (156) This is the eternal nature of the God of Moses – not a bald metaphysical token but "the one who was and is and shall always be", who is met by Moses and the people of Israel at Sinai.

That "He Who Is" is the most fitting name of God[9] had long been attested by both Latin and Greek fathers and was, furthermore, linked with the idea that God is "Being itself". As we have seen, this connection was already made in the first century by Philo, who understood the Septuagint's "*ego eimi ho on*" to be equivalent to saying that God is "Being itself", or "the Existent One". While still assistant to Albertus Magnus, Aquinas found discussions of "He who is" as a privileged name for God in both Peter Lombard himself and in Albert's commentary on him. He also found in Lombard a Jewish perspective – that of Maimonides in the *Guide to the Perplexed* who said that "being" or "I am who I am" is the most appropriate name of God.[10]

[8] My apologies to Elizabeth Johnson here. Aquinas follows the Greek, *ho on*, and says "He who is" but his intention is to indicate a personal God, rather than an abstraction like "The Existent". Unfortunately in the English language we use gendered pronouns to do this.

[9] ST Ia 13,11.

[10] See Armand Maurer, 'St. Thomas on the Sacred Name "Tetragrammaton"' in A. Maurer, *Being and 'Knowing: Studies in St. Thomas and Later Medieval Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studes, 1998), p. 59.

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Yet I think we must also add what Aquinas had gained from Maimonides in consolidating his commitment to *creatio ex nihilo.* Aquinas is famously devoted to the doctrine of creation. Evident from the outset, this teaching grows in prominence in his two *Summas* and most especially the *Summa Theologiae*. In this, his last work, the doctrine of creation or more properly *creatio ex nihilo*, subtends Thomas's account of how it is that we know God and how we speak of God. It is the foundation of his famous, and famously brief, Five Ways and of his understanding of free will and grace.[11] It underlies the whole of his doctrine of God. We can see the doctrine of creation fashioning his presentation of "holy teaching" as it pronounces on "God as principal and on creatures in relation to him, who is their origin and end (Ia.1.3)." We may style this an *exitus/reditus* structure but it is as recognizably the Christian doctrine of creation, from origin to end, which is the *Summa's* guiding principle and grounding motif.

By the time he was starting to write the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas had made further detailed study of the *Guide to the Perplexed* and found in Maimonides a great ally and reinforcement on the centrality of *creatio ex nihilo*. Not only did Maimonides insist that this was the one teaching that the three great traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam held in common, but he is emphatic that it is not a teaching of the philosophers, even his beloved Aristotle. Yet Maimonides' scheme was famously so austere, as Aquinas noted with concern, that our language about God could only be equivocal: to say that God is "wise" means that he was the source of wisdom in creatures, and to say that he is "good" means the same.

Around the same time that he was immersing himself in Maimonides, Aquinas made his own careful reading of the *Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius and we should ask why Aquinas, who had already examined this work while Albert's assistant, should return to make his own careful study at a later date, either during his time at Orvieto, when he was finishing the *Summa contra Gentiles*, or in Rome as he began the Prima Pars of the *Summa Theologiae*.[12] Jean-Pierre Torrell suggests mildly that the commentary shows the increasing influence of Neo-Platonism in his work, but this is not evidently so.[13] Aquinas in fact distances himself from many of Denys most distinctively neo-Platonic elements. The answer may be that the growing centrality of *creatio ex nihilo* in his mature theology and his further immersion in Islamic philosophers and Maimonides, was

[11] See Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: a Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 157.

[12] I must confess that these remarks are conjectural and I stand to be corrected by any medievalists amongst us.

[13] Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Person and his Work* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1996) p. 112.

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bringing the whole question of "religious language" (divine names) to a point of crisis. Torrell himself suggests that Aquinas learned his apophaticism from Maimonides as derived from a strong sense of the divine transcendence. Yet the idea that, with respect to God, our denials are more apposite than our affirmations was frequently articulated by Augustine and any number of Latin and Greek fathers. Not only the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles* but his writing on Lombard's *Sentences* are prefaced, Torrell notes, by an "apophatic declaration". Aquinas simply pursues this in a more analytic fashion. For Thomas, "there is nothing to know about God except to know that which he is not".[14]

Aquinas, when preparing the *Summa*, found himself with two disparate and admired sources converging on the same theme – the impossibility of saying anything and knowing anything about God. And if he found in Maimonides too austere an "apophaticism" then there was much in Pseudo-Dionysius to make Thomas's hair stand on end. Thomas cites Dionysius often but it is not always with approbation. He can scarcely differ from so revered an authority, but his explanations often so qualify what Dionysius said as to almost reverse it. Sometimes he can barely conceal his rage as when, in his discussion of divine simplicity, he address the question of whether God can enter into composition with other things (Ia.3.8). It seems so, he begins placidly,

> For Dionysius declares that the being of everything is the godhead beyond being. (Ia.3.8, citing Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchies*)

The response is one of the few places where we sense Aquinas becoming angry. Bad mistakes have been made on this point, he says, including "the really stupid thesis of David of Dinant that God was the ultimate unformed matter of things." Aquinas goes on to clarify that what Dionysius meant was that "the godhead is archetypally and causatively the being of all things, but not substantially their being."

To give him credit, Dionysius would not have embraced the "really stupid thesis of David of Dinant" but even his champions admit he was frequently sloppy. More charitably we could say his intentions in writing were doxological rather than strictly philosophical. But the Neo-Platonism on which he drew on was that of Proclus and this had worrying incompatibilities with Christian orthodoxy and was not always, in Denys, completely digested. In Proclean Neo-Platonism the One, which was utterly transcendent, emanated "henads" or unities to which the divine names apply. Such a scheme deliberately reinstates, as neither Plato nor Plotinus did, a new polytheism.[15] Dionysius tried to qualify the Proclean legacy, rejecting the idea that the names apply

[14] Ibid.

[15] Andrew Louth. *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 1989), p. 84ff.

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to exalted beings, insisting that being derives from God alone, and making the names to be attributes of the one God, but there is still enough in a Proclean flavour to his Platonism to cause concern.

Thomas, as we have seen, explicitly privileges the name revealed to Moses, which, citing Augustine, "signifies being in the present and this is especially appropriate to God whose being knows neither past nor future. . . ." (Ia 13.12, citing Augustine, *de Trinitate* V.2)

Thomas cites Augustine while faithful to Maimonides, who, believes that scripture, makes it clear, as we have already said, that "He is existent not through existence … that there is a necessarily existent thing that has never been, or ever will be, non-existent."

This returns us again to *creatio ex nihilo,* which, of course, is not to do with the beginning of time or the origins of the universe so much as with the recognition that "all that is" comes from God as has its being in relation to God. Aquinas prefers the name "He Who Is" (*Qui est*) not in order to turn our face in a cognitive direction but because it is a scriptural name, a divine self-denomination, hallowed by subsequent human use, which points to God as the source and cause of all that is – or as Aquinas says, to God as "the beginning and end of all things and of reasoning creatures especially" (ST *Prologue* before Ia.2). We cannot grasp the divine essence but only point to God as the origin of all things. We can know that God is Being itself, just as we know that God is Creator, without claiming to understand what that could mean. We know God as the source and foundation of all that is: he spoke and it came into being (Judith and the Psalms). For this reason Aquinas believes "He who Is" is a more fundamental a name than "Good", or rather while "Good" may be fundamental insofar as it treats of God as cause, "to be" (*esse*) is presupposed in being a cause. "Good" is also liable to the blurring between Creator and creature that Aquinas indignantly rejected in David of Dinant. All things are indeed good, but they are so as creatures, not as bits of the deity itself.[16]

But to return to the modern critics of the "classical names": does Aquinas, in privileging the "He Who Is", remain faithful to Maimonides and *creatio ex nihilo* but thereby forego any reference to Christ? Is this starting point not just further confirmation that the Christology of the Summa is an afterthought that is appended to a superstructure of philosophical monotheism, and that metaphysics has supplanted scripture?[17] A full answer will need to consider Aquinas not as a scholar of Aristotle but as *Magister in Sacra*

[16] Aquinas does give a far more positive account of the meaningfulness of our speech on the basis of *creatio ex nihilo* and the theology of participation it entails. See Rudi teVelde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (E.J. Brill, 1995).

[17] The *sed contra* of Ia.2.3 where Aquinas cites the "*I AM WHO I AM*" of Exodus 3.14, opens his discussion of the Five Ways and launches his doctrine of God.

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Pagina. Already Augustine, among a host of others, had identified the "I AM" who spoke to Moses as Christ. Indeed it seems likely that the author of John's Gospel is doing the same, both in the Prologue, which echoes the Moses narrative, and in the "I AM" sayings credited to Jesus throughout John's gospel (e.g. "before Moses was I AM", John 8.58). This invocation of the name "I AM" by John takes us back to Deutero-Isaiah where, in a striking sequence of divine self-naming, YHWH declares that he alone is God:

> For thus says YHWH
> who created the heavens
> (he is God!)
> who formed the earth and made it
> (he established it;
> he did not create it a chaos,
> he formed it to be inhabited!):
> I AM YHWH, and there is no other. (Isaiah 45.18)

It also takes us to the epistles, and especially Paul's letters, which allude to Christ as the very Word through who all things were made,

> For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (I Cor.8.6)

Perhaps the most striking identification of Jesus with the I AM of Exodus comes in that most Jewish and thus least understood of the New Testament books, Revelation.[18] The Book of Revelation opens with a theophany:

> I am the Alpha and the Omega" says the Lord God who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. (Rev.1.8)

In the resounding sequence of divine self-designations that follow both God and Christ are clearly named "Alpha and Omega" and "First and the Last". These names are themselves interpretative glosses of *the* Name YHWH whose only interpretation in the Old Testament is in Exodus 3 where a sequence of word plays expand upon the Tetragrammaton (which has the appearance of the Hebrew verb "to be") and gives us *eyeh esher eyeh*: "I am and I will be" and "He who is".[19]

For Aquinas and his contemporaries, soaked as they were in received readings of scripture, the "I AM WHO AM" is already to be identified with Christ as witnessed in Paul and the Book of Revelation: the one who was, and is, and is to come. Christ is the God

[18] Here I point you to Richard Bauckham's excellent, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation,* on which I am drawing.

[19] See Bauckham, p. 28.

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behind Thomas's text from first to last as we can see evidenced in the *sed contra* to Ia.3.3 where he points out that "God is not only called living, but life: *I am the way, the truth and the life*", a Christic self-naming from John 14.6. This means that Christ is the God whose presence to us as "Being Itself" and the source of all being is unfolded in those first – apparently solely philosophical – questions of the Summa and here would lie my reply to Cardinal Kasper, should I ever be asked to give one.

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