New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01370.x

Thomism and Atheism

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Abstract

Atheism, the thesis that God does not exist and Thomism, the thesis that there are "proofs" for the existence of God based on experience and reason can be juxtaposed to each other as two extremes. On the other hand, the very statement of each implies the need to consider the other, so that the atheist and the Thomist both claim to belong to rational discourse, however much they differ in conclusions. The scriptural tradition has consistently found the one who says there is "no God" to be "foolish," that is, someone with more than just an intellectual error.

Keywords

Thomism, atheism, acidia, infidelity, pride, self-creation

> "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good."
>
> – Psalm 14, 1.[1]

> "For just as all beings must be referred to one first being, in a similar fashion all principles of demonstration must be referred to some principle which pertains in a more basic way to the consideration of the philosophical science. This principle is that the same thing cannot both be and not be at the same time. It is the first principle because its terms, *being* and *non-being*, are the first to be apprehended by the intellect."
>
> – Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the *Metaphysics*, XI, 5, #2211.

> "When I was a student, all my friends and I were ordinary modern Atheists. Then two of my friends got caught up by (Rudolph) Steiner. I loathed this and it led to frightful arguments for several years. During these arguments I heard nothing that would convert me to

[1] Psalm 53, 1 also reads: "The fool has said in his heart: 'There is no God above.' Their deeds are corrupt, depraved; not a good man is left."

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01370.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Anthroposophy; but the negative side of Steiner, his case against the common modern pseudo-scientific attitude, proved to be unanswerable. That is, I didn't think what he affirmed was true, but I did think all his denials were right."
>
> – C. S. Lewis, Letter, June 10, 1952.[2]

I.

Harry Jaffa wrote a book entitled, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, in which, reflecting on Aristotle's magnanimous man, he wondered whether the magnanimous man's affirmative judgment about his own worth was compatible with the Christian notion of humility.[3] After some discussion over the years, it is generally agreed that the two kinds of life are rather more compatible than it first seemed to Jaffa. Humility and truth are presupposed to each other.

However, no one much expects that "Thomism" and "atheism" will be so deftly reconciled with each other as "Thomism" and "Aristotelianism." Still, we know that the early Christians in the Roman Empire were sometimes considered to be atheists because they did not believe in the gods of the city, a charge that was made against Socrates himself. The classical atheist, moreover, was content to withdraw from public life into the quiet of his study or garden. His atheism was, in part, the result of the fear the gods caused in the lives of everyone in the pagan world with their threats of retribution and punishment. Ironically, it was precisely this necessity of reward and punishment that Plato thought was required if the world were to exist in justice and not in irrationality.

"Thomism" and "atheism," we might say, in the world at large today, are both considered to be "isms." They are, it appears, abstract explanatory "systems" in a world filled with other competing "isms." But a "Thomist" or an "atheist" is a real person who holds something to be true or untrue about the origin and cause of the existence of the world. Each may be consistent or inconsistent in the holding of his position. Each thinks that some relation is found between how he thinks and how he lives.

Christianity was commanded to be "missionary" from its beginning. It conceived itself to be directed to all the nations, to all men. It is only in modern times, however, that atheism, probably reacting to or imitating Christian universalism, has become militant and, yes, apostolic. It sees itself designated to save men from the myths of

[2] C. S. Lewis, "Letter to Marg-Reiter Montgomery, June 10, 1952, *Collected Letters of C. S.* Lewis (San Francisco: Harpers, 2007), III, 198.

[3] Harry Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1979).

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ungrounded belief in the gods, Christian or otherwise. Whether, if there is no God, anybody needs to be worried about anything is itself a question an atheist must deal with.

Yet, we live in an indifferent, multi-cultural age in which both the atheist and the Thomist are looked on as rather odd characters. Each thinks that what he holds is true. What he thinks, makes a difference about how he lives. Otherwise, he would not bother to prove or explain his position. He would simply use his power and consider it right, however he chose to use it. Each system draws the opposite conclusion on the basis of the "evidence" at hand. One says that, grounded in the finite nature of existing things, it is reasonable to argue that God exists; the other says that it is not.

In the meantime, the culture itself shies away from affirming anything as true. This distancing is often more of a political position than an epistemological one. It is not that we doubt the relation of sense and intellect, but that we dare not admit that something is true and other things are not. No one wants to seem prejudiced. No one wants to place any outside or objective criterion on how one is to live.

Contemporary man valiantly seeks to avoid ever being confronted with a standard of truth to which, for his own well-being, he should conform his life and actions. Diversity and multiculturalism have become little more than unexamined skepticisms about the status of truth. We presume that the only way we can live together is by not acknowledging any truth that we all can affirm as self-evident.

The famous passage in the fourteenth Psalm about the "fool" who says in his heart that there is no God takes it for granted that certain consequences follow from the belief that there is no God—abominations and the incapacity to do good. The man who holds that there is no God, of course, will look at the record of believers. He will acutely observe that it not always so edifying. He will, in fact, usually claim that "objectively" the atheist lives a "better" life than the believer or, at least, one that is no worse. The Thomist is in the uncomfortable position of having to admit, on his own principles and from his own experience, recalling the Fall, that even the best among us can and rather too often do fail. The virtue of humility does require us to acknowledge this truth.

The minute the atheist makes such a claim that he lives a better life, of course, he too implies a standard by which he can compare the living practices of the atheist with those of the Thomist or believer. The issue becomes rather more complicated because the Thomist does not maintain that "belief" is the ultimate ground on which he rests his case about God's existence. All faith is ultimately grounded in someone actually seeing. There is no faith in faith *ad infinitum*. The argument for the existence of God is a "preamble" to faith, something it supposes from the power of reason. The Fall did not imply the total corruption of reason. Mind remained mind.

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The Thomist proposes "proofs" for the existence of God, proofs rooted in experience and in the principle of contradiction, the obviousness that a thing cannot be and not be in the same time and place, in the same circumstances. He presents an elaborate series of consequences that follow logically from this initial proof or proofs of existence—that God is good, simple, true. In other words, the Thomist proposes to engage the atheist on his own grounds. The argument between the atheist and the Thomist is not an argument about faith and reason. It is an argument about reason and evidence.

C. S. Lewis tells us that, as a young man, he was an atheist like most of his friends. However, he came across the works of Rudolf Steiner. They did not convince him of the truth of Steiner's proposals, but they did undermine any confidence in the credibility of the claims of modern popular science to explain things. Like Chesterton in *Heretics*, the main arguments that Lewis found for belief in God or his disbelief in atheism were the modern philosophical and scientific arguments proposed to show that God did not exist. These arguments against God's existence were full of holes but presented with the utmost assurance.

It comes as something as a shock to realize that, in the past century or so, the principal upholders of reason in the modern world have been found on the Throne of Peter. John Paul II's *Fides et* Ratio is remarkable as a call for philosophy to be philosophy. Benedict XVI remarked in his "Regensburg Lecture" that in fact the early Church was not so much concerned with the validity of other religions but with the validity of philosophy and the relation of revelation to it. The Church has been concerned about a narrow understanding of "reason" that limits it to rationality but denies to reason any insight into things. The reduction of knowledge to what the method of inquiry will reveal is not philosophy of *what is*. Rather it is a reductionism that disallows anything that the method does not allow.

II.

In Question 10 of the *Secunda Secundae,* Aquinas addresses the general question of *infidelitas*–unfaithfulness. What is the status of someone who does not "believe?" We might mean by this unfaithfulness simply that someone does not have the faith because he never heard of it or considered it. The issue just never came up. Certainly a modern atheist might well fit into this distinction, though most actual atheists at least purport to know the arguments that are proposed in favor of God's existence. But someone may take no stand one way or another because the issue has never arisen for him. Yet, it is difficult to think of someone who calls himself an "a-theist" who never wondered what a "theist" was.

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Aquinas speaks of the vice of *acidia*, what is often translated as "sloth" or "idleness." As Josef Pieper often points out, this vice is not just your every day laziness.[4] It rather refers to a condition of soul that refuses to ask what it is or what is this life of mine about. It is a refusal to ask about the being whose very nature is designed that he know himself in order that he might live well in the world and in what transcends it.

The unbeliever is not necessarily one who refuses to look at his soul. He claims that he does indeed look at his soul or whatever it is that unifies his being. He claims to see no reason why, to understand himself, he needs to conclude to the existence of God. He does not think he is a "fool" when he says "there is no God." He thinks he is being reasonable, with a reason that does not allow an opposite position.

Infidelity, however, can also mean something more aggressive. Someone can directly reject the content of the faith as it is proposed and heard. He can even contemn it. Aquinas bluntly calls this latter position a sin. It implies a rejection of *what man is*. Aquinas evidently takes active hostility to God's existence as a sign of moral disorder that prevents reason from seeing what is true about man himself. But, as Aquinas acknowledged, no sin is found if someone has never heard of the issues of faith. Such ignorance, at best, might be a kind of punishment resulting from original sin, a simple not having something we need to know about ourselves. But if in fact we do not know it, it is not sinful.

In the response to the third objection of the first article, Aquinas tells us that "infidelity, insofar as it is a sin, arises from pride, from which it happens that man does not wish to subject his intellect to the rules of faith and the sound understanding of the fathers." One might say that Aquinas not only proposes that we think but that we think rightly, according to the norms existing in our minds and in things. These are principles that we discover but do not make ourselves.

Intellectual errors are not merely mistaken calculations. They have consequences in how we live even if inculpable. The connection of pride and infidelity is not wholly accidental. Pride means attributing all order to ourselves as if there is no sound doctrine, rooted in things themselves, that we must discover and obey. Pride makes us think that the world is objectively what we want it to be.

In the third question, Aquinas asks whether lack of faith is the greatest sin. He thinks that sin is greater the more it "separates man

[4] "Idleness (*acidia*), for the older code of behavior, meant especially this: that the human being had given up on the very responsibility that comes with his dignity; that he does not want to be what God wants him to be, and that means that he does not want to be what he really, and in the ultimate sense, *is*." Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend. IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 28.

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from God." Infidelity separates man from God because, with it, he has no "true understanding of God." It is difficult to live properly if we have no valid understanding of the highest things.[5] God is not grasped through a false understanding of Him because what is grasped thereby is not the God *that is*. It is not that we can, with our finite minds, understand everything about God. But it is possible that what we do understand is correct in fact and not false.

Again, evidently referring to the passage in the Psalm about the fool, Aquinas says that infidelity is a greater sin than all others which "lead to the perversity of morals." Aquinas holds an intimate relation between thinking and acting. And he maintains that thinking wrongly about God is not a neutral or vague thought with no consequences. This connection is true even when the one who does not believe or know is not really culpable. If erroneous ideas of God or anything else had no consequences whatsoever, we would have to conclude that the mind is unconnected both with reality and with how we live, which is obviously not the case.

III.

In recent decades, the Catholic Church has been particularly aggressive in engaging everyone willing to enter into discussion about their world views. The ecumenical movement has to do with other Christians of whatever variety, how they differ, what they have in common. There are regular discussions with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, as with philosophers and scientists. Generally speaking, the impetus for such discussion comes initially from the Church.

The Vatican dicastery for discussion with atheists publishes a journal called *Ateismo e Dialogo*. The office's function is, in a word, to keep its knowledge of atheism up-to-date. Within Catholicism, particularly under the recent popes, it assumed there are grounds for talking with any religious, philosophic, or scientific position about its truth and the relation of that truth to revelation.

Depending on how one calculates the Chinese Marxists, the fact is that, numerically, relatively few formal atheists exist in the world. The more articulate ones have, perhaps, influence beyond their numbers, but this is not unusual in many areas of intellectual life. Also we generally distinguish between practical and theoretical atheists. The practical atheist is one who lives as if God does not exist, though he has no particular brief about why. The theoretical atheist, on the other hand, claims to have reason and proofs for his non-belief. Like the Thomist, he claims that his reasons are sufficient to "prove" the validity of his position.

[5] See James V. Schall, "On 'Believing' Atheists," Ignatius Insight, on-line, January 13, 2010.

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IV.

In his discussion of "Atheism," in the *Encyclopedia of Theology*, Karl Rahner surveyed the history of atheism in philosophy and in Church teachings. "Atheism essentially lives on the misconceived ideas of God from which theism, in its actual historical forms, inevitably suffers," Rahner wrote.[6] It seems that failures to argue consistently or to live according to what the existence of God implies is itself used as justifications for rejecting the God who supposedly is represented by these perceived misconceptions. Nietzsche's famous aphorism that "the last Christian died on the Cross" is not a "proof" of Christianity's futility but rather a lament that believers do not in practice believe what they claim to believe.[7]

The unbeliever does frequently come up in Jewish and Christian documents. Since Vatican II, the Church has sought to treat the atheist with good will and sympathy. No more "fool calling," granted Scripture's point. The Church has tried to evaluate the sociological and personal reasons why someone might think atheism is a valid position. Yet, Scripture itself persistently judges the atheist, for the most part, as not innocent. This is how Rahner put it:

> Scripture. . .knows no atheism of a purely neutral kind, which would be merely incidental (or at least does not reflect any such atheism). It only recognizes an atheism which lies somewhere (impossible to locate in the individual case) between pious inarticulate veneration of the "unknown God" (Acts 17:22 in the light of Eph 2:12) and the guilty ignorance of the God who in actual fact one knows in the "suppressed" accomplishment of one's own human nature (Romans 1)."[8]

Behind actual atheists, Scripture sees a moral issue. Atheism is the result of the way one chooses to live, not its cause.

When we look at the actual lives of atheists, Rahner points out, something more is going on than a mere opinion about the origins of the world and man's place in it. "There can be no serene atheism which is in harmony with itself; for even atheism draws life from an implicit theism," Rahner observed.

> There can be a nominal theism which despite its conceptual talk about God either does not yet genuinely accomplish in personal freedom the true nature of the transcendent orientation towards God or else fundamentally denies it atheistically, i.e., godlessly; there can be an atheism which merely thinks it is one, because in a tacit way transcendence is obediently accepted but there is no success in making it expressly

[6] Karl Rahner, "Atheism," *The Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 48–49.

[7] See James V. Schall, "Last Christian," Inside Catholic, on-line, April 14, 2009.

[8] Rahner, ibid. 50–51.

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> and explicitly clear enough to the person concerned; there can be a total (but as a consequence, necessarily culpable atheism) in which transcendence is denied in a proud closing of the self, and precisely this is consciously made into atheism expressly and deliberately.[9]

The expression that we cannot have a "serene" atheism is striking. Sooner or later, everyone must choose what kind of atheism he really holds. He must live one way or another. The self can close itself. Atheism can be culpable, proud, the maker of its own rules.

V.

Thomism and atheism, in conclusion, are bound together. The very logic of the words means that the "theist" implies at least the notion of the "a-theist." And conversely, the "a-theist" must wonder about the denial of his denial. We might inquire whether modern atheism implies more than, say, Augustine's proud man who wanted to see himself as the cause of all distinctions and being?

Have we entered into a new age of "atheism" that has something distinctive about it? Granted that the world, through the abidingness of its classical religions and philosophies, is in fact filled with believers in God, however understood, can we detect a new militancy or missionary zeal in atheism that now sees a way to convince all mankind of its validity?

In his interview in *Salt of the Earth*, Josef Ratzinger already described in the most lucid detail what the modern atheist in logic holds. This same view is again spelled out in *Spe Salvi*, but the earlier statement, it strikes me, is classic in its succinct comprehension: "The ideal that 'nature' has something to say is no longer admissible," Ratzinger wrote.

> Man is to have the liberty to remodel himself at will. He is to be free from all of the prior givens of his essence. He makes of himself what he wants, and only in this way is he really "free" and liberated. Behind this approach is a rebellion on man's part against the limits that he has as a biological being. In the end, it is a revolt against our creatureliness. Man is to be his own creator–a modern, new edition of the immemorial attempt to be God, to be like God.[10]

This description is not only of a world without God, but a world without man as we have known him, something that theists expected would come about once the denial of God was spelled out in its complete consequences.

[9] Ibid. 52.

[10] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 133.

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Today, the Thomist answer to atheism is not that such "restructuring" of man cannot be carried out by the "rational" being. His response, call it consequentialism if you will, is that the product, the "new man," the "new edition," is in no way superior to the man that was created *ex nihilo* along with all else. The theist holds that we are given the choice. Will we choose to retain what we are as a gift superior to anything we could concoct by ourselves as an alternative? The new man asks: "If we can do it, why not do it?" Will men be "like gods?" The fact is, in this "new edition," men will not even be "like men."

The "rebellion against the biological limits" of man's being is a rebellion against *what he is*. No "serene atheism" can be found that leaves man in harmony with himself. Will men be "like gods" deciding their own good and evil? They will not even be like men. The choice in the Garden has come full circle. Man is free of "all prior givens," except one. His rebellion does not allow him to be himself. For to be himself, he must choose himself, not as he wills, but as he is given to be *what he is*. Aristotle was right. Politics did not make man to be man, but taking him from nature, as already man, makes him to be good man. We do not make men "good" by remaking them as men.

The atheist and the Thomist now have the field of the world to themselves. The great battles are first fought in the souls of men. What we see in our culture is merely the claim of the apparent victor. Which is the fool and which is the wise man, we are left to ponder. It is indeed a "revolt against creatureliness." The whole essence of atheism is that there is no god. The whole essence of Thomism was that, for a creature, it was all right to be a creature and not a god.

Thomas Aquinas stated in his Commentary on the Metaphysics, that "all beings must be referred to one first being." If there is no first being, then the only thing to which all being can be referred is the human mind making and remaking itself. Thomism, thus, remains the only real opposition to atheism, which simply means "man making himself without God."

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