New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Grammatical Thomism?*

This journal has always privileged contributions about St Thomas Aquinas, without subscribing to any one of the different approaches to reading Aquinas: Thomism of the Strict Observance, Transcendental Thomism, Analytical Thomism and so on. Intriguingly, however, our longtime editor Herbert McCabe, a prolific exponent of Aquinas (posthumously even more so!), has recently been identified as a founder of Grammatical Thomism.

In *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford University Press 2015), Stephen Mulhall discusses Herbert's work, along with that of David Burrell CSC, under this heading (capital letters throughout). This label he takes from *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford University Press 2007) by Francesca Aran Murphy, who coined it, as she names McCabe and Burrell as founders of this one of the three schools of the 'narrative theology' which she is out to discredit. The other two schools are Story Barthianism: George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, who focus only on an idea of the resurrected Christ rather than on the reality, or so she says; plus Story Thomism, represented by Robert Jenson, for whom God is only a character in the Christian narrative.

The focus of Grammatical Thomists, analogously, is not on God but on how God is named, on the grammar of God-talk rather than on the doctrine of God. They are bewitched by linguistic philosophy, or anyway insist on reading Aquinas as if he too practised Wittgenstein's method of describing the logic of what is said in order to see what is meant (if anything).

David Burrell is now best known for placing Thomas in an interfaith context with the Jewish and Muslim thinkers whom he read: an irreversible move on Burrell's part, if not yet always fully understood by students of Aquinas. Earlier, however, beginning with *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (Yale University Press, 1973), Burrell showed how we can learn to speak of divine things accurately enough to avoid misunderstanding, yet without giving the false impression that we are saying what God really is. While aware of Wittgenstein, he owes far more, as he says, to Ralph McInerny's work on analogy, and, above all, to Bernard Lonergan. For Burrell indeed, as he says, Aquinas is practising logical skills developed in twelfth century 'speculative grammar'. If Burrell's Thomas goes in for grammatical analysis in questions about the divinity it has nothing much to do with Wittgenstein.

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Herbert McCabe famously made the following remark in his translation of Questions 12 and 13 of the *prima pars* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964): 'In the opinion of the present translator too much has been made of St Thomas's alleged teaching on analogy. For him, analogy is not a way of getting to know about God, nor is it a theory of the structure of the universe, it is a comment on our use of certain words'. He would have done well to say what he was ruling out. Amusingly enough, as he knew, he was already contradicted by the general editor, Thomas Gilby, in his introduction: 'while it may well be that the subject of analogy has been overblown by some of his followers [Thomas] certainly did not leave it at the level of linguistics'. While Herbert probably never delved into the stack of highly sophisticated neoThomist reconstructions of Aquinas' supposed analogy theory, he no doubt regarded such super-subtle theorizing as overblown, blinding us from seeing how we obviously make analogical uses of words all the time. Then, since he didn't read German, Herbert certainly never read *Analogia Entis* (1932), Erich Przywara's classic monograph, highlighting the metaphysical principle of the analogy of being as the formal principle of the Catholic worldview as a whole.

Herbert liked this quote: 'Now, we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the way in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does' (*Summa Theologiae* 1a.3 as translated by Timothy McDermott). The following questions in the *prima pars* McCabe takes to be ruling out, step by step, what we would say of God. It's an apophatic procedure ('protocols against idolatry' in Nicholas Lash's fine phrase), rather than a list of divine attributes that delivers positive knowledge of the divine nature (however 'quidditative' as Thomists have sometimes argued). What it comes to, as he often put it, is that, in speaking of God, 'we can use words to mean more than we can understand'.

Whether meaning more by what we say about God than we find intelligible (in this life) is the upshot of Thomas's logical/grammatical analysis, as Herbert maintained, would not persuade every Thomist. It surely did not come to Herbert through reading Wittgenstein. It sounds much more likely to be what he heard in class at Blackfriars, Oxford, as Victor White commented on the text of the *Summa* (see Victor White OP, *God the Unknown*, Harvill Press 1956). Whether it is usefully or appropriately called Grammatical Thomism seems rather dubious.

Fergus Kerr OP

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