New Blackfriars

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Comment: Negative Theology

Negative Theology is a proposed antidote to the tendency to forget or pass over the profound difference there must be between God and any of God's creatures. Its advocates typically start with the conviction that God exists while then seriously insisting that we do not know *what* God is and that our most accurate way of characterizing God is to say what God is *not*. The intention here is to avoid us slipping into idolatry, the conviction that God is part of the created order. One may, however, wonder whether exponents of negative theology go too far, whether they end up effectively rejecting what Christians believe about God or even embracing a kind of atheism.

The value of negative theology is defended by Simon Hewitt in his *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis: Only the Splendour of Light* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020). This is the most recent book length discussion of Negative Theology and is something that readers of *New Blackfriars* can be encouraged to consult and reflect on. Simon teaches philosophy at the University of Leeds and is a Lay Dominican. He has a great respect for the writings of Aquinas and the philosophy of Wittgenstein. He is also a fan of the thinking of Herbert McCabe OP. Drawing on Aquinas, Wittgenstein and McCabe, Simon presents a strong defence of Negative Theology. For him, negative theology is what belief in God *demands*. The purpose of his book, he says, is 'to defend, from a perspective internal to Christian philosophical theology, an apophatic theology to which, far from being a concession to atheism, the claim that God is radically unknowable arises out of the very reasoning according to which we can come to know that God exists'.

Simon follows up on these remarks by noting how Aquinas proceeds just before he gets going on the text of *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 3 (which discusses the topic of God's simpleness and is titled *de Dei Simplicitate*). In his introduction to ST 1a, 3 Aquinas writes: 'We cannot understand what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist'. ST 1a, 3 goes on to make what some people would take to be extraordinary and unacceptable claims such as that God is *not* something capable of undergoing change, that God is *not* an individual member of any natural kind, that God is *not* something with properties considered as attributes distinguishable from what God is, and that God is *not* something to be thought of as able not to exist. While agreeing with Aquinas on these negative claims, Simon explains how they can be justified on the assumption that God is what accounts for there being something rather than nothing (the traditional

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understanding of the claim that God creates *everything* without *modifying* anything).

Critics of Simon might say that he is ignoring the many positive assertions about God that Aquinas makes. For does not Aquinas positively assert that, for example, God is perfect, that God is good, and that there is knowledge and will in God? The answer to this question is clearly 'Yes'. But Aquinas evidently does not take these 'positive' assertions to conflict with what he has to say about divine simplicity while focusing on negation. And Simon carefully explains why that is so and why Aquinas is definitely a friend of Negative Theology. His thesis (drawing on Aquinas) is that all of our attempts to describe God 'signify imperfectly' since our language (and therefore our understanding) is just not equipped to capture or grasp the nature of what God must be as Creator of all that is, seen and unseen.

McCabe once expressed this thought by asking us to imagine a child who has overheard someone saying 'If it were not for America we would have no Kentucky Fried Chicken'. McCabe then goes to say:

> Suppose s/he has heard nothing else whatever about America. Suppose s/he doesn't even know whether 'America' means a person or a place or a sum of money or a cooking technique. This child, I want to say, would know enormously more about the intricacies of American politics, economics, history, geography and way of life than we know from knowing that God is Creator of the world. By comparison with theologians and philosophers who talk about God, this child would be a learned and scholarly expert on America. After all, a certain amount might be deduced about America that without it there would be no Kentucky Fried Chicken (at least there are several intelligent guesses and alternative scenarios one might construct), whereas we can deduce nothing we can understand about God from the fact that if it were not for God there would be nothing at all. We can, of course, know some things that could not possibly be true of God, and we are able to say things about God which are not all negative in form. Unfortunately, though, we do not really know what these statements mean. They do not convey to us any information as to what God is like.

This is the line of thinking that Simon is defending. It is at odds with what many contemporary analytical philosophers and analytical theologians have to say while supposing that God is a kind of Top Person, like us while having more power, knowledge, and goodness to a greater degree than we do on a scale applying to both God and us. But that makes what Simon says worth considering by people with an interest in Aquinas and those theologians before and after him who have stressed the fact that we finite creatures, who rely on our senses for understanding what things are, have to be seriously lacking when it comes our understanding of what God is.

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