

St. Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich – Two Views of God the Creator

Kenton Machina

One of Christianity's deepest and most creative philosophical minds lived and worked in the 13th Century – at the prime of what we today call the “Middle Ages”, or the “Medieval” period in Europe. During this time, a hardened form of Christianity had become well entrenched as a state religion throughout Europe, supporting an intertwined power network of kings, lords, and the church hierarchy. Over the next three hundred years, this established order began to come apart at the seams, with a renaissance of interest in the humanistic arts and literature, the development of a larger merchant class, political independence movements in rebellion against Church control, the introduction of the printing press, and 16th Century reformation movements within the Church itself led by people like Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Looking back from a modern perspective on Europe as it was in those Medieval days and subsequent centuries, it is easy to be critical of the negative effects nurtured by the mingling of state power with the organized church. Contemporary society still suffers in many ways from the wounds opened in those days, including the nurturing of hatred toward Jewish people throughout Europe and the slaughter of Muslims in the Middle East during the Christian Crusades – the first “holy wars”.¹ (In that regard I find it incredible that some Christians in the US today are working for recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the US.)

But in cultural matters, things are rarely as simple as they might seem at first look. The Medieval church was not merely a power-hungry political organization. The church also fostered education and literacy among those in its employ, including a surprising amount of science. Without the church, it is quite possible that the knowledge and philosophical accomplishments of the ancient Romans and Greeks would have been entirely lost to Europe. Without the church it is quite possible there would have been no libraries left in Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Within the European church, universities developed and there was considerable intellectual activity and

¹Muslims today have not forgotten the brutality they suffered as a group at the hands of the Crusaders, some of whom gloried in the fact that Muslim blood literally ran in the streets of Jerusalem after their assault. For this reason, when President Bush announced a worldwide “crusade against terror” in response to the 9-11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, his wording led to immediate negative associations throughout the Muslim world, and he found himself entangled in agitated questions about whether his “war on terror” was a repeat of the Medieval Christian attempt to diminish the clout of Islam by military action. In remembering the Crusades, many Muslims do not remember the Muslim military adventures that preceded the Crusades and that precipitated considerable Christian fear of Muslim political expansion into Europe.

theological debate, particularly among those churchmen without political leadership roles. People like St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) and his correspondents are prime examples.²

Initially, the theological and philosophical ideas promoted by St. Thomas were viewed by some within the church hierarchy with great suspicion. The suspicion and outright opposition seems to have been based at least in part on the fact that Thomas built his theology not only on the Bible and the ideas of Christian thinkers before him, but also on the work of Aristotle, the ancient non-Christian Greek philosopher. Thomas seems to have been the first major Christian thinker to have recognized the power of Aristotle's philosophical analysis. The Bishop of Paris, where Thomas did much of his work, tried to have his ideas condemned. However, because Thomas was in a religious order, rather than being a parish priest (he was a Dominican), he had considerable freedom to raise questions and promote ideas so long as those in charge of his order supported him, which they did. (Much of the intellectual development within the Medieval church and later occurred within the various religious orders, where the members have enjoyed a measure of independence.) Eventually, St. Thomas became so revered that it was common to cite his views as the basis of all professional theologizing within the Roman Catholic church. During the 20th Century his centrality diminished, but that does not take away from what he accomplished in the way of systematic intellectual investigation into all aspects of Christian theology, and anything in philosophy that related to it.³

St. Thomas' argument for the reality of God as creator

Thomas argued that a few basic beliefs central to Christianity could be proved true by means of human reasoning, while many other beliefs had to be based on the acceptance of revelation from God.⁴ One of the beliefs that he thought could be proved to be true is the belief in a creator God. In fact, he offers five different arguments, often referred to as Aquinas' "Five Ways" to prove the reality of a creator God. His intent was to establish the reality of such a God on the basis of assumptions that all thoughtful people would accept, not using quotes from the Bible, or traditions, or other claims that only believers in God will find acceptable. In other words, he's trying to appeal to the area of overlap between worldviews that all people share.

In philosophical discussions of Thomas' arguments, it is common to focus all the attention on the question of whether he succeeds. But it is a mistake to jump immediately to the evaluation of his

²"Aquinas" is not his family name. It is the name of the place from which he came. Literally, "Thomas Aquinas" means "Thomas from Aquino". Aquino was a town in Italy.

³For those who are suspicious of philosophy in Christianity, here is apparently a true story about Thomas: Near the end of his short life, he had a mystical experience of such great power that he asserted afterward that all of his life's writing about theology was just "straw" in comparison to the connection with the divine that he had experienced at that time. Given that he had written thousands of pages of profound reflections on theology, his statement is remarkable.

⁴He understood the philosophical difficulty of deciding what to count as a genuine revelation, but his arguments about that subject are not to the point here.

claims. Rather, it is much more valuable for our purposes to focus first on really *understanding* just one of his five arguments – one that many people find quite appealing – namely, his second “Way”. Understanding this argument, in my opinion, will reveal much about why Christians (and many non-Christians, such as Judaists and Muslims) accept the reality of a creator God, for I think this argument captures a key element in the worldview that has such a God at its center. It’s the sort of argument that common people can relate to and recognize as being something like what they themselves endorse. The argument is based on the idea of God as the ultimate explanation for why we have the universe that we have.

(Actually, believers in a creator God who give arguments in support of their belief more commonly appeal to something like Thomas’ fifth argument, rather than his second one. But a discussion of that argument must wait until we talk about contemporary debates regarding the question whether science has rendered the idea of a creator God obsolete. The fifth is based on the idea that certain facts about our universe show it to be intelligently designed.)

So, how does the second argument go? Here is my own recreation of the argument:⁵

Whatever we find in the world of our sense experience has an explanation⁶ for why it is the way it is (whether or not we know what the explanation may be). But explanation always works the same way, and the basic features of the way explanation operates are the key to the argument.

The main feature of explanation that we need to notice is that explanations always operate in a certain ordered way, as follows: Nothing in the world that is accessible to our senses can be thought to explain why it is the way it is, because the explanation for why something is the way it is must refer to some reality that existed prior to what is being explained. [Of course, the prior thing might also still exist, but the point is that it had to at least exist prior to the thing being explained. For example, to explain why a building is the way it is now, we must refer to some factor or agent that existed prior to the building’s being this way, such as an architect’s plans or builders’ efforts, or damage due to weather, or] Since obviously

⁵The original argument is found in Thomas’ enormous work, called the *Summa of theology*, Part One, Question 2, Article 3. This *Summa* was never finished – Thomas’ death prevented his return to the work; the completed portions were written from 1266-1272.

⁶In standard translations of the argument, the term “explanation” does not appear. Instead, the word “cause” is used. However, this use of the word “cause” comes directly from the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who talked about different types of explanation by using the word that gets translated as “cause”. Aristotle, and St. Thomas, were really talking about various kinds of answers that can be given to the question, “Why?” These answers, I claim, are all reasonably called explanations. The notion of explanation is much broader than the notion that today is typically referred to by the word “cause”. So, I use the word “explanation” in my rendering of the argument.

nothing exists prior to the time it exists, to explain why something in the world of sense experience is the way it is, we have to refer to something other than that thing itself. [Another way to put this point: in order for a natural thing to explain itself, it would have to have existed prior to its own existence, which is impossible.]

But now we can ask about the explanation for why things around us are the way they are. We have already established that none of these things can explain themselves. So they are all explained by something other than themselves. [For example, one might explain the current state of the universe by appeal to a prior state of the universe. Or one might explain current thinking about the Bible by referring to the process by which that thinking developed.] But this immediately raises a question about whether such explanations can be complete – that is, do they really answer the demand for an explanation?

Not if they themselves require explanation for why they were the way they were. [So, if you try to explain why the building is the way it is by appealing to the builders and the architect's plans, that immediately invites the question for why the builders did what they did, and why the plans were they were. For example, if the building fell down and we traced the explanation back to the architect's plans, we would want to know why the plans were defective. It might be we would discover the architect was poorly trained, and place the blame there. But then we could ask why the architect was poorly trained, and so on.] This means that so long as we give explanations by reference to things that themselves require explanation, we are not done with our explanation. There is always a further Why question.

So, to generate a completed explanation – one that really answers the question of why things are the way they are – you have to find some place to stop the series of explanations. But the only legitimate place to stop is to find something that does not itself require any explanation for why it is the way it is. This thing would be something that is not dependent on anything for why it is the way it is. This thing is the ultimate explanation for why anything is the way it is. This thing is quite reasonably called God. In other words, God is the ultimate explanation for why anything in the world of our experience is the way that it is.

Notice that Thomas is not here denying that there are “intermediate” causes. E.g., he is not claiming that it is wrong to explain the building's collapse by citing things like the architect's failures. But he is claiming that such an explanation is incomplete, and that it really does not give us understanding of the building's collapse if we suppose that there is no explanation for why the architect's plans were defective. Imagine that there were an inquiry into the collapse, and the architect was called as a witness. Suppose she agreed that her plans were defective, and she was asked how that came to be. Then suppose she said that there simply was no explanation at all for why

the plans were defective. It was not carelessness or bad training, it was not anything at all that caused the plans to be bad. It just happened for no reason. In that case, would we think we had been given a legitimate explanation for why the building collapsed? Probably not. We would insist that surely there is some reason for the defect in the plans, and until we know it, we don't really have a good explanation for what happened. This is Thomas' point. Everything in the world of our experience has an explanation. But he insists that this implies that all explanations ultimately must terminate in a fundamental explanation that requires no further explanation.⁷

In other words, this is an argument for the reality of a fundamental explanatory factor on which all explanation of everything in the world of our experience depends. This fundamental explanatory factor, that requires no explanation, is not in the world of our sense experience. It has to be something that is totally self-dependent, for otherwise it would require explanation by reference to something outside of itself. Apparently, Thomas is assuming that nothing in the realm of things accessible to our senses is self-dependent. (This will lead to an objection to his argument. See the second objection below.) Thomas thinks that such a self-dependent explanatory factor, or explanatory reality, deserves to be called divine. He certainly is not claiming that he has shown that this divine reality is loving or merciful or good. So the God that emerges from this argument is simply the ultimate explanation for why the universe is the way it is – why the laws of nature are the way they are, why the universe is here at all.

Notice also that this argument has nothing to do with the idea that God created the world at some particular point in time, or that the universe had a beginning at all. It's not about beginnings; it's about dependency. That is, the argument sees God as a being, a factor, a reality on which the world we experience with our senses depends for its explanation. As far as I can see, in this way the argument sidesteps the question of whether the physical universe had a beginning. (Again, this is connected to a possible objection. See the second objection below.) It is not too surprising that Thomas would develop an argument of this sort, since he was very impressed with the philosophical work of the ancient Greek, Aristotle. Aristotle thought the physical universe had always existed, and had no temporal beginning – in fact, he argued that the notion of a beginning to the physical universe was incoherent. It was this very idea of Aristotle's that aroused suspicion in the church against St. Thomas when it became apparent that Thomas was building much of his own thinking on the work of Aristotle.

One more thing to notice: there is a strong tradition in Christian theology to refer to God not only as the Creator, but also the "Sustainer" of the universe. Perhaps St. Thomas' argument could be seen as one way of interpreting the notion of God as sustainer. After all, Thomas is saying that the ultimate explanation for the way things are in our universe right now traces back to God. So, it's not just some events that happened a long time ago that are explained by reference to God. Events happening right now are ultimately explained by reference to God.

⁷In some cases, perhaps, the only explanation for why something happened is that it flowed directly from God. "Intermediate" causes are not necessarily required by the argument.

Unfortunately, the argument as I have rendered it above appears to have a very serious consequence, namely, that God is the ultimate explanation for why there is bad, why there is suffering, why there is evil, why there is pain in the world of our experience. Thomas is aware of this problem and has a very short reply: Assuming that the God who is the ultimate explanation is a loving and good being, it has to be that all things work out for the best. There is no other option. He does not try to explain *how* this is possible. He simply notes that *there is* no other logical possibility. What seems to us to be bad, or inconsistent with what God would allow if He were good, must be part of a larger scheme in which it contributes to some greater good.

Critique of the argument

Once the argument is understood and appreciated, it is possible to raise useful questions about how good it is. Does it appeal to basic claims that cannot be accepted by all reasonable people? Is there some flaw in the logic that connects its various parts?

A number of issues could be raised regarding the argument, but I think there are three main points of difficulty with the argument.

The first of these difficulties has to do with whether Thomas is right about the way explanation works – do we really agree that no satisfactory explanation exists unless there is an underlying basic explanation that is completely self-dependent? Suppose, for example, that the universe popped into being without any explanation at all, a long time ago. It was just a random occurrence, without any purpose, without any explanation. Does that really imply that no legitimate explanations of anything can be given? What would be wrong with explaining lots of everyday occurrences by citing the laws of nature and prior events? According to Thomas, it's fine to give such explanations, but they only work if we admit that there is an explanation for why the laws of nature are the way they are. But is he right about that? Suppose I say that the laws of nature are what they are simply because they popped into being along with the universe, without any explanation. There simply is no answer to the question of why the laws of nature are what they are. It's just a brute, unexplainable fact. It's unexplainable because there is no reason why the laws are the way they are.

The issue about this point seems to center on the concept of explanation. Thomas insists that explanation is satisfactory or genuine only when it has a foundation that does not need explanation. The objector thinks that explanation need not have that kind of foundation. Thomas would probably reply to the objector by saying that if the objector were correct, then at bottom nothing in the world has any real explanation. Sure, he would say, we “explain” things by reference to the laws of nature, but these laws themselves have no explanation, so aren't we really saying that there is no explanation for why things are the way they are? A steadfast objector will probably deny that Thomas is right about this point. They will probably say that if we explain A by reference to B, we have explained A even if we say that B itself has no explanation. For example, if we suppose there is no explanation for why a flipped coin lands heads up, and we flip a coin to decide whether you live or die by execution, the objector might say your execution or lack of execution is explained by reference to the coin flip, even though there is no explanation for why the coin lands the way that it does.

If we step back just a bit from this evaluation question, we can see what is at stake. Even if the objector wins the above argument, Thomas has still made a point worth noting. If the objector wins the argument, Thomas has not proved that there is a fundamental explanation for everything. But he has nevertheless pushed the objector into making an important admission: the universe has no explanation. In other words, this debate highlights for us a stark choice – either the universe as a whole has some sort of explanation for why it is the way it is, where that explanation cannot be given by reference to the universe itself, or there is no explanation whatsoever for why the universe as a whole is the way it is. If we think the first option is the right one, there is something reasonable about referring to the explanation for the whole universe as being divine, since it seems to be independent of the physical universe. But there is no reason to suppose that this “divine” reality is anything like the God that Christianity has typically talked about as good, or loving, or just. Words like those seem to make the divinity very person-like, whereas Thomas’ argument gives us at best a rather abstract conception of the divine as a fundamental explanatory factor for all of the universe. Nevertheless, this idea of God as the fundamental explanation for why the universe is the way that it is, is a deep and powerful rendition of the traditional Christian notion of a single divinity as creator (a notion shared with several other religious traditions).

The second major difficulty with the argument: the objector might try to avoid being pushed into the corner described above by saying that the universe can explain itself if the universe has always existed. Then, we don’t need God as an explanation for the universe’s being the way it is. The universe itself is its own explanation. Now, Thomas thinks he has already dealt with this problem, for he assumes it is obvious that an explanation of something X in the physical world has to appeal to something that existed prior to X. So, if we accept that principle, then in order for the universe to explain itself, it would have to have existed prior to itself, which is clearly impossible, whether or not the universe had a beginning. (Even if the universe never had a beginning, it surely did not exist prior to itself.) But the objector may well reply to all this by denying the basic assumption that explanation of a physical thing must always appeal to something that existed prior to the thing being explained. In the case of something that comes into existence, the objector might say, Thomas is right—its explanation must refer to something prior; but in the case of something that has always been around, why can’t we see that thing as self-explanatory?

It is hard to know what to say about this objection. It may seem as though it turns on an obscure technicality about explanation. However, if you really “get” what is at stake here, you will see that it is not just a technicality. The Christian position articulated by Thomas is claiming that even a universe that has always been in existence cannot be self-explanatory – there will still be a question about why that universe has the character that it has. This will not be a question about how the universe began, since we are assuming for the sake of the argument at the moment that the universe did not have a beginning. Instead, it will be a question about why we have this universe rather than some other one, or why there is a universe at all. Basically, the objector is saying that the eternal universe just is a given, and no further explanation is needed. Thomas is saying that’s not satisfactory, for if you claim that everything rests on the unexplained fact that the universe is here and that it has the character that it has, then you really haven’t explained anything at all.

Now for the third main difficulty with the argument: Thomas sees his argument as establishing the reality of a *single* divinity, whom he calls “God”. But it is not at all clear why he thinks that there could not be many different ultimate explanatory factors, each of which is completely self-dependent. To put the point bluntly, why does he think he has shown the existence of only one God? Why not three, four, or ten, each rather different from the other? Perhaps each could be the ultimate explanation for some different aspect of the physical universe. Maybe this wouldn’t work out too well for getting us a coordinated, unified universe, but nothing in the argument claimed that the universe as a whole is coordinated or unified. The argument merely claimed that each thing in the world that we can access through our senses has an explanation that traces back to some fundamental explanation. I don’t see why different things in the world of our sense experience couldn’t trace back to different ultimate explanatory factors.

If this critique is correct, the argument needs to have some further development before it will work as Thomas intended. Exactly how this might go is unclear, but it would probably have something to do with claiming that the universe as a whole is seen to be a coordinated whole, working under the same principles at all times and everywhere, so that the ultimate explanation for why the universe is the way that it is has to be able to explain why there is this coordination. I leave it to you to think about whether a move like that might help the argument, and about how the details might go. It’s not so clear to me how it will all work out.

Moving beyond critique

For our purposes, it’s not important whether the reality of God can be *proved*. Very few Christians now think that it can be proved by arguments such as Thomas’ argument. Unfortunately, to my way of thinking anyway, it is common among Christians to jump from this to the claim that belief in God is just a matter of faith, where that basically means that one is supposed to accept it without having any reasons at all for doing so. However, if having a grounded faith means having a faith that makes sense of things, it is important to consider whether believing in the reality of God makes any sense. Does it help to make sense of things? On that score, the above analysis of Thomas’ argument should be helpful. It presents us with a way of seeing the world in relation to God, in which God is represented as the explanation for why things are the way they are – that is, in which God is represented as a creator and perhaps as a sustainer. To many people, that picture of the universe as having an ultimate explanation that needs no further explanation is very appealing; it provides a basis for understanding everything. Without an ultimate explanation for why the universe is the way it is, we are left with the somewhat unsettling idea that the universe is a giant, unexplainable accident. This may well not count as a *proof* of the reality of God, but it does seem to count as a reason for thinking that belief in such a God helps to make sense of things.

On the other hand, the appeal of the idea that a Christian God could be the ultimate explanation is damaged, I think, by the realization that this way of seeing divinity comes with a heavy price: the problem of evil and suffering. If God is the ultimate explanation for why things are the way they are, then God must be the ultimate explanation for why things are so often in a horrible state. Unless something can be said to alleviate that problem, the idea of a loving, good, and just God as creator may not make much sense. Unless that problem can be handled, we might end up with the idea of a

rather brutal or incompetent creator God for our explanation of a world that so often is cruel or harsh. St. Thomas' brief assertion that the universe must be set up in such a way that a greater good comes out of anything bad may seem like a desperate measure that in fact does not make much sense.

A 20th Century development of these ideas by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich was well-known in the latter half of the 20th Century for his reconceptualization of Christian theology in a way that removed mythological elements from it.

To understand what this means, it is necessary to understand what mythological thinking is. Mythological thinking predominated at the time of the writing of the Bible, and the Bible expresses its theology in mythological terms. Mythological thinking amounts to this: everything that happens is explained as the result of the intentional actions of intelligent beings, many of which are supernatural, or by the activities of good or bad "powers". People got sick because they were being punished by a supernatural being, volcanoes erupted because the gods were angry, crops were good because some god intervened to bring good weather, wars were won and lost on the strength of which army's god was more powerful. In mythology, angels deliver messages, demons cause troubles, and demi-gods are born as the result of a god's having intervened to bring about a human woman's pregnancy, often through some sexual act. But people also bring about things through their intentional actions, sometimes for good, sometimes for evil.

However, the mythological way of thinking does not fit well with modern concepts of how the universe works. That has led to an unfortunate development in the common understanding of what it means to call something "mythological" – in the common understanding, "myth" means "false" or "ignorant" or "mistaken". But to claim that mythological thinking is wrong, or a mistake, is to pass a judgment on it, based on acceptance of a more modern outlook. To suppose that mythology has no value simply because it is out of harmony with a more scientific understanding of the world is to jump to a conclusion that may not be warranted.

So, what should happen to Christian theology in the modern world? Should it continue to be expressed in mythological ways? Does that make it disconnect from the broader culture in a way that causes non-Christians to miss the point? Several prominent Christian theologians have thought that the Christian message must be completely recast so as to eliminate the mythology from it. But what would such a theology look like? Would it have lost all its power? Would the guts have been ripped out of it? These are hard questions.

Stepping into this fray, Paul Tillich (a Lutheran theologian, for those who care about such things) labored to develop a Christian outlook with substance and power that was more or less devoid of mythology. He proposed a way of thinking of God that seems to me to be entirely non-mythological. He proposed that we conceive of God as the "Ground of being".⁸ What does this mean? What is a "ground" for something?

⁸See his *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1. University of Chicago Press, 1951.

It seems to me that Tillich's proposal can be approached by comparing it to St. Thomas' idea of God as the ultimate explanation for why everything is the way it is. Being a ground is something like being an explanation. So, I'm suggesting that St. Thomas' notion of God as the ultimate explanation is also non-mythological. Neither the notion of a basic ground nor the notion of an ultimate explanation carries with it the idea of a divinity that is something like an invisible superman or superwoman. Mythological conceptions of divinity make the gods out to be very much like humans, but with superhuman powers. The notions of an ultimate explanation or of a basic ground for everything do not imply that divinity is like us.

So, what is a ground? A ground is a basis on which something rests. The ground of everything is the basis on which everything rests. This sounds to me quite a lot like Thomas' ultimate explanation of why everything is the way it is. Perhaps the notion of ground is more abstract than the notion of explanation. Probably the notion of ground is the notion of "that-without-which-not". Here's what I mean: the ground for your graduation is everything that has to be in place in order for you to graduate, such as having enough credits, your continuing to be alive, the continued existence of the world, and so on. In other words, all those things without which you will not graduate – all those things are the ground of your graduation.

If this is right, Tillich's conception of God is this: God is that without which nothing has being. God is the ultimate ground for everything. God is that without which nothing happens, nothing exists, nothing has meaning.

So, if you ask Tillich if there is a God, he could ask you whether anything exists, whether anything happens, whether anything has meaning. If you say "yes", then he can say to you that whatever is the ultimate basis for those things is God. This may not tell you a lot about God, but it tells you that you are committed to the reality of God as soon as you commit to the reality of anything at all.

Of course, there are objections to Tillich's approach, but that is not the point right now. Rather, the point right now is to see how the notions of God as creator/sustainer have been developed in interesting ways – ways that conceive of creation not merely as an event that happened a long time ago, and that simultaneously provide reasons for thinking that there really is a creator God. These conceptions of a creator God are part of the effort to build a Christian worldview that makes sense to a wide range of people. These efforts capture, I think, some of what many Christians (and others in various non-Christian religious traditions) find appealing about the notion of a divine creator. But they also turn off many Christians who find the resulting notions of God as creator to be too abstract and impersonal. These Christians may prefer the Biblical mythological picture of God walking in the garden with Adam and Eve.⁹

⁹To be fair to St. Thomas and Paul Tillich, one must examine a great deal more of what they have to say about God. The story does not end with the conceptions mentioned in this brief essay. Tillich, for example, works very hard to explain how the Ground of being becomes accessible and important to humans other than as the abstract foundation of their very existence.