

# Introduction

Who is God? Below is the traditional Christian answer, or better its necessary beginning. This answer does not resolve every theological question; it generates further questions that call for more theological investigation. It is not a definition but an invitation to a journey, for theology is always *in via*. The answer comes from Thomas Aquinas, who set it forth in the first forty-three questions of his *Summa Theologiae*. His first twenty-six questions lead us into God's essence or nature: God is simple, perfect, immutable, impassible, infinite, eternal, and one; the next seventeen into God's processions: the one essence is revealed in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because the essence or nature is the processions, the two parts, following the pattern of the Nicene Creed, signify the one God. The following is a summary of the traditional answer:

God is simple, perfect, immutable, impassible, infinite, eternal and one, who is revealed in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God's essence is one, yet each person is the essence. The Father is the essence. The Son is the essence and the Spirit is the essence. The Father, Son and Spirit are also the essence. Nonetheless, there is only one essence and three persons. The persons are distinguished by their relations.

Aquinas did not invent this answer; he developed it from authorities, especially Holy Scripture, Augustine, Dionysius, Hilary, John of Damascus, Boethius, Lombard, and others. He also drew on philosophers such as Aristotle, Plotinus, and Proclus. The answer is

found throughout the Christian tradition, among Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant theologians and confessions, but that alone does not yet tell us much. To discern the importance of this answer we must ask, “What kind of answer is this, what questions gave rise to it, and to what questions does it give rise?”

Like all answers, this answer makes good sense within the context of some questions and less so in the context of others. The argument in this work will be that the context within which the answer makes best sense is the question, “How do we speak well of the mystery of the Holy Trinity?” Divine simplicity and perfection make most sense when they are an answer to that question. They are also used as an answer to questions such as “What can be known of God by reason independent of faith or nature independent of grace?” and “How does God predestine all things to God’s own glory?” When the answer is to the latter questions, so my argument will suggest, it generates difficulties that are not as troubling as when it answers the first question.

Notice how the different contexts subtly shift the answer:

Question 1: How do we speak well of the mystery of the Holy Trinity?

Answer: God is the perfectly simple Triune God.

Question 2: What can be known of God by nature and reason, and what by faith and grace?

Answer: Nature or reason tells us God is perfectly simple; faith or grace that God is Triune.

Question 3: How does God predestine all things to God’s own glory?

Answer: God predestines them as the perfectly simple God whose knowledge is the cause of all things.

The answer to all three questions is not wrong per se, but the terms *perfectly* and *simple* have different functions in each of these contexts. In the first question, the terms function to speak as well as we can of the Triune mystery. In the second question, the answer is divided into two parts to address epistemological concerns. In the third question,

the terms *perfectly* and *simple* function not to address the Triune mystery but God's relationship to creation as a causal power.

Although all three answers may be accurate, the meanings of *simple* and *perfection* shift. My argument in what follows is that the first question is the most proper, and any role remaining for the next two questions must come by way of it. I also hope to show that this is the best, albeit not the only way, to interpret Thomas's first forty-three questions in the *Summa*. When they are not interpreted through that question, then the affirmation of the "perfectly simple Triune God" will lose something significant. A tacit assumption running through my argument is that the "counters" of Counter-Reformation and countermodernist theologies on both the Catholic and Protestant sides took the common answer and used it to address questions for which it was not primarily made, seeking to drive a wedge between opponents. What should unite people of faith, the knowledge and identification of the Holy Trinity as the object worthy of our worship, was turned into an instrument of battle to gain victory over others.<sup>1</sup> If Reformed theologians placed the answer in a new context emphasizing predestination, Catholic Counter-Reformation theology often placed it in a new context of argument, emphasizing theological epistemology. The answer then supposedly demonstrates that Catholicism maintains reason against Protestant and modern fideism.

When the answer is placed in the context of the relation between reason and faith or grace and nature, then it requires parsing it other than Aquinas presented it. That happened: Thomas's answer became divided into two treatises and were given titles he did not use. Rather than his own terms of the essence of God and the "Triune persons *in divinis*" (see *ST I 27* proem.), they became known as *de deo uno*, or God's oneness, and *de deo trino*, or the divine Trinity. The first supposedly sets forth what metaphysical reason can know of God without revelation, and the second how revelation further specifies who the one God is without reference to metaphysics or philosophy. Such a division,

1. I use the term *object* intentionally, drawing on Katherine Sonderegger's convincing argument that God is the subject who in his love is also object. See Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 441–45.

however, distorts how the answer names the Triune God. Far from creating two separate treatises, one based on philosophy and the other on revelation, the terms used to identify God's oneness are necessary to express well divine Trinity, and vice versa. In other words, simplicity does not name an "attribute" or "property" of God known by reason alone; it is what allows theologians to identify the persons as the essence of God without positing four essences, or making creation a fourth divine hypostasis. Likewise, the divine Trinity is not a further specification of God after metaphysical reason has completed its task; the Triune persons reveal what simplicity means so that it can be applied to God, who is known to have real distinctions, which at first glance appears to deny simplicity. If we are to use the terms, then *de deo uno* must always be read from the perspective of *de deo trino*, and *de deo trino* must always be read from the perspective of *de deo uno*. They must be read simultaneously. But creaturely human language does not permit their simultaneous expression in either written or oral form; it always fails, which is also what this answer affirms, and this is the cause of much theological confusion in contemporary theology.

The confusion comes in two main forms. One form finds the *de deo uno* as the necessary metaphysical supposition for the *de deo trino*. Convinced that metaphysical reason properly identifies *that God is*, this first form confuses the *de deo uno* with an objective metaphysical foundation on which the divine Trinity must be expressed. The result is often a loss of the dramatic character of God's existence in God's self and for us. In other words, an "abstract" metaphysics renders God impersonal.<sup>2</sup> A second form emphasizes the *de deo trino* and

2. Although I will defend "abstraction" and metaphysics throughout this work, I also recognize there are presentations of them that are problematic. I think they are much more feared than they should be, but the concern is not misplaced. See Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1969), for a discussion of Hegel's difficulty with Anselm's ontological proof for God's existence and how it leads to "abstract being" that cannot distinguish between being and nothing. Hegel writes, "When reality, taken as a determinate quality as it is in the said definition of God, is extended beyond its determinateness it ceased to be reality and becomes abstract being; God as the *pure* reality in all realities, or as the sum total of all realities, is just as devoid of determinateness and content as the empty absolute in which all is one" (113). I have serious reservations about theologians' use of Hegel's critique of "substance" metaphysics, as will become evident in what follows. However, I would agree with Cyril O'Regan's affirmation of Hans Urs von Balthasar's work that "although Hegel's own metaphysical articulation proves problematic for Balthasar, Hegel's critique both of the abstraction of the classical metaphysical

acknowledges God's dramatic character, but finds the *de deo uno* static, restrictive, and unnecessary. This form results from the Trinitarian and christological turns in modern theology, turns as we shall see that follow rules established by Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. The consequence has been repeated calls for revisions to the traditional language of the *de deo uno*.

The following work is an exposition, defense, and, in part, critical revision of Aquinas's synthesis of the traditional answer to the question "Who is God?" noted above, attending to the good and not-so-good reasons for the two forms of confusion. To accomplish this task, the work divides into three parts. The first part is exposition. Engaging with Thomas Aquinas, the first part explains how the (so-called) *de deo uno* and *de deo trino* entail each other. Each of the terms expressing God's unified essence—*existence*, *simplicity*, *perfection*, *immutability*, *infinity*, and *eternity*—are explained in terms of their key role in expressing divine Trinity. I recognize some might find this reading of Thomas Aquinas a Protestant reading. Although there are Catholic theologians who would confirm it, I no longer contest the charge. There are important "Protestant" reasons for engaging Thomas and reading him against much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century antimodern Catholic thought.

In his 1941 seminar on the Council of Trent, Karl Barth stated that every generation of Protestant theology must "engage the phenomenon of Roman Catholicism" in order to recognize where it does and does not require reform.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of our own self-understanding, Protestant theologians must engage Thomas. Our generation is not the first to do so. As will be demonstrated, many of the significant Protestant theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cited Thomas for their doctrine of God. They were part of a Thomistic renaissance. They may even provide a reading of Thomas that became obscured by the "counters" that came to define those

tradition and its commitments to a static ontology are not entirely misplaced"; Cyril O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar's Response to Philosophical Modernity*, vol. 1, *Hegel* (New York: Crossroad, 2014), 117.

3. See D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 243.

generations after the fact. The perfectly simple Triune God was never a source of division for the Reformers or Protestant Scholastics.

Since Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni patris* set forth Thomas as the philosopher who could restore philosophy against modernity's criticisms, Thomas's work has been a bulwark for Catholic engagements with the doctrine of God against modern (Protestant) trends, both in philosophy and theology. Such an engagement led to the antimodernist oath and the reduction of Thomas's thought to twenty-four theses set forth by Pius X in his 1914 *Postquam sanctissimus*. It was, in part, the dissatisfaction of some of this engagement that led Catholic theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, and others to reread Thomas and provide a different engagement with modernity that led to Vatican II. Protestant theology must ask what relationship it has to these diverse Catholic engagements. As we will see in what follows, many Protestant theologians have now set their doctrine of God against Thomist answers to the question "Who is God?" Thus what was not at stake in the Reformation, the teaching on God's essence or nature, has now become one more point of division in the "enigmatic cleft" dividing Protestants and Catholics. Should it be? I think not. It matters that we worship the same God, a God everyone recognizes across our divides.

A great deal is at stake here. If we can only name, love, and worship what we know, and if we have differing doctrines of God, then the only way forward for theology is to identify the grave errors on the other side and require conversion. But if, despite the significant differences on authority and ecclesiology that divide Protestants from Catholics as well as Protestants from Protestants and Catholics from Catholics, we are still able to recognize that each tradition names, identifies, and worships the same God, then the importance of those differences will be relativized. In other words, if each tradition claims that its understanding of authority and ecclesiology is necessary for a proper doctrine of God and yet nonetheless also recognizes the same Triune God is the object of worship in the other tradition, then with respect

to what matters most—our chief end—those differences cannot be decisive. The following argument sets forth a Thomist answer to the question “Who is God?” and shows the breadth of acceptance it found among Protestant theologians, and among church confessions prior to the eighteenth century.

Although Thomas Aquinas gave a formative answer to the question “Who (and what) is God?” in the thirteenth century, his presentation of it was neither unique nor original. He found it in the Bible, and in most of the church fathers, in Augustine, Dionysius, John of Damascus, Anselm, and Peter Lombard. Thomas also drew on philosophy and non-Christian authorities for his answer. The first chapter takes the reader through the first forty-three questions of his *Summa*. The focus is on those questions because they have become the source of division. The second chapter examines Thomas’s sources for those divisions, arguing that he found them particularly in two central church fathers, Augustine and Dionysius, as well as in sacred Scripture. The point of this chapter is to show the breadth of authorities for the traditional answer. Thomas was not being innovative or making a unique contribution to the doctrine of God. These two chapters constitute the first part of the work.

The second part of this project shows how Protestant traditions inherited Thomas’s answer. The heart of the traditional answer was not challenged by the Reformation, for it is found with some modifications in Reformed thinkers such as Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Girolamo Zanchi, Peter Martyr Vermigli, John Owen, Richard Hooker, and John Wesley. The second part includes, then, an exposition of the broad consensus this language had, a consensus that is instantiated in most Protestant confessions.

The third part describes how the answer became questioned in the modern era from a variety of theologians and theological movements. Many, if not the majority, of contemporary theologians would agree with Barry Smith: “Even though enshrined in historical Articles of Faith, the simplicity doctrine in the modern period has faded from prominence that it formerly enjoyed, sometimes being judged to be

a piece of scholastic arcanity.”<sup>4</sup> Or, as John Sanders notes, “Modern theology has witnessed a remarkable reexamination of the divine-human relationship as well as of the attributes of God.”<sup>5</sup> This “remarkable reexamination” does not fit any prescribed theological or political programs. It occurs among evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, liberal and magisterial Protestants. It can be found among theologians who delight in the scandal of heresy as well as theologians who affirm the core teachings of Chalcedon and Nicea. Most calls for revision arise from the perceived inability of the traditional answer to address questions of evil, freedom, liberation, logical analysis, or biblical interpretation. This third part seeks to accomplish two goals. The first is to present and take seriously the challenges each of the theologians and theological movements critical of the traditional answer pose to it. The point of this work is not simply to repeat past formulas but to bring them into conversation with modern, postmodern, and postcolonial challenges. The second is to ask whether the traditional answer can accommodate these critiques. It will do so by suggesting where the challenges misunderstand and/or misstate the traditional answer, where they require an either-or judgment, where they make an important point that the traditional answer cannot, or has not yet, addressed, and where they raise something completely new, which will call for supplementation. Doctrine develops and makes progress. Defending the “traditional answer” is not an act of nostalgia, nor a call for a return to an era to which we cannot, and should not, return.

4. Barry D. Smith, *The Oneness and Simplicity of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 84.

5. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 160.