

# Misrepresenting Aquinas with Prejudice: Why Reformed Theology is Not Sectarian

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Scott Oliphint's highly negative verdict on the thought of Thomas Aquinas demands some response if only because of the need to have, in Reformed circles, the balanced understanding of Aquinas' theology and philosophy that Oliphint fails to provide. It is a fairly consistent refrain throughout Oliphint's book, *Thomas Aquinas* (P&R, 2017), that Aquinas failed in an attempt to "synthesize 'purely' philosophical with theological *principia*"—failed because "the two *principia* cannot be merged" (p. 124). These "ultimately incompatible *principia*" are, according to Oliphint, "the neutrality of natural reason ... and the truth of God's revelation" (p. 126). I propose to take up the two questions that are the focus of Oliphint's book, the problem of knowledge, specifically knowledge of God; and in a second part of the review, Aquinas' understanding of the analogy of being, the proofs, and the relationship of divine simplicity to the Trinity. Concluding comments will follow as a third part.

## The Knowledge of God

Oliphint rests his examination of the *praeambula fidei* on Ralph McInerny's recent study as if McInerny argued that the preambles, namely, the proofs of Thomas' *Summa*, are autonomous "purely philosophical" arguments, products of "pure nature" (p. 79, n63), "outside the realm of theology," viewed by Aquinas as necessary "in order properly to assess the knowledge of God" (pp. 25-26, 27). What McInerny actually says is that "It is obvious that the phrase 'preambles of faith' is one devised and used from the side of belief; it is the believer who compares truths about God that he holds only thanks to the grace of faith and those truths about God that philosophers come to know by way of demonstrative proof."<sup>1</sup> This is a very different reading of Aquinas than Oliphint's claim that "Thomas thinks that natural reason forms the foundational structure of which revelation is the superstructure" (p. 13). Oliphint is mistaken in his reading of Thomism as attempting to merge the antithetical "*principia*" of a neutral "natural reason" and the truth of revelation.

When Aquinas makes his distinction between those truths concerning God that can be known through human reason and those that exceed the capability of

reason and must be known by revelation, he is not segmenting off rational from revealed truths: rather he is placing his entire rational presentation within the compass of sacred doctrine which deals with God "not only so far as he can be known through creatures just as philosophers knew him ... but also so far as He is known to himself alone and revealed to others."<sup>2</sup> Aquinas did not view truths of reason and truths of revelation as incompatible or in need of synthesis. Underlying the theological project of Aquinas' two *Summas* is the assumption that what is true is true whatever its immediate source, given that all truth ultimately comes from God who is true. Aquinas' project is not an attempt to synthesize incompatibles.

The basis for this particular misinterpretation appears in Oliphint's definition of *duplex veritatis modus*, incorrectly rendered as "truth in two ways" and "double ways of truth."<sup>3</sup> "Modus" is nominative singular—with the result that the term indicates one "twofold way" or "twofold mode" of truth and not two ways of truth. The mistranslation is probably what leads Oliphint to confuse *duplex veritatis modus* with *duplex veritas* or "double truth." Oliphint goes on to comment "that it is possible for something to be true in philosophy but false in theology, or false in theology but true in philosophy," namely, double truth (p. 129). Aquinas affirms a twofold way of knowing truth about God—but he denied double truth. From Aquinas' perspective, reason teaches that God exists (which is true) and revelation teaches that God exists (which is true): there is no incompatibility between the rational and the revealed truth, because it is the same truth, but in the case of revelation in a different "mode" because from a higher, clearer source.

It is also does not follow from the absence of a discussion of the noetic effect of sin in Aquinas' *praeambula* that the issue was not broached and understood in his theology. One need look no further than Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* to find that he views "weakness, ignorance, malice, and concupiscence... as wounds of nature consequent on sin" and that he explicitly indicates that these wounds were "inflicted on the whole of human nature as a result of the first parent's sin": reason is "deprived of order" and wounded with "ignorance" and "obscured, especially in practical matters."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, in the very argument that Oliphint cites from Aquinas' *Commentary on the Gospel of John* as a basic statement of Aquinas' view of the powers of natural reason,<sup>5</sup> Aquinas also comments on the phrase "the world did not know him" (Jn. 1:10) to the effect that "this lack is attributed to man's guilt."<sup>6</sup>

Aquinas' exposition of Romans 1:19-20, moreover, is much like that of Calvin, Vermigli, and various of the Reformed orthodox: there is knowledge of some truth concerning God among the Gentiles, to the end that they are left "without excuse" in their ungodliness.<sup>7</sup> This limited knowledge of God cannot indicate "what God is [*quid est Deus*]" inasmuch as it arises only from the light of reason and sense knowledge—although such aspects of God as his goodness, wisdom, and power can be known.<sup>8</sup> In their guilt, human beings fail to use the knowledge of God that they have and with "perverse reasoning" change true knowledge of God into false teachings.<sup>9</sup> Contra Oliphint, Aquinas has not "wholly misread and misunderstood what Scripture is arguing" (p. 44).

The problem is most apparent in Oliphint's highly selective use of Aquinas' commentary on John 1:9, which leaves out the portions that undermine his argument. Aquinas indicates that human beings are enlightened by "the light of natural knowledge," which insofar as it is light is such by participation in the "true light," which is the Word. He adds, "If any one is not enlightened, it is due to himself, because he turns from the light that enlightens."<sup>10</sup> Aquinas also distinguishes this true light, given to all by God, from which human beings turn away, from the "false light" which "the philosophers prided themselves on having," citing Romans 1:21.<sup>11</sup> Despite what Aquinas says quite clearly, Oliphint concludes, "We should make it clear here that Thomas does not think that the 'enlightening' of which John speaks necessarily includes divine truth or content" (p. 15).

For Aquinas, reason, "the light of nature," is itself a gift of God to human beings in the original creation of humanity that is capable of knowing not only that God exists, but that God is good, wise, and powerful. Where reason falls short, because of its finitude, its rootedness in sense perception, and the errors brought about by sin, is that, without the aid of revelation, it cannot know the truths of salvation. This "Thomistic" assumption should have a familiar ring in Reformed circles. It is paralleled by the very first sentence of the Westminster Confession—as also by the second article of the Belgic Confession, and Calvin's commentary on the passage. Oliphint's claim that Aquinas' reading has "no basis" in the text of Scripture becomes an indictment of Calvin and the Reformed tradition as well. .

## The Analogy of Being

Oliphint's discussion of Aquinas' view of God draws heavily on the claims of Cornelius Van Til, one of whose basic points of critique is that Aquinas' "idea of the *analogy of being* compromises the biblical doctrine of creation."<sup>8</sup> In Van Til's view, the notion of an analogy of being comes directly from Aristotle and reduces the distinction between the Creator and the creature by adopting the Greek philosophical assumption that "all being is essentially one" and that "all individual beings are being to the extent that they participate in this one ultimate being."<sup>9</sup> What Van Til missed is that if Aquinas assumed "all being" is "essentially one," he would have had no need for analogy and simply identified the same attributes in God and in human beings as predicated univocally. But since Aquinas clearly affirms the Creator-creature distinction, resting on creation *ex nihilo*, he argued for non-univocal, namely analogical predication. Failure to understand the connection between Aquinas' understanding of analogy and his doctrine of creation is also characteristic of Oliphint's critique.

Oliphint also makes several crucial mistakes in his interpretation of Aquinas' proofs of the existence of God. He dismisses Aquinas' use of Exodus 3:14 as insufficient to show the Christian context in which the proofs are deployed on the rather slim ground that, had Aquinas really intended to be biblical, he would not simply have cited the verse he would have "shown how the content of revelation grounded his arguments" instead of proceeding by "natural reason."<sup>10</sup> But citation of texts, presumably interpreted exegetically elsewhere, is a common practice, and this understanding of Exodus 3:14, rooted in Augustine, was a commonplace—not, by the way, available to "natural reason."

Nor is the citation of Exodus 3:14 the only indication of a theological and biblical backdrop to the proofs: in the first article, on whether the existence of God is self-evident, Aquinas bases his argument with an objection drawn from John of Damascus' *De fide orthodoxa* and John 14:6—and then counters the objections with a point from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* interpreted by way of a reference to Psalm 52:1. In the second article, whether it can be demonstrated that God exists, draws objections from Hebrews 11:1 and from John of Damascus, countering them with a citation of Romans 1:20. Then, when Aquinas poses the question leading to the proofs of whether God exists, he offers no references in his objections and counters them with Exodus 3:14. The process of argument is on the basis of reason, but the argument with the objectors is an argument among Christians.

The second mistake is also categorical one: it concerns the issue of precisely what Aquinas thought he was proving. Oliphint represents Cajetan as teaching that the "proofs only demonstrated properties that could apply to a god, but not to God himself," (p. 90, n77) but what Cajetan actually held was that the proofs do not demonstrate the existence of God "per se" but "quasi per accidens," his point being that the proofs establish properties that, as Aquinas himself put it, "everyone understands to be God."<sup>11</sup> These are not merely possible properties of "a god"—they are the presumed properties of the one and only God.

Another mistake concerns Oliphint's reading of Aquinas' cosmological proof. Oliphint draws on Stephen Davis to argue that "for any version of the cosmological argument to work, the conclusion must presuppose some aspect of temporal causality" and concludes that since Aquinas' does not place God into a temporal sequence, Aquinas' proof fails (p. 81). Aquinas, however, assumed creation *ex nihilo* and that there is no time, finite or infinite, before the moment of creation. Aquinas' view of the impossibility of an infinite sequence of causes, therefore, does not rely on temporal sequence but follows precisely what Davis assumed might produce a valid argument, namely, an essential or ontological sequence of the hierarchy of causes in which contingent being (even if it were in an infinite temporal sequence) is not sufficient to explain its own existence.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, contra Oliphint, Davis concludes that Aquinas rightly recognized that "No hierarchical causal series can regress infinitely; it must have a beginning."<sup>13</sup>

## Divine Simplicity and the Trinity

One particular aspect of Aquinas' approach to the traditional notion of divine simplicity comes to the fore in Oliphint's discussion, namely, the relationship between simplicity and the doctrine of the Trinity. His discussion is focused on a distinction between *esse* and *id quod est*. Oliphint has the correct translation of *id quod est* as "that which is," but his definition is wrong: "that which is" does not mean "essence or nature" (pp. 105, 130). Aquinas uses the Boethian *esse-id quod est* distinction to indicate the same issue as his own essence-existence distinction, which points directly toward Aquinas' stress on God as "He who is" (Exod. 3:14).

Oliphint's Van Tilian critique not only ignores what Aquinas actually argues, it is also quite untenable, whether from a historical, theological, or philosophical perspective. Thus, Oliphint:

If we begin with biblical revelation, however (something that Thomas's natural theology cannot do) we can begin with, instead of the categories of *esse* and *id quod est*, the one *essence* of God as *three hypostases*, or *subsistences*. In other words, we can begin, contrary to Aquinas, with the ontological Trinity. With these biblical categories in view, we are able to affirm *both* that God's *essence* is who he is and that there is no possibility that he could be otherwise, *and* that each of the three subsistences can and does *act as that one essence* (p. 109).

*Pace* Oliphint, distinction between *essentia* and *subsistentia* is not directly given in biblical revelation. It took the church more than three centuries after the close of the canon to arrive at this terminological solution to the problem of divine triunity. Aquinas, moreover, both confesses the doctrine and meditates at length on the issue of one essence in three subsistences or hypostases. It is not clear why the post-biblical distinction between essence and subsistence, as used to explain the biblical issue that God is One and is also Father, Son, and Spirit, is any more "biblical" than the distinction between *esse* and *id quod est*, as used to explain the biblical point that God is Who He is.

Even with the *post-biblical* trinitarian language in view, we are quite unable to make clear "that God's essence is who he is and that there is no possibility that he could be otherwise." A series of qualifications of the term essence must be added, including the point that in God there is no real distinction between essence and existence, a point, as Aquinas indicated, that can be gathered from Exodus 3:14. Just setting forth the trinitarian formula of one essence and three hypostases does not satisfy the requirement for affirming, in Oliphint's words, "that each of the three subsistences can and does act as that one essence." Indeed, just to say that each of the three subsistences "can and does act" as one essence itself is a problematic usage that verges on tritheism: the issue of the trinitarian formula is that the three subsistences *are* the one essence. In order to complete the doctrine and clearly affirm that the three subsistences are the essence in such a way as not to imply composition, the doctrine of simplicity also needs to be present. And it is present in Aquinas' theology, and was present in the major patristic and Reformed orthodox formulations concerning the Trinity.

All of these aspects of Oliphint's argument are problematic, but they do not quite rise to the level of the underlying problem, namely, that Oliphint confuses epistemology with ontology. Both Aquinas and the Reformed orthodox writers

begin with prolegomenal discussions in which Scripture is set forth as the primary authority in doctrinal matters—so that both actually do begin biblically. Neither Aquinas nor the Reformed orthodox begin with the "ontological Trinity" because both recognize that the proper beginning point of knowledge (as distinct but not separate from faith) cannot be a point of doctrine like the Trinity that is neither self-evident nor demonstrable. Oliphint has confused the *principium essendi* with the *principium cognoscendi*, and has failed to recognize that cognitive *principia*, more generally understood, are self-evident, incontestable notions, some directly available to reason, some given by revelation.

## Natural reason and philosophy

It is in Oliphint's final critique of Aquinas' views on natural reason and philosophy in their relation to theology that the source of his misreading of Aquinas becomes clear. The assumption that Aquinas, given his attachment to Aristotle, attempted to merge two antithetical *principia* comes from Cornelius Van Til. In addition, the assumption that Aquinas' Aristotelianism stood in the way of a resolution of the question of essence and existence "so central to Thomas's metaphysical system" also comes from Van Til (pp. 51-53, 88-89), even as Oliphint identifies the writings of Van Til as "the best overall assessment and critique of Thomism" (p. 139). Oliphint summarizes Van Til as arguing that "reason, apart from grace, can deal only with *essences* and not with *existence*," and then cites Van Til as viewing Aquinas' purported attempt to move from "the language of essences into that of existences" as rendered impossible "without suppressing reason" (p. 51). Van Til concludes the impossibility of merging pagan Aristotle and Christian theology—as if this is what Aquinas were doing—and, on the mistaken assumption that Aristotelian philosophy is a philosophy of "abstract essences," posits the further impossibility of a "transposition from the realm of abstract essences to that of existence."<sup>18</sup>

The rather natural question that arises is where do Van Til and Oliphint find the claim that reason, apart from grace, can only deal with essences and not with existence? It certainly is not a legitimate inference from Aquinas' thought. It also would be, at best, rather difficult to work through Aristotle's treatises on physics, the categories, generation, and the history of animals and conclude that, for Aristotle, reason does not deal with existence but only with essences. The basis for Van Til's and Oliphint's view is probably an assimilation of Aristotle to Plato, who assumed it is the idea, namely the form or essence, that is the proper object of

knowledge. But Aristotle, unlike Plato, did not allow that ideas or essences can be separate from substantial existence.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle's view does yield the conclusion that the knowledge of things consists in their definition, the definition being the idea or essence that applies to a class of existents, which in turn leads to the question of how one has knowledge of particulars or individuals—a rather different issue than that claimed by Van Til. There is, moreover, a considerable scholarly literature that discusses the issue and that concludes that Aristotle's philosophy does deal with the knowledge of particulars.<sup>20</sup>

The Van Tilian claim is also demonstrably wrong in the case of Aquinas. Copleston notes, rather pointedly, that it is "not true to say that the intellect, according to St. Thomas, has no knowledge of corporeal particulars." As Copleston continues, this primary object of the intellect is not the abstracted universal "as such" but the universal as abstracted from the particular.<sup>21</sup> Aquinas rests this view, moreover, on a distinction between sensory and intellective knowing. The primary object of the intellect is the form or universal that has been abstracted from the particular, with the particular external object being known by the intellect indirectly, by means of the abstracted universal—but also with the external object being directly and concretely known to sense.<sup>22</sup>

These considerations not only of Van Til's misconceptions but specifically of what Aristotle and Aquinas understood concerning knowledge of essences and of things or particulars, brings us back to the impact of Exodus 3:14 on metaphysics and, accordingly, on the framing of a Christian philosophy. Aquinas' approach, in focusing on the identity of the First Mover as "He who is," the existent One, opens up a philosophy that can argue creation *ex nihilo* and a doctrine of providence, specifically on the ground that the One in whom there is no real distinction between essence and existence can know the essences of potential things and confer existence.

In order to deny this reading of Aquinas, Van Til even goes so far as to bifurcate Aquinas into a philosopher and a theologian attempting to synthesize unsynthesizables—Aristotle's pure essence that does not create and the biblical God, the One who is, who does create.<sup>23</sup> But, as indicated above, even taking McInerney's approach to the preambles as correct, the proofs in the *Summa theologiae* remain the philosophical arguments of a Christian. The proofs, moreover, do not attempt, as Oliphint and Van Til claim, to simply merge an Aristotelian absolute Thought with the God of creation: on the contrary, they draw



on Aristotelian views of causality and motion but argue in a non-Aristotelian manner to a divine first cause who, as necessary Being, creates a contingent order out of nothing. In other words, Aquinas draws together the truths concerning causality and a First Mover known to Aristotle, highly useful in demonstrating that the existence of God can be known to reason, and truths of the biblical revelation concerning God—on the ground that rational and revealed truths, as true, cannot disagree.

Van Til's claim of impossibility rests on his own presuppositions cast over Aristotelian thought and Aquinas' arguments: after assuming a radical antithesis, worthy of a Harnackian, between Greek philosophy and biblical revelation, Van Til imposes his own conclusion on the direction that any Aristotelian argumentation must take and then reads his conclusion concerning Aristotelian thought into his reading of Aquinas—without acknowledging that neither Aquinas nor, in fact, the Christian tradition from the second century onward, including Reformed orthodoxy and the Westminster Confession of Faith, shared his presuppositions about the character and use of natural reason.

## **Sectarian theology: Out of accord with the Reformed confessions**

There are, in sum, several fundamental problems with Oliphint's work on Aquinas that stand in the way of the book serving a useful purpose.

The first of these problems is simply that Oliphint's argumentation evidences major misreadings and misunderstandings of the thought of Thomas Aquinas on such issues as the relation of reason and revelation, the noetic effects of sin, the *praeambula fidei*, the *analogia entis*, the nature and character of the proofs of the existence of God, and the relation of the doctrine of divine simplicity to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The second, related problem is that his argumentation rests largely on the thought of Cornelius Van Til, who by no stretch of the imagination can be viewed as a competent analyst of the thought of Aquinas. The end-result of their readings is a mangled interpretation of Aquinas that impedes genuine access to his thought and actually stands in the way of legitimate interpretation.

Third, inasmuch as the Westminster Confession of Faith and Reformed Orthodoxy in general are largely in agreement with Aquinas on issues of epistemology, natural theology, doctrine of God, and, indeed, apologetics, Oliphint's and Van Til's views at best stand at the margin of what can be called Reformed and, at worst, create a kind of sectarian theology and philosophy that is out of accord with the older Reformed tradition and its confessions.

*\*This essay has been used with permission from Reformation21. Richard Muller's full review of Oliphint's work is available in [\*Calvin Theological Journal\* 53.2 \(2018\):255-288](#).*

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## Endnotes

1. Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), pp. 30-31.
2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q.1, a. 6, corpus; cf. M. F. Sparrow, "Natural Knowledge of God and the Principles of 'Sacra Doctrina,'" in *Angelicum*, 69/4 (1992), pp. 471-491, here p. 489; cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, & Reception*, trans. Benedict M. Guevin (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 19.
3. Oliphint, Aquinas, pp. 9, 129, The phrase *duplex veritatis modus* is from Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I.3.
4. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, IaIIae, q.85, a.3, corpus. Note here that "practical matters" is a reference to the praxis dimension of theology which relates both to the moral life of Christians and to promise of salvation, as distinct from the contemplative dimension of theology which relates to the knowledge of "divine things."
5. Oliphint, *Aquinas*, p. 14, citing Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 3 vols., trans. Fabian Larcher and James Weisheipl, with intro. and notes by Daniel Keating and Matthew Levering (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), I, pp. 54-55.

6. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, I, p. 59.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *In omnes D. Pauli Apostoli Epistolas*, 3 vols. (Liège: Dessain, 1857), vol. I, *Ad Romanos*, lectura 6 (pp. 30-31).
8. Aquinas, *Ad Romanos*, lectura 6 (p. 31).
9. Aquinas, *Ad Romanos*, lectura 7 (pp. 34-35).
10. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, I, pp. 54-55.
11. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, I, p. 53.
18. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley: P&R, 1969), p. 160; cf. idem, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (S.l.: Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969), p. 60.
19. Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 60; idem, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, p. 160.
20. Oliphint, *Aquinas*, pp. 60-61, referencing McInerny's reading of the preambles; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 27, 51.
21. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q.2, a.3, corpus.
22. Cf. Matthew Levering, *Proofs of God: Classical Arguments from Tertullian to Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 66, especially note 165.
23. Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 73.
24. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), p. 155; cited in Oliphint, *Aquinas*, p. 51.
25. Cf. e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I.9, 991b, 1-9; with *ibid.*, VII.5-6, 1031a, 1-19.
26. E.g., Harold F. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1944), pp. 221 n131, 236-239;

Walter Leszl, "Knowledge of the Universal and Knowledge of the Particular in Aristotle," in *Review of Metaphysics*, 26/2 (1972), pp. 278-313; Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics: A Study in the Greek Background of Medieval Thought*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), pp. 426-432; Robert Heinaman, "Knowledge of Substance in Aristotle," in *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 101 (1981), pp. 63-77.

27. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols. (Westminster, MD.: Newman Press, 1946-1974), II, p. 391, citing Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q.86, a.1; cf. Joseph Owens, "Aquinas on Knowing Existence," in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. John R. Cattan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), pp. 23-26, 29, etc.
28. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q.86, a.1, ad 4.
29. Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, p. 156.



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