

## Deforming God: Why Nothing Really Matters A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper takes its cue from studies that point to the influence of Thomas Aquinas on the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan and explores key Lacanian themes of language, desire, God/the real, embodiment and gender from the perspective of the *Summa Theologiae*. To illustrate how a Lacanian perspective opens new interpretative possibilities with regard to the *Summa*, it focuses on language and desire, on the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and the incarnation, and on Thomas's attempt to incorporate gendered Aristotelian concepts of form and matter into Christian theology. It argues that it is possible to resist Lacan's nihilism, while allowing his psychoanalytical approach to language to bring about a deconstructive reading of Aristotelian philosophy from the perspective of Christian theology. This allows the reconciling paradox of the incarnation to challenge the dualism of form and matter inherent in philosophical cosmologies, to offer a more dynamic understanding of the significance of material creation and its incorporation into God by way of the resurrected body of Christ. A Lacanian approach brings to light hidden and neglected dimensions of Thomas's theology, making possible a postmodern Thomism, which offers a viable theological response to some of the most challenging questions facing theology today, around questions of language, desire, gender and creation.

### Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, Lacan, theology, psychoanalysis, creation *ex nihilo*, Aristotelianism

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on my recently published book: Tina Beattie, *Theology After Postmodernity: Divining the Void – A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Further references for all the ideas presented here can be found in that book.

Theorists such as Bruce Holsinger and Erin Labbie point to the formative influence of Thomism on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, primarily through the influence of French Thomists such as Étienne Gilson in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> I have discovered that there is much to be gained by bringing Thomas Aquinas and Lacan into a mutually critical and illuminative encounter around key Lacanian themes that are shaped by his admittedly idiosyncratic but sometimes piercingly insightful engagements with Aristotelian Thomism.

In this paper, I am going to focus on two issues as an illustrative example of the ways in which Lacanian psychoanalysis can be a resource for reading Thomas anew – language and theology, and the philosophical relationship between form and matter in the context of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. My main focus in what follows is on Thomas rather than Lacan, since I am aware that readers are more likely to be familiar with the Thomas's theology than with Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. I begin with a general overview of how a Lacanian Thomism might contribute to the task of theology in postmodernity, and I then turn to key doctrinal questions of God, creation and desire.

### Consciousness and Desire

Thomas and Lacan share the age-old philosophical dilemma of how to account for the aporia between body and soul, form and matter, consciousness and materiality, whatever terminology we use to express this duality. The problem of consciousness might reinvent itself in different theoretical guises, but it remains one of the fundamental mysteries of what it means to be human. The oddity and uniqueness of our species derives from the fact that we belong on the cusp of different modes of existence where the animal and the angelic bleed into one another. This is, for Thomas as for Lacan, a dilemma which focuses on the question of language and desire. It relates to the abysmal mystery which draws the human to itself beyond all that we are capable of conceptualising or expressing in our material relationships, which suffuses our language and knowledge with an uncanny and restless sense of otherness.

Lacan – like Thomas – lends himself to many interpretations, but it is possible to read him as an atheist Thomist, who turned

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce W. Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Erin Felicia Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). See also Marcus Pound, "Lacan's Return to Freud: A Case of Theological *Ressourcement*?" in Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (eds) *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2011): pp. 440–56.

to psychoanalysis in what I would argue was a failed attempt to escape the God of his devout Catholic upbringing. Lacan confronts the wordless mystery that animates human desire and holds it in a state of perpetual yearning and insatiability as an unspeakable abyss – the Lacanian real. Thomas confronts that same mystery and interprets it as an unsayable plenitude – God. Ontologically these might be different, but experientially they are hard to tell apart.

For Lacan, the real is the God-shaped void that remains after the death of God. It is the source and end of desire, the extra-linguistic Other that constitutes the formless absence at the heart of language. Just as the theological longing for God expresses itself in and through all the desirable beings of creation, so for Lacan every object of desire carries within itself the capacity to arouse in secular or atheist consciousness a perpetual cycle of frustration and rekindled desire. Just as Thomas argues that we can know that God is (but not who God is) by our experiences of the effects of the creator within creation, so Lacan argues that we can know that the real is but not what it is by our experiences of its effects within our own souls and within our social and linguistic relationships.

According to Lacan, if atheism is to have integrity, it must resist the hubris of scientific rationalism and acknowledge the insatiability of desire. There is no beatific vision, no post-mortem union with God that will finally scratch the itch of being, but neither is there any total science that might provide all the answers. Lacan seeks to offer a psychoanalytic explanation for the universality of desire, while rejecting the idea of a transcendent Good or God as its object. The real – the ultimate object of Lacanian desire – is a vortex that threatens to suck the self into a void, because it has lost its divine referent and nothing can or should claim to replace that absent God, even though scientific modernity crams the emptiness with hubristic claims to knowledge. Lacanian psychoanalysis does not offer a cure for this torment but asks how we can learn to love ethically and to experience fleeting epiphanies of joy, within the tragi-comedy of the human condition.

While resisting Lacan's nihilism, I argue that he offers a path of purification and purification of theological desire as a way of asking God to free us from God, in the words of Meister Eckhart's prayer, in order to seek a renewal of theological method and language. The task of theology today is to rediscover the centrality of desire for our understanding of how meaning and truth emerge from the mysterious relationship between words and the material world. Thomas is a rich resource for this, if we interpret desire widely in the Lacanian sense to encompass the passions, the appetites, the desiring and the willing, which, according to Thomas, motivate us to know and to love God through the desirable things of creation, and to act in such a way as to express that love in our relationships and ways of living.

However, much recent writing on the theology of desire has been narrowly defined in terms of sexual desire, or it has been filtered through the lens of a progressive liberalism that fails to take seriously the violent and distorting effects of sin upon desire. Psychoanalytic Thomism can reawaken theology to the significance and complexity of desire in its destructive as well as its creative aspects. This might lead us to a renewed sense of belonging within creation, while inviting a reclamation of the doctrine of original sin as that which alienates us from one another and from the natural world, so that the virtuous life is a disciplining of desire – I would argue through the cultivation of the habit of joy.

So my reading of Thomas entails a shift beyond both conservative and liberal Thomisms of the last fifty years or so. It rejects the sexual essentialisms and often violent rhetoric of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology and its advocates,<sup>3</sup> but it also allows psychoanalysis to bring back into view themes that tend to be neglected by more liberal interpreters of Thomas – the angelic and the demonic, the gendering of creation around paternal form and maternal matter, the tension between Greek philosophy and Christian doctrines such as creation *ex nihilo*, the Trinity, the incarnation, and the resurrection of the body – in other words, the aspects of faith that are a stumbling block in the attempt to weave a seamless theological robe between Greek philosophy and Christian revelation.

Lacan argues that these medieval doctrines and beliefs with their phantasmic hauntings and desires have had a formative influence on the making of western language and culture. With the disgracing of nature by Luther and the banishment of the ethical and cognitive function of desire by Kantian ethics and the rise of scientific rationalism, the imaginative and desiring dimension of the Thomist soul, which connected the human intellect to its material others by way of the senses, was banished from the scene of language and representation. This effected a rupture in the order of language, with the modern symbolic order constituting the rationalised, abstract language of the masculine subject and his laws, institutions and hierarchies, and the inchoate language of desire, longing (including religious longing) and embodiment constituting the feminised other of the unconscious, or the Lacanian imaginary. Important for my argument here is Lacan's association of the symbolic with the paternal form of medieval Aristotelianism, and the imaginary with maternal matter. In other words, the cosmologies and ontologies of the medieval world lose their purchase on materiality but become incorporated into language in the making of modernity, without changing their coordinates.

<sup>3</sup> See Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London and New York: 2006).

Freudian psychoanalysis attends to the fractured and muffled expressions of forbidden desire that speak through and beyond the modern linguistic subject, and Lacan discerns therein the haunted remains of the medieval Catholic soul. Lacan argues that the God of modernity is not dead but unconscious – which is quite different from claiming that God is *the* unconscious. After the so-called death of God, the western secular soul is still subject to the effects of some dimension of its own being associated with desire and the longing for love that it cannot articulate or understand, which can be neither satisfied nor eliminated. So, with that in mind, let me say a little more about how the function of language as understood by Lacan has deep resonances with the language of classical theology, including that of Thomas.

### God and Language

Gregory P. Rocca offers a metaphorical account of what it means for Christians to talk about God. He asks us to imagine ourselves clinging to the rocky wall of “a deep, narrow abyss cleaving the face of the earth down to its core, . . . being buffeted by upwelling air currents”, and able to see nothing but “a mass of hazy, congealing clouds backlit and limned by a reddish glow – a dark blaze and a blazing darkness”.<sup>4</sup>

The difference between this theological approach and what Lacan diagnoses as the malaise of modernity is that classical theology, like Donald Rumsfeld perhaps, knows what it does not know, whereas the language of modern scientific rationalism and its theistic derivatives masks, but cannot eliminate, the absent other in its totalizing claims to knowledge. The man of science no longer seeks an infinite God but an infinite knowledge that will overcome forever the darkness of the soul. Richard Dawkins declares himself “thrilled to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding. Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits”.<sup>5</sup> The phenomenal success of Dawkins’ book, *The God Delusion*, and the cult of scientific atheism that it fuels, suggests how seductive this fantasy of scientific plenitude has become in modern western society.

In the analogical balance between affirmation and negation, Rocca argues that Thomas’s positive theology bears a greater weight than his negative theology. However, he also quotes an extended passage from the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, in which

<sup>4</sup> Gregory P. Rocca OP, “Aquinas on God-Talk: Hovering over the Abyss”, *Theological Studies*, 54 (1993): pp. 641–61, p. 641.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 374.

“the continuing negations finally burst the confines of all rational pursuits and lead us into the darkness of ignorance”:

When we proceed into God through the way of negation, first we deny of him all corporeal things; and next, we even deny intellectual things as they are found in creatures, like goodness and wisdom, and then there remains in our understanding only the fact that God exists, and nothing further, so that it suffers a kind of confusion. Lastly, however, we even remove from him his very existence, as it is in creatures, and then our understanding remains in a certain darkness of ignorance according to which, as Dionysius says, we are best united to God in this present state of life; and this is a sort of thick darkness in which God is said to dwell.<sup>6</sup>

This illustrates Denys Turner’s point that ‘for Thomas, to prove the existence of God is to prove the existence of a mystery, . . . to show God to exist is to show how, in the end, the human mind loses its grip on the meaning of “exists”’.<sup>7</sup> This is a vital insight for any reading that seeks resonances and dissonances between the Lacanian real and Thomas’s God.

There is a dense abyss at the core of human understanding. When this is interpreted in terms of the manifestation of the divine within the fabric of creation Christians call it grace, but Lacan repeatedly hints at a dark grace to be discovered in the psychoanalytic deconstruction of the self-knowing “I” of modern humanism. In the introduction to a volume of essays on Lacan and theology, David Fisher asks, “Is the space cleared by postmodernism one that allows for a return of grace – or is it a space in which, as the critics of postmodernism sometimes argue, nothing, no one, can live?”<sup>8</sup>

There can be no single answer to this question, for it is a matter of hermeneutics: how do we interpret the chasm that postmodern nihilism with its psychoanalytic influences reopens within consciousness, beyond the Cartesian self? As Charles Taylor points out, no modern individual is free from the kind of responsibility that secularism puts upon us with regard to such questions. Secular humanism thrusts us into a disenchanted world of “multiple modernities” in which, says Taylor, “Naiveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike”.<sup>9</sup> Each of us thus bears responsibility for what

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa super libros Sententiarum* I, 8, 1, 1 ad 4, quoted in Rocca, *ibid.*, pp. 648–49.

<sup>7</sup> Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> David H. Fisher, “Introduction: Framing Lacan?” in Edith Wyschogrod, David Crownfield, and Carl A. Raschke (eds), *Lacan and Theological Discourse* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 21. Taylor attributes the phrase “multiple modernities” to Victor Turner.

we believe and why, and how that affects the way we live. In the words of John Caputo, this is “less a matter of asking how do I apply and translate this authoritative figure of the God of Christianity to the contemporary world and more a matter of asking what do I love when I love my God?”<sup>10</sup>

It is in the doctrinal and emotional surplus of Thomas’s theological language – that which remains when philosophy has done its best and failed to cover all the ground – that the postmodern condition might find a mystery capable of responding to its quest for meaning. While philosophical reasoning remains vital for our social and ethical interactions, the primary task of Christian theology is to bring us face to face with the dazzling darkness and thunderous silence of the Trinitarian God, who is incarnate within the visceral and fleshy depths of our own humanity in a way that makes us a mystery unto ourselves, and within the wondrous energies and desiring relationships that hold the cosmos in being and makes that too a mystery within which we are created and sustained.

This brings me to a fundamental challenge that Lacan poses to Thomas, concerning his failure to go far enough in exploring the extent to which Christian doctrine disrupts Aristotelian logic with regard to the oneness of God, the relationship between form and matter, and the significance of the body in the making of meaning. In the second part of this paper, I consider more closely the influence of Aristotle on Thomas’s theology of creation.

### Sexual Mythologies and Creation *ex nihilo*

Gilson points to the crucial importance of Exodus 3 in enabling Thomas to reconcile philosophical metaphysics with scriptural revelation, so that the “pure act-of-being which St Thomas the philosopher met at the end of metaphysics, St Thomas the theologian had met too in Holy Scripture”.<sup>11</sup> This, argues Gilson, constitutes the genius of Thomas’s thought. In recognizing that “*He Who Is* in *Exodus* means the *Act-of-Being*”, Thomas brings to light not only the compatibility between philosophical reason and scriptural revelation, but also the balanced unity of his own thought. I would add that to translate the *qui est* of the Latin Tetragrammaton as “He who is” introduces a corruption into Thomas’s theology which should have troubled the Thomist tradition more than it has. *Qui est* implies no attribute other

<sup>10</sup> John D. Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics” in John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1961), p. 93.

than being. Upon that little word “He” hinges a host of theological difficulties which today cannot be evaded after the challenges posed by feminist theology.<sup>12</sup>

For Lacan, the theological temptation to equate the being of God with the One of philosophical form cannot be reconciled with the unity of the divine simplicity of being. Thomas’s attempt to map the fatherhood of God onto the Aristotelian account of paternal form and function in natural theology does not mesh seamlessly with his understanding of the nature of being, nor, I would add, with his maternal analogies of Trinitarian relations (an aspect of Thomas that Lacan never acknowledges, perhaps because it was not part of the Thomism of his time). There is a (m)Otherness to Thomas’s God that will not let him go – a mystical beyond that unravels and renders inconsistent the carefully rationalized dialectic of the *Summa Theologiae*. If Thomas had been more Christian and less Aristotelian in his understanding of God, and more willing to imagine a social and intellectual world constructed around Trinitarian relationships rather than the patriarchal hierarchies of pagan Aristotelianism, how different might the Church look today? Feminist theology has exposed the crumbling foundations of Christian patriarchy and Thomas is often blamed as a primary culprit in establishing those foundations, but it is possible to bring into view alternative readings that make Thomas less Aristotelian philosopher, and more mystical theologian. I have been helped by Karen Kilby in reading him that way.<sup>13</sup>

Lacan interprets the Judaeo-Christian tradition as the “true religion”,<sup>14</sup> because the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* eliminates the sexual mythologies of creation found in other religions and philosophies and posits instead a primordial lack within all that is. Hebrew monotheism, and its warping around the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, marks out the western subject in a unique way by rendering redundant the copulative ontologies which drive pagan philosophies and religions and suffuse the material world with divinized erotic energies. These sexual mythologies made something of a comeback in medieval Aristotelianism, and they were repressed but not banished by the Reformation, the Enlightenment and scientific rationalism.

Lacan argues that the Aristotelian mythology of the copulation of form and matter as the consummation of being cannot be reconciled with the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, nor with the Thomist

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> See Karen Kilby, “Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits of Understanding”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 7 (4), 2005: pp. 414–27.

<sup>14</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p. 137.



understanding of the simplicity and oneness of God's being. Creation *ex nihilo* removes the ontological necessity of the copulative relationship, and in God the verb to be is uniquely not a copula but the active condition of being that makes possible all beings.

This might seem an anachronistic point to make, for few Thomists today would slavishly follow Aristotelian cosmology with regard to the copulative nature of being. However, Lacan argues that the relationship between maternal matter and paternal form has had a far-reaching effect on the gendered ordering of western society, in ways that are often unconscious and therefore resistant to intellectual scrutiny. So let me turn to Thomas's juxtaposition of creation *ex nihilo* with Aristotelian philosophy in order to suggest that this is more problematic than Thomas acknowledges.

While Thomas recognizes that it is philosophically coherent to argue for the eternity of the world, it is an article of the Christian faith that, according to the Book of Genesis, God created the world *ex nihilo* and it therefore has a beginning (I.46.2).<sup>15</sup> This can be reasonably defended as a belief but not rationally demonstrated in a proof, and Thomas cautions against making ourselves look ridiculous by seeking to offer rational explanations for the things we believe by faith. Yet the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was never fully developed by Thomas in a way that would displace the intellectual and social hegemony of Aristotelianism and Platonism. So I want to revisit the question of form and matter in Thomas to suggest that there are other possible readings that usher in a more luminous and mystical vision of God and creation than Aristotelianism can accommodate, beginning with the question of "is God form?"

### Deforming God

Perhaps not surprisingly, Thomas's interpreters are cautious when discussing how he understands form in relation to God. Eleonore Stump briefly attempts to explain the tension in Thomas's account of the divine form by suggesting that, in his view, the divine form is unlike any other form because it is self-subsistent and independent of matter. However, she rather hastily dismisses the question – "focusing on God as form is almost entirely more trouble than help in understanding Aquinas's notion of subsistent form"<sup>16</sup> – and

<sup>15</sup> All parenthetical references are to the *Summa Theologiae*: Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros., 1947) available online at <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/index.html> [accessed 5 November 2013].

<sup>16</sup> Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (Arguments of the Philosophers Series; London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 198.

she moves on to the angel as a simple, subsistent form that is like God.

Yet for anybody seeking to read Thomas with a consciousness awakened by feminist, environmental and psychoanalytic insights, this is a fundamental question. I argue that we need to move beyond the whole scaffolding of form and matter and all the hierarchies and dualisms that these implicitly support. By reading Thomas in a way that is more doctrinal and mystical and less Aristotelian and philosophical, we can read his theology as deconstructive of philosophical dualism and the gendered hierarchies it sustains, bearing in mind that deconstruction is not simply negation. It is a move that takes place within the linguistic structures it interrogates, in order to expose their paradoxes and instabilities and therefore to render them polysemous and dynamic.

A Lacanian reading of Thomas invites us to discover in the relational Trinity and creation *ex nihilo* a non-dualistic vision of the goodness and desirability of creation, as a manifestation of the goodness and desirability of God and as a participation in the divine Trinitarian relationships. Form and matter have served as a useful philosophical hypothesis but the new physics has rendered them redundant, for it has revealed a material world that is far more evanescent and mysterious than modern science once claimed. I cannot elaborate upon this here,<sup>17</sup> and I am not suggesting that theology should be constantly seeking to prove its credentials before the court of science. Theology is to science as poetry is to grammar – its task is to create spaces for mystery and wonder within the structures and laws by way of which we understand the world. This means looking into the ways in which ancient beliefs and concepts about form and matter still influence our ideas, impeding our capacity to wonder at the unfolding of creation as a continuous, dynamic evolving of beings out of nothing, while infecting our relationships with a deeply masculine anxiety about chaos, matter and the body and the need to order and control these. So, that is a complex and far-reaching agenda for a postmodern Thomism, of which I can only sketch an outline of some key features here. I would, however, suggest that on this point hinges the whole debate about whether or not Thomas is guilty of ontotheology. Yes he is and no he is not. We can read him either way, but to rescue him from his own ontotheological leanings we have to bring a more dynamic reading of his account of being back into play.

Of all the explanations offered with regard to the question of form and matter, the most relevant for my purposes here is that offered by

<sup>17</sup> For a reading of Thomas in the context of the new physics, see James Arraj, *The Mystery of Matter: Nonlocality, Morphic Resonance, Synchronicity and the Philosophy of Nature of Thomas Aquinas* (Midland: Inner Growth Books, 1996).

Gilson – bearing in mind that he is the primary route into Thomism for Lacan. Gilson argues that “form is a nobler element of substance than is matter”,<sup>18</sup> but that Thomas went beyond the “metaphysical heights” achieved by Plato and Aristotle by recognizing that,

Since neither matter nor form can exist apart, it is not difficult to see that the existence of their composite is possible. But it is not so easy to see how their union can engender actual existence. How is existence to arise from what does not exist? It is therefore necessary to have existence come first as the ultimate term to which the analysis of the real can attain. When it is thus related to existence, form ceases to appear as the ultimate determination of the real.<sup>19</sup>

In the identification of the real with being beyond form, we begin to see why the Lacanian real is analogous to Thomas’s God, but also why the formless beyond of God has an uncanny tendency to dissolve into the formless viscosity of prime matter – a point to which I shall return. In insisting that God is the sole agent of creation, Thomas moves beyond the idea of God as form to God as creator of all forms and all matter. With that in mind, let me consider more closely the question of form and matter in relation to God.

Thomas interprets the *qui est* of Exodus 3 as signifying not any kind of form but being itself – *ipsum esse* (I.13.11). This suggests that God cannot be identified with form, but here we encounter a persistent ambiguity in the *Summa Theologiae*. Rather than affirming that God is neither form nor matter, Thomas seems to conclude elsewhere that God is form: “whatever is primarily and essentially an agent must be primarily and essentially form. Now God is the first agent, since He is the first efficient cause. He is therefore of His essence a form; and not composed of matter and form” (I.3.2; see also I.3.7). This would suggest that God is form, and the act of creation involves matter but not form, so that an eternity of form would be posited over and against the creation of matter *ex nihilo*. But later in Part I Thomas argues that “Creation does not mean the building up of a composite thing from pre-existing principles; but it means that the ‘composite’ is created so that it is brought into being at the same time with all its principles”. He goes on to reject the suggestion that “matter, and not the composite, is, properly speaking, that which is created”, by responding that “This reason does not prove that matter alone is created, but that matter does not exist except by creation; for creation is the production of the whole being, and not only matter” (I.45.4).

However, if Thomas is ambivalent about form, he is unambiguous about matter in relation to God: there is no matter in God. The

<sup>18</sup> Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

human is made in the image of God not in terms of the body but in terms of the incorporeal faculties of intelligence and reason. Thomas is emphatic that there is no mingling or union between God and anything else that would make of God a composite being. David Dinant's teaching that God is primary matter is "most absurd" (I.3.8). But if it is "most absurd" to use prime matter as an analogy for God, it is surely no less absurd to use form as an analogy for God?

As Gilson argues, neither forms nor matter actually exist for Thomas except insofar as they exist in created beings. If this is so, the gendered, copulative cosmology that sustains Thomas's ontological, ethical, social and sexual hierarchies within the order of creation begins to disintegrate. Creation is not the continuation of Greek philosophy by other means. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* stuns philosophical reasoning into silence, as do the doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection of the body. These require that we rethink the whole relationship between divinity and materiality in the most fundamental, radical and far-reaching way. The philosophical hypothesis of a copulative relationship between form and matter may function as an elegant explanation that arouses an implicit eroticism in relation to the world, but Christianity reminds us that it is a fantasy.

From the beginning, Christianity was an affront to Greek philosophy because it attributed birth, embodiment and death to God in the person of Jesus Christ. In the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, the incarnation and the resurrection of the body, Christianity announces a reconciling initiative by God that overcomes all the ancient dualisms and renders redundant the need for concepts of form and matter, by way of which ancient philosophers sought to account for the eternal nature of being and its composite manifestations.

This leads to the question, where does a material creation belong in relation to God? Thomas's stumbling block is the composite relationship between form and matter, which would contradict the simplicity of God's being. And yet, if Thomas refuses to accept at least some sense in which there is materiality in God, in what sense is Christ truly risen? If a human body is a composite relationship between form and matter/body and soul, then Thomas has a problem because Christ's body is in God. Thomas himself insists that he is, in Part III of the *Summa* where he addresses the question of the resurrection (III.53–58). The Son, who is consubstantial with the Father and sits at the right hand of the Father in glory, is not only the divine nature but the full person who is the conjoined human and divine natures, so that "under one adoration the one hypostasis, together with his flesh, [he] is adored by every creature" (III.58.3). In the person of Christ, there is materiality in God – there is no other possible conclusion in the context of Thomas's theological orthodoxy. To say otherwise is to make the docetist claim that Christ only appeared to be a human body – he was an avatar of the divine, not God incarnate. The

mystery of the incarnation calls us to open our intellects to new ways of reasoning about the relationship between nature and God. With that in mind, I turn now to creation in relation to the oneness of God.

### Being and Beings

Over and against a mathematical definition of singularity, Thomas posits the oneness of God as synonymous with being itself. This leads him to reject a dualistic interpretation of the one as opposed to the many, in favour of a more harmonious vision of creation in which the multitude, being divided, lacks the undivided fullness of the oneness of being. In other words, for anything to become other than God there must be some limit to its being, by way of which it exists as different from other beings and as distinct from the fullness of God's being. Otherwise, there would be no created beings at all – the divine plenitude would be all in all.

For Lacan, the temptation to associate God with the Platonic perfection of the One of form, allied to the tendency to think of the divine being in quantitative rather than qualitative terms – the One as the singular totality of the many – sets up a sense of resentment and striving in the masculine subject, who lacks what it takes to be God.<sup>20</sup> Lack here is experienced as imperfection in the nature of one's being, and a fault to be overcome in the desire to become like God.

However, in Thomist terms, the lack that we perceive in and beyond being is not the lack of any individual species in terms of its particular mode of being – Thomas is clear that every species has the potential for its own perfection. The difference between the being of God and other beings is qualitative, not quantitative. Lack is the condition of our existence and freedom, God's gift to us, which we experience as withdrawal and negation. God creates a lack within the fullness of being in order to let us be, and this surrounds our being with a pervasive sense of the desirable and mysterious Other of the created order.<sup>21</sup> We become more like God, not by rejecting aspects of our own being, nor by seeking to add incrementally to the quantity of

<sup>20</sup> These arguments are explored in Lacan's typically obtuse style in Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975); Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality – the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999). See Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity*, pp. 275–9.

<sup>21</sup> For a Kabbalistic interpretation of this, see Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton, "The Subject of Religion: Lacan and the Ten Commandments", *Diacritics*, 33 (2), 2003: pp.71–97. See also Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity*, pp. 314–5.

being we have, but by living to the utmost the divine mystery that we are by virtue of our own unique, particular, and eternal way of being within God.

So for Thomas, the differentiation of created beings is not hierarchical as in some forms of Neo-Platonism, but an expression of the goodness of diversity as a revelation of the abundance of God's being. Consider this:

For God brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever. (I.47.1)

Far from the many being opposed to the one as in more dualistic cosmologies or in Hegelian ontologies, for Thomas the multitude is expressive of and harmonious with the oneness of God. This insight is not always sustained, for Thomas is sometimes lured by a more dualistic form of Platonism so that the unity of God seems to be asserted over and against the diversity of the world. Nevertheless, in terms of Thomas's trinitarian theology, his doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and his understanding of the participatory trinitarian nature of beings within God's being, there is greater integrity to his theological vision if we focus on his more holistic understanding of creation. God's being unfurls, spreads out, opens up, and creates a space of welcome for otherness in order to manifest the abundance of the divine goodness of being.

Not only does Thomas argue that "God is in all things", (I.8.1), he also argues that "as the soul is whole in every part of the body, so is God whole in all things and in each one" (I.8.2). This opens into a mystical sense of being beyond all human comprehension. God is one – indivisible and simple – so that wherever being is, there God is, shining within a finite body as a particular aspect of the perfection of the divine being which that creature and no other is capable of communicating. But this God is also relational and interpersonal, so that everything in creation is also relational. Its unity comes, not from the composite relationship of form and matter, but from the conception, gestation and outpouring of love among the persons of the Trinity which expresses itself in the order of creation. So what is there in the beginning?

### Nothing Really Matters

Thomas considers an argument that “goodness implies desirability. Now primary matter does not imply desirability, but rather that which desires. Therefore primary matter does not contain the formality of goodness. Therefore not every being is good”. Here is Thomas’s response:

As primary matter has only potential being, so it is only potentially good. Although, according to the Platonists, primary matter may be said to be a non-being on account of the privation attaching to it, nevertheless, it does participate to a certain extent in goodness, viz. by its relation to, or aptitude for, goodness. Consequently, to be desirable is not its property, but to desire. (I.5.3)

I believe this short passage is the key to unlocking the heart of Lacan’s Thomism, for it suggests that the primordial other that God brings into being in the act of creation is not matter and form but desire itself. For Thomas, desire for God is the current that flows through all the filaments of creation and draws all beings towards the being of God. Desire arouses into being the beings of the world, all of which come to be through their desire for God. Although Thomas does not explore the implications of claiming that “to desire” is the property of prime matter, in making such a claim he acknowledges that even at its most elemental level, being is suffused with the active love of God in such a way that it is always drawn towards God through desire. Desire is the wisdom of God transformed into the space of the coming into being of otherness and difference, which constitutes the birthing of creation.

Am I now wandering too far from Thomas into a kind of quasi-Thomist New Age mysticism? If time allowed, I would illustrate what I mean by discussing the lavish maternal analogies of Thomas’s *Commentary on Boethius’s Trinity*,<sup>22</sup> which opens with a quotation from the Book of Wisdom: “I will seek her out from the beginning of her birth, and bring the knowledge of her to light” (Wis. 6:24). A rich Trinitarian theology of wisdom and creation emerges if we read this commentary through a Lacanian lens. Nothing matters/materializes in its most primordial expression as desire for God, and, in the incarnation, creation is incorporated into God as the ultimate end and meaning of its desire.

<sup>22</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *On Boethius on the Trinity – Questions 1–4*, trans. Rose E. Brennan S.H.N. (Herder, 1946). See also Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity*, pp. 356–61.

## Conclusion

In Christ, God is reunited with the human in the garden of creation, and all the old dualisms and alienations are shown to be the product of our corrupted desires. Yet as several papers in this conference have argued, the eschaton, although it is already always present as the eternal love of God, cannot be fulfilled or hastened towards by any earthly notion of progress. So we need philosophy with its dualisms and its dialectics, and the political, ethical and social systems which it sustains – all of which bear within themselves the taint of violence and the hope of redemption – if we are to inhabit the earthly city which is our temporal home, along with all God's creatures. Yet as Church we also need to live as a community of equals in a good creation, following Mary's Magnificat in declaring that God has already done what we shall only understand at the end of time. God has already turned the world upside down and inside out, and now we have to ask how we can make that upside down and topsy-turvy truth manifest in our ways of being gathered together in the body of Christ, without any hubristic illusions about our capacity to change the world. This is not, I suggest, a call to exaggerate and ontologise the erotic, copulative energies of a kind of neo-pagan, nuptial theology, but rather to break these open to new possibilities of loving communion and exchange between and among created beings – human and non-human. Our being in the world but not of the world constantly challenges us with regard to the cultural and counter-cultural paradoxes inherent in following the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ. God's kingdom is the perfect, reconciled union of creation with its creator, the time out of time when our desire comes to rest in the good that is God, and that will be our wisdom and our delight.

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