



Ethics and Theological Disclosures

THE THOUGHT OF
Robert Sokolowski

edited by Guy Mansini, O.S.B.,
and James G. Hart

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John C. McCarthy

7. The Reach of Reason

According to long venerated opinion, the Christian faith has little regard for reason and its prerogatives. Already almost three centuries ago, spirited partisans of freethinking had begun openly to urge that "the unspeakable" be crushed, so convinced were they of faith's unreason; and to their most ardent disciples, the Church's persistent refusal to submit to the liberating compulsions of their various educational reforms served only to confirm the truth of that appraisal. Anti-theological ire gradually yielded, however, to a policy that is at once less bellicose and more effective, and so also more consistent, it would seem, with reason's own terms: toleration, which has come to mean a polite but unbending refusal to allow that Christianity could have anything substantive to contribute to the "conversation of mankind."¹ Many Christians, cowed or seduced by the accomplishments of modern rationalism, have readily obliged their onetime interlocutors by retreating into a thoroughly spiritualized conception of their faith, according to which one's adherence to the Gospels is a private affair, wholly beyond the pale of public scrutiny or corroboration. The conviction that Jerusalem has nothing whatsoever to do with Athens is, in short, now common among believers and unbelievers alike, which is something of a wonder given the pains the Church has taken over the past two millennia to give reason its due. In-

1. See Francis Slade, "Was ist Aufklärung? Notes on Maritain, Rorty, and Bloom, with Thanks, but No Apologies to Immanuel Kant," in *The Common Things: Essays on Thomism and Education*, ed. Daniel McNerny (Mishawak, Ind.: American Maritain Association, 1999), 48-68.

deed, it is doubtful whether any religion has been so mindful of the rights of reason as has the Christian faith. This is not to overlook the many sins Christians have committed over the centuries against human intelligence, many of them, alas, quite colossal. Nor is it to deny that a reasonable unbeliever might well wish to question the Christian understanding of reason's proper terms. All the same, prevailing opinion about "faith" and "reason" could hardly be more wrongheaded. The Church's confidence in the power of human intellection is unusual not only by normal religious standards. It also sets her apart from most any other human institution, past or present, that has presumed to make reason's cause its own.

Consider St. Paul's notorious declaration near the beginning of his Letter to the Romans: "what can be known about God is evident to [human beings] because God made it evident it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been clearly seen, being understood by the things that have been made."² Contrary to those who would confine genuine manifestations of the divine to civic cult or gnostic privilege, the apostle to the gentiles contends that the God whom Christians adore can be known, at least to some degree, by anyone who has eyes to see. One need not have the benefit of Christian revelation or even, it would seem, particularly acute powers of intellection in order to recognize the hidden source of the manifest world. It suffices that one possess a modicum of intelligence, and be willing to examine facts readily accessible to all comers.³ If, however, the human mind is able to apprehend God himself, then surely nothing whatsoever lies beyond or beneath our rational grasp. Romans 1:19-21 is hardly the sort of statement one would expect from a misologist.

Not that St. Paul sought to promote anything remotely like a religion

2. Rom. 1:19-20. I have used throughout the *New American Bible*, with occasional minor modifications. There are, of course, notable antecedents to this Pauline text in the Jewish scriptures (see Job 12:7-10; Ps. 19:1-6; Ps. 104:24; Wisd. of Sol. 13:1-9; and Sir. 42:15-19). They have not, however, assumed a prominence within Judaism equal to the place it, and so also they, came to occupy within Christianity. But even if one were rightly to infer from this that the statement from Romans must differ, if only in its emphases, from its Jewish precursors, it is unlikely that St. Paul meant by it to signal either continuity with, or divergence from, Jewish piety. For as Heinrich Schlier observes, "Der Römerbrief selbst ist . . . nicht an eine vorwiegend jüdenchristliche Gemeinde geschrieben," *Der Römerbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), 40.

3. Compare Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.2.982b29-83a10.

within the limits of reason alone. Although his brief to the Christian community in Rome is unusually sanguine about the natural range of the human intellect, it is not so hopeful as to suppose that we shall someday be able to think our way to a perfectly rational state of affairs. The intention of the letter is, as everyone knows, to announce that Jesus Christ alone can save mankind from its aberrant ways. Yet this merely goes to show that in the apostle's view, Christian belief, far from requiring the denigration of our rational capacities, does not come fully into its own until the full reach of reason has been acknowledged. By the same token, in attributing to ordinary human intelligence a genuinely theological capacity, St. Paul implicitly obliges believers to bear witness to their faith as the completion of reason's own natural trajectory.⁴ Not for nothing, then, did the passage just cited become a touchstone in the patristic period and thereafter for theological reflection upon the encounter between Christianity and pagan philosophizing. More recently, and with the plenary authority of an ecumenical council, the apostle's claim was restated in canonical terms by the First Vatican Council in its "Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Faith," *Dei Filius* (1870): "God, the principle [*principium*] and end [*finem*] of all things, can be surely known [*certo cognosci posse*] by the natural light of reason from the things that have been created."⁵ The Second Vatican Council again reiterated the doctrine in its "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," *Dei Verbum* (1965). And it was reaffirmed more recently still in both *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) and the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998).⁶ In sum, the Church has always put great stock in

4. See Rom. 1:14–15; 15:14–17.

5. Chap. 2, *Enchiridion Symbolorum. Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, ed. Heinrich Denzinger, rev. Adolf Schönmetzer, S.J. (Rome: Herder, 1976), 3008. In *Fides et Ratio* (§52), John Paul II observes that Vatican I marks the first time in the Church's history that an ecumenical council concerned itself with faith and reason as such. Although *Dei Filius* was occasioned by theological controversies that have long since passed from view, and although it was necessarily dependent upon the theological and philosophical vocabulary then available, the scholastic economy of its formulations and the care it takes to situate itself within the tradition of Scripture, magisterial pronouncement, and Christian theological reflection suffice to show the futility of any attempt to reduce the "Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Faith" to the terms of its historical genesis.

6. *Dei Verbum*, §§3, 6; *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§27–49, 282–89; *Fides et Ratio*, §§8, 9, 13, 52, 53, 55, 67 together with 55, 83, and 100. Among the other magisterial statements subsequent to *Dei Filius* that address faith, reason, and their mutual relation, the encyclicals *Aeterni patris* ("On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy," 1879), *Pascendi dominici gregis* ("On the False Doctrines of the Modernists,"

our capacity to know, far more, it would appear, than have such paragons of modern rationalism as Kant and Hegel.

Some have been quick to dismiss such writings as proof of an unctuous desire to placate the philosophers, signs of the "Hellenization" of Christianity, if you will, but the charge is a spurious one. There is nothing in these texts to suggest a faith on the defensive. To the contrary, by claiming more for reason than it has normally claimed on its own behalf, they might more plausibly be accused of rashly disregarding reason's natural limits—unless, of course, human intelligence is indeed able to ascend to God himself. Even a passing acquaintance with her constant teaching shows how badly mistaken is the dominant opinion regarding the Church's esteem for reason. The question remains, however, whether that esteem is rationally well founded. Is it really possible for anyone to know, apart from faith, that God exists?

In the minds of many, that question was settled in the negative some time ago. It has been a couple of centuries at least since a philosopher of the first rank has made a serious attempt to marshal a demonstrative argument for the existence of a God whom Christians could acknowledge as theirs.⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century, thinkers of the stature of Charles Darwin were still prepared to admit that the matter deserved careful scrutiny, but typically, they would add, initially with some reluctance and perhaps for a while thereafter with some regret, that they themselves had not derived any conviction from the evidence commonly adduced on God's behalf. Respectable opinion remained more or less "agnostic" until the early decades of the last century, by which point even nominal deference to the biblical and ecclesial tradition had become rare among the most widely respected representatives of reason.⁸

1907), and *Humani generis* ("Concerning some False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine," 1950) must also be mentioned. As regards the question of a purely rational knowledge of God's existence, see *Aeterni patris* §4 (Denzinger, 3135–36), *Pascendi dominici gregis* §6 (Denzinger, 3476), and *Humani generis* §2 (Denzinger, 3875). Kenneth Schmitz considers some interesting differences of emphasis between *Fides et Ratio* and the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith" in his "Faith and Reason: Then and Now," *Communio: International Theological Quarterly* 26 (1999): 595–608.

7. It must be said, however, that no less an authority than Pascal believes that there are strong theological reasons for thinking that the modern abandonment of "medieval" demonstrations was not in all respects a bad thing; see *Pensées* 242, 427, 449, and 463 in the Lafuma edition (585, 194, 556, 243 in the Brunschvicg). Cf. also n. 47, *infra*.

8. So that an eminent theologian could write, by the middle of the century, "[i]t

At the dawn of the third millennium, it is true, there are a few scholars still active within Catholic circles who continue to engage the question, in keeping with the philosophical or theological inspiration they draw from St. Thomas Aquinas above all. Somewhat more surprisingly, a smaller number of Protestant academics are now attempting to shore up the philosophical footings of the Pauline doctrine. Perhaps most unexpected of all are the signs of a recovery of interest in a natural theology among a handful of Christians otherwise engaged in advancing the cause of modern natural science. Nevertheless, there is little to suggest that a wholesale restoration of a "Christian metaphysics" will occur anytime soon. Even less ought we to expect the old arguments, howsoever newly restated, to regain the sort of intellectual authority they formerly enjoyed beyond narrowly confessional boundaries.

Be that as it may, those who would embrace the Christian faith are not free to reject or to ignore scriptural claims merely because they have fallen out of popular or theoretical favor, least of all those that have been constantly reaffirmed over the course of Christian history. Moreover, the claim that God's "invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been clearly seen, being understood by the things that have been made" is not just one assertion among the many that constitute the Church's understanding of things created and uncreated. Precisely because it implies a conception of the nature of truth and of man's proper relation to the truth, the reality and goodness of Christian revelation as a whole could be said to stand with it, or fall. My purpose in this essay is, accordingly, to offer some general reflections upon a traditional teaching in view of its present neglect.

While there is always room for reconsideration of the evidence advanced by thoughtful Christians throughout the ages in support of God's existence, I do not here attempt such a thing, in part because modern restatements of the traditional arguments have often overlooked perplexities to which those arguments naturally give rise; and if these are not addressed, then even the best of the old demonstrations will be repeated in vain. The present essay begins, therefore, by restating

would be a great gain for Christian apologetics if the words 'God' and 'existence' were very definitely separated. . . . God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him": Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 205; cf. 208–210, 236–37.

a few quandaries posed by the Church's understanding of reason's reach. I then take up a second statement made by St. Paul by way of indicating how the Church could reasonably assert that human reason is ordained to know that God exists even prior to, or apart from, any express attempt on her part to demonstrate his existence. In the third and final part of this essay, I offer a few observations of a "historical" kind concerning what can be known about God from the things that have been made.

I.

Interpretation of Romans 1:19–20 has sometimes focused upon its implications for ecclesial foreign policy, as it were. St. Paul's words are taken to entail a kind of apologetical imperative, according to which the primary task of reason within the life of faith is to discover and promulgate rational proofs of the *praeambula fidei* so called, God's existence first and foremost. Only then, the thought goes, would the apologist be effectively in position to announce the truly Christian things, the things given to be known in and through faith in Jesus Christ. This is, to put it bluntly, a very one-sided reading of Scripture. While St. Paul could not be clearer about the theological conclusion that "unaided" reason ought, he thinks, to come to, he also plainly states that in this respect unbelievers throughout the ages have to an alarming degree been unwilling and so also unable to be reasonable.⁹ But if, in his judgment, pagan eyes have commonly been blind to things they ought clearly to have seen, it would seem every bit as unreasonable, on the believer's part, to invest much hope in a stringently rational consideration of the divine as proreptic to Christian evangelization.

That the first chapter of Romans cannot rightly be reduced to a mandate to apologists becomes still more apparent were we to recall a fact that should have been obvious to anyone whatsoever: the Letter was composed principally, if not exclusively, with the faithful in view. Here as elsewhere St. Paul supposes that his normal reader already possesses a knowledge of God that is far superior to reason's rightful portion. Why is it, then, that he bothers to make the claim we have been considering? Why was it not rendered moot by Christian revelation?

9. Rom. 1:21–23.

Let us recall that the Romans to whom the apostle was writing were, at that time, a fragile and statistically insignificant presence in the imperial city. This was a flock compassed about by men and women who betrayed little or no sign that they had perceived, or were even capable of perceiving, the invisible things of God in and through the things visible to all. Even an exceptionally intelligent human being may, in the face of pressing necessities or strongly countervailing opinion, find it difficult to sustain conviction in truths to which he had earlier assented.¹⁰ Given their situation, then, it was entirely appropriate that St. Paul offer the Christians of Roman a little encouragement by reminding them of the manifest traces of the hidden God. The value of such a reminder was made all the more salient by the connection he goes on at some length to draw between pagan ignorance and iniquitous pagan deeds, a connection that was easy to document under the reign of Nero.¹¹ Do not let yourselves be troubled by pagan impiety, St. Paul seems to be telling the fledgling Christian community in Rome, for as the conduct of your unbelieving compatriots suggests, they are not terribly reliable witnesses to the truth about anything. Be that as it may, why did the Fathers of Vatican I think it necessary to recapitulate his teaching so many centuries later, in such markedly different circumstances?

Despite a growth in the Church's numbers unimaginable perhaps even to St. Paul, and notwithstanding attempts by theologians over many generations to provide a compelling articulation of the worldly evidence for God's existence, at the time *Dei Filius* was promulgated the faithful must still have been tempted to believe God to be hidden from rational sight. Nor has Christian diffidence on this point abated much, as we have noted. The Church's several restatements of the apostle's bold claim might, therefore, be construed as a sign of its perennial currency. Yet to this someone might well object that the Church here stumbles into an obvious self-contradiction. After all, if the reality of God is truly manifest, why should Christians, of all people, need such frequent reminders to that effect? Admittedly, prejudices and defects of character often impede otherwise thoughtful human beings from perceiving

10. "Like everyone who works with abstractions, von Neumann needed constant reassurance against deep-seated and recurring self-doubts": Gian-Carlo Rota, describing Stanislaw Ulam's friendship with John von Neumann in his memoir on Ulam, "The Lost Café," *Contention 2* (1993): 49.

11. Rom. 1:24-32.

truths lying plainly in view, but surely the believer ought to be open and alert to the worldly evidence for God's existence if anyone is or can be. Just how evident can the evidence be for a truth about which even those having every reason to assent to it are sometimes inclined to waver?

In reply, we might begin by noting that the visible, created order can never do more than point to the invisible things of God; and since it is in the nature of every sign both to reveal and to conceal, the theological evidence provided by creation will always be somewhat ambiguous. Thus, by pointing away from itself and toward something else, a sign effectively withdraws itself from view; to follow its lead is to look beyond it, and so to leave it behind. Yet a sign must first invite our gaze before it can direct it elsewhere, which is to say that the condition for its performance—its ability to elicit our interest—may become the cause of its failure to perform: having "caught" our attention, a sign can then "absorb" it. Worse still, the more worthy of our notice is the thing to be signified, the more deserving it is of a notable introduction, which means that the risk of a signitive failure is in direct proportion to the semantic density of that to which the sign is subordinate. From all of this it follows that a pointer in any way adequate to God himself would seem necessarily to include the possibility that we lose the signified in the signifier. What we might call the pedagogy of creation, whose principal lesson is said by the Church to be a God who is its "principle and end," is not and cannot be so structured as to guarantee that we its students always draw the correct conclusion.

The legacy of modern natural science attests to the difficulty. Over the course of the last century it has revealed an astonishing variety of invisible things, albeit things of an entirely worldly order. The quarks, mitochondria, solar winds, and other occult entities it has brought to light are not only fascinating in their own right; they also point to the possibility that countless other realities lie hiding just beyond the horizon of current scientific knowledge; at the same time, they testify to the remarkable perspicuity and promise of the science and the scientists by which they were revealed. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that scientists are as a body not much inclined to the view that God is the ultimate origin and end of every scientific disclosure. Nor, correlatively, would it be cause for scandal were ordinary Christians—most of whom are thoroughly unequipped to penetrate beyond the esoteric veils of modern science, but perfectly capable of perceiving the theological indifference

common among the scientifically adept—to need occasional reassurances that the natural order is indeed so constituted as to point, as they would otherwise be inclined to suppose, to its divine maker.

These considerations hardly suffice to resolve our problem, however, especially should we examine more closely the sort of assurance provided by our texts. Why is it that neither Scripture nor any of the other writings we have mentioned makes the slightest attempt to demonstrate that which they all assert to be demonstrably true? This lacuna, if it is a lacuna, seems all the more troubling given that such texts constitute the preeminent expressions of the Church's teaching. *Dei Filius* is particularly noteworthy in this regard, because some of the Council Fathers did actually press, without issue, for empirical documentation of that which they all took to be an abiding human possibility.¹² Presumably the Church's historical unwillingness to furnish what would have become, in effect, canonical arguments for God's existence stems precisely from her desire to leave reason free to go about its proper business. Yet even if, to state the obvious, a "dogmatic constitution" is not the appropriate forum for an exercise in dialectical reasoning, would not the Church have been better advised to prove her faith in reason by the deed of a discrete silence? If the human mind is naturally ordained to certain knowledge that God exists, why not let nature take its purported course, rather than invite the suspicion that Christian belief relies on an argument from authority in order to establish that arguments from authority are, in this instance, thoroughly unnecessary?¹³ That the Council Fathers should have pronounced a decree of "anathema" upon all who would deny the Church's claims regarding the rationally accessible evidence for God's existence seems only to add insult to injury.¹⁴

Nor do our difficulties end here. Even or rather especially if we are willing to accept in faith the words of those duly authorized to pronounce upon matters of Christian doctrine, it remains quite unclear how a believer could ever speak with the requisite precision about rea-

12. Hans Urs von Balthasar discusses the philosophical and theological issues at stake in *Dei Filius*, with some attention to the circumstances of its appearance, in "Nature in the Decrees of Vatican I," in *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 302–25.

13. Consider the acrobatics dutifully performed by René Descartes in his Dedicatory Letter "To the Very Sage and Illustrious Dean and Doctors of the Sacred Faculty of Theology of Paris," *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

14. Chap. 2, canon 1 (Denzinger, 3026).

son as such. In order to delineate exactly what man can and cannot know about God when left wholly to his own devices, would he not have to cast into doubt, or at least to hold in rational suspension, all that he had been given to know by faith until he had satisfied himself that rational inquiry had reached its limits? Otherwise, how could he be sure that his phenomenology of reason had not been illicitly influenced by Christian revelation? But even if we were to grant that a believer could ensure that his fidelity to Christ had no impact whatsoever upon his understanding of reason, which may be doubted, would not any attempt to bracket his faith be contrary to the express terms of Christian revelation?¹⁵ In a word, on what grounds, philosophical or theological, could faith as such ever hope to describe the character of reason apart from faith?¹⁶

As if these troubles were not enough for the day, things become more perplexing still should we move from an examination of faith and reason rather formally conceived to a more direct consideration of the God who, according to the Christian tradition, is common to them both. In this regard, we might begin by noting that when St. Paul asserts that God's eternal power and divinity is so evident that the pagans of Rome and elsewhere "have no excuse,"¹⁷ he is not lamenting the ubiquity of atheism among them. Atheism in the strict sense existed scarcely if at all in the ancient world. Like all ancient peoples, the Romans had a keen though often enough unsteady interest in things divine. Theirs was indeed a notoriously expansive religiosity, ready to embrace most any god they encountered on their road to empire. St. Paul does not fault paganism in its various forms for anything so generic as a failure to acknowledge that the world is shot through with signs of the divine. He blames it, rather, for failing to know God aright. "While claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes."¹⁸ And this brings us to the nub of the problem.

As Robert Sokolowski has observed, paganism characteristically conceives of the divine as part of the intelligible whole, albeit the first, or

15. See Matt. 10:32–34. Also *Dei Filius*, chap. 3, canon 6 (Denzinger, 3036).

16. See Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," *L'Homme* 21 (1981): 5–20, esp. 15–16 and 18–19.

17. Rom. 1:20.

18. Rom. 1: 21–22.

most enduring, or most powerful, or best part.¹⁹ The God whom St. Paul announces to the gentiles is altogether different, however. He is not merely the "supreme being," as it is sometimes said, the single greatest thing in a universe of things. Nor is he the sum of the world's parts, or the wholeness of the whole, the unifying worldly principle of the world's multiplicity. He is "the living God, 'who made heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them.'"²⁰ Having brought the world in its entirety into existence from out of nothing, he must himself be wholly beyond the worldly logic of parts and wholes. This means in turn that notwithstanding the admirable integrity of the created order, it can in no way add to, complete, or improve upon the truth, goodness, and beauty always already existing in infinite measure in him alone. As Sokolowski puts it, "no perfection would be lost if God had not created the world." Or more paradoxically still, "(God plus the world) is not greater than God alone."²¹

Although the contrast Sokolowski draws between the pagan gods and the Christian God displays exceptional fidelity both to the Christian tradition and to the classical pagan world, it also brings out with rare clarity and vigor the novelty of "the Christian distinction," as Sokolowski calls it, between the worldly and the divine. He reminds us that the God of faith is novel not only in comparison to the chthonic, political, and cosmic divinities of pagan antiquity. Even for one baptized as an infant, and who has known no other god than the One who existed "before" there was a world, this God is as "new" as he is "old," *tam antiqua et tam nova* in St. Augustine's memorable phrase.²² For of course, Christians

19. Whether the divine part is to be understood as a relatively independent piece of the universe or as some feature or element is, for present purposes, unimportant.

20. St. Paul in Acts 14:15, invoking a formula from Exod. 20:11.

21. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), esp. 7–20; also "Creation and Christian Understanding," in *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David B. Burrell, C.S.C. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 179–92; and *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 37–48. On this and related issues, Sokolowski acknowledges a great debt to the late Thomas Pruffer, for which see, for example, "A Reading of Augustine's *Confessions*, Book X," 27–31, "Creation, Solitude and Publicity," 32–34, and "Juxtapositions: Aristotle, Aquinas, Strauss," 35–42, in *Re-capitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993).

22. *Confessions* 10, 27 (38).

are just as beholden to the logic of parts and wholes as are any other human beings; we tacitly appeal to that logic, and find it repeatedly confirmed, countless times a day, every day of our lives. But precisely because God is irreducible either to some part of his creation, or to the whole that is constituted by them all, our everyday grammar of whole and part is, in a sense, stymied by him. What Jesus Christ reveals about the divine does not abrogate, it rather confirms, that for every human being, Christian and pagan alike, God will forever be strange or mysterious.

Seen in this light, however, St. Paul's teaching looks all the more bewildering. Not every pagan, it is true, was so crude as to worship "likenesses of images" of created things, noble or base. Yet even the philosophers, who undoubtedly represent pre-biblical piety at its rational best, seem to have been incapable of overcoming the limits to the standard pagan conception of the divine in what is, for Sokolowski, the decisive respect.²³ The philosophically pagan few are as one with the pagan many in regarding the divine as subject to a greater, and on that account necessarily an uncreated, whole or order.²⁴ But if, as seems likely, ancient philosophy provides as reliable an empirical indicator as we will ever have of that which is possible for reason apart from the visible influence of Christian revelation, the Church would appear to be positing a human capacity that has never been actualized, so far as we can tell, in human history.²⁵ And were that the case we would be compelled to admit

23. Neither the immaterial Platonic "Good," nor Aristotle's plurality of self-thinking thoughts, nor even the sublimely transcendent "One" of Plotinus seems to escape this limitation. In the terms of *Dei Filius*, while each identifies the divine as a principle or an end, and perhaps even as a principle or an end of everything else, it is doubtful whether any can rightly be construed as both principle and end, still less as both principle and end of all things, and still less as the principle and end of all things. In the second part of this essay I hope to show, nevertheless, why some ancient philosophers, and non-philosophers for that matter, might still have actualized, the theological potential St. Paul attributed to them.

24. One might attempt to rescue ancient philosophical piety by countering that its real theme was not the divine part of the whole, but rather the whole as such, which would mean that it was "pantheistic." Although St. Paul seems never to have encountered a pantheist in his travels, there is little reason to suppose that he would have regarded the divinization of every worldly thing in its absolute and necessary unity with everything else as an improvement, in the decisive respect, upon the more conventional forms of idolatry known to him. For a more extensive consideration of pantheism, see Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 38–39. Also *Dei Filius* chap. 1, canon 3 (Denzinger, 3023).

25. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, however, Aristotle (and perhaps also Plato)

that at the very least, Christianity stretches the meaning of "reason" well beyond standard usage.

To be sure, *Dei Filius* sets forth the Church's teaching exclusively in terms of principle, not practice. Hence the Council's decision, noted earlier, not to enlist any particular philosophical reflections in support of its teaching. Still more revealing, perhaps, is a second gesture entertained but ultimately rejected by the Council Fathers, namely, to pronounce "semi-traditionalism," a then contemporary theological position held in suspicion by some, anathema. Everyone agreed that "traditionalism" was theologically untenable, for it held that, apart from faith, mankind had forever lost the ability to know anything about God, owing to the damage wrought to our nature by original sin. The semi-traditionalists maintained, contrarily, that natural theology had always been humanly possible *de jure*; they merely specified that such a thing had never, in their judgment, been realized *de facto* except insofar as the rational evidence for God's existence had been illumined through a historical encounter with the God of faith. Several participants at Vatican I urged that both positions merited condemnation, but in the event, only the former was censured.²⁶ Yet even if the Church's position concerns

did possess demonstrative knowledge of God *qua* creator. Or so at least Mark F. Johnson contends in his "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?" *New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 129–55. In his "The Originality of St. Thomas's Position on the Philosophers and Creation," *The Thomist* 60 (1996): 275–300, Timothy B. Noone shows, on the supposition that Johnson is correct, that St. Thomas would have been utterly alone among his contemporaries. Yet as Johnson himself admits, one can attribute this position to St. Thomas only by inference, since the Angelic Doctor nowhere expressly attributes knowledge of creation to Aristotle. On the other hand, Joseph Owens has cautioned that whenever St. Thomas discusses Aristotle's "metaphysics," there are ample signs that his treatment of "the Philosopher" is hedged by exegetical circumspection; thus, as Owens indicates, St. Thomas sometimes knowingly understates differences between his own position on certain questions and Aristotle's, differences having everything to do with what Aristotle may or may not be said to have known about God. Owens attributes such reticence to what we might call hermeneutic generosity. See his "The Conclusion of the *Prima Via*," in *St. Thomas on the Existence of God: Collected Papers of Joseph Owens, C. Ss. R.*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 166–67; also "The Starting Point of the *Prima Via*," 187; and "The Accidental and Essential Character of Being," 59.

26. See chap 2, canon 1 (Denzinger, 1806). I am grateful to Guy Mansini, O.S.B., for first bringing this point to my attention, as also for his Benedictine hospitality in hosting a most congenial conference on the theology of Robert Sokolowski ("Christian Distinctions and Theological Disclosures: Robert Sokolowski and the God of Faith," St. Meinrad's Abbey, April 10–12, 2000), where an earlier version of the essay was presented. I should also like here to acknowledge my debt, in friendship, to

the domain of pure principle alone, it remains difficult to see how human beings ever could have come to know, wholly on their own initiative, anything whatsoever about a God who forms no part of the world. Awareness of such a God would seem to require that one think beyond the world's confines, and a step of that magnitude by no means goes without saying.

We are wont to consider the world as one among the seemingly endless number of things we are given to ponder. Philosophically speaking, however, the world is not a thing at all. It is neither an unimaginably large thing, nor the theoretical last in any particular series of things. The world is, rather, the normal horizon of human thinking. It provides the overarching context, or setting, for human experience. As such, it is given in advance, as it were, of particular experiences of this, that, or the other thing; ordinarily, we come up against it as always already "there" when we find ourselves thinking about this or that or the other. Indeed, the word "horizon" does not quite do justice to our awareness of the world, being merely a metaphor, drawn from the experience of visual perception and its limits, for quite another sort of limit altogether, an invisible or noetic limit. In gazing at the horizon we "see" with the mind's eye that things unseen lie beyond it, things that would be available to us were we given some other visual field, defined by some other point of view. We do not, however, possess a supra-noetic cognitive power standing analogously to intellect as intellect does to visual perception, and affording us a glimpse of the universe as merely one among an infinite number of intelligible worlds.²⁷ To begin to sort out the "worldhood" of the world would already take us, as Sokolowski puts it, to "the extreme margin of what can be thought."²⁸ Yet if we are not to conceive of God as part of his creation, it would seem necessary that we be able to go still further, by "unthinking" this rationally marginal world. And as Sokolowski gently observes, such an undertaking is "not

Michael Waldstein and Jay Thompson for inviting me to discuss these same issues with the faculty and students of the International Theological Institute, Gaming, Austria, in April 2001.

27. See Klaus Held, "The Controversy Concerning the Truth: Towards a Prehistory of Phenomenology," *Husserl Studies* 17 (2000): 35–48.

28. Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 18–19; see also 10, 12, 19, 31, 43, 46, 50–51, 107, 108, 112–15; *Eucharistic Presence*, 52, 171, 198; *Husserlian Meditations: How Words Present Things* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 169–75, 202–4; and *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 43–46, 50, 113.

as simple as one might suppose.²⁹ For in thinking beyond the world, we would also have to think beyond the world's self-manifestation in our thoughts, a task involving paradoxes still greater than those at work in Tom Sawyer's desire to be present as spectator at his own funeral.

To conclude, the perimeters of the world that is the normal correlate of rational activity are not easily traversed by us, if they are traversable at all. It was almost to be expected, then, that paganism typically understood the divine to be the most exalted part of the intelligible whole. But if that is correct, has not the Church ascribed to human reason the power to grasp a truth beyond human reach? How is it that we who are immersed so decisively within the world should be able to discover the God who forms no part of it, and that precisely through reasoning of an intensely worldly sort?³⁰

II.

Is the Church's faith in reason's theological capacity well founded? An impeccable demonstrative argument would settle the issue, but as I indicated at the outset, I shall not here attempt to shoulder the burden of the world's proof. In what follows, I merely outline some reasons for thinking that the Christian conception of reason's natural ambit is not unreasonable, and so deserving of serious consideration by any human being, believer or not. Yet it would be a mistake to essay even that much until we attempt a more ample articulation of the reach of reason according to Christian faith.

To restrict ourselves to the formula of Vatican I, what exactly ought to count as a purely rational knowledge of the "principle and end of all created things"? Notwithstanding the formal simplicity of the Council's terms, it proves rather difficult to say, so difficult indeed that even theologians have not always agreed as to how *Dei Filius* is to be interpreted. According to some, it teaches that human beings are by nature able to

29. Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 32. As he notes, 43, "Existing, or *esse*, is for Aristotle not a theme for thought, and indeed it becomes a theme for thought only within the special historical tradition of Christian belief."

30. Timothy Noone, commenting upon what might appear to be the procedure of St. Thomas Aquinas, states what is close to the same aporia in a telling way: "How . . . can a proof for the existence of God [from the character of the world's existence] be considered the basis for inferring that the world was created?" "The Originality of St. Thomas's Position," 297.

recognize God as having brought the world into being *ex nihilo*; others hold that "principle and end" falls short of signifying "creator." Such disagreement is not, I submit, accidental. Its cause is not merely a particular defect of intellect or will in one of the parties to the dispute. If there is no unanimity regarding the exact sense of the Council's terms, this is in some measure due to their obscurity. Or rather, it is due to the obscurity, *quoad nos*, of the reality that they strive to articulate. Given the Christian understanding of God, the Church simply cannot spell out with all the detail one might wish just what reason is able to disclose about him apart from faith.

The difficulty in unpacking the formula of Vatican I arises for reasons we have already considered. Such a task would require that we stake out what is largely uncharted human territory: we lack a common vocabulary, a common tradition, that concerns itself with the divine as manifested to and acknowledged by both believers and unbelievers alike.³¹ That we find it difficult to enlarge upon the Council's statement is also a consequence of reason's propensity to assume the world's givenness in any particular reflection it initiates: while it is easy enough to mouth the words of *Dei Filius*, to give voice to them in an energetic or thoughtful way must push any human being, pagan or Christian, to the utmost limits of his cognitive powers. There is, however, a third obstacle confronting anyone who would elaborate upon the stringently concise terms of Vatican I, an obstacle to which the Council itself tacitly points.

In a statement that follows immediately upon the passage we have been considering, *Dei Filius* affirms that, thanks to God's self-revelation in and through his Son, "those things concerning the divine that are not impervious to human reason are, in the present condition of the human race, able to be known by all readily [*expedite*], with firm certitude [*firma certitudine*], and no admixture of error."³² Given its concision, the

31. The first three of St. Thomas's "five ways" might be construed as providing just such a specification, although they surely do not, as a matter of historical fact, identify what "all men [*omnes*]" understand by, or name, or call "God." *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, c.

32. Chap 2 (Denzinger, 3005); and see St. Thomas in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 1, c, together with *Summa contra gentiles* I, 4. This text also suggests a rather obvious question that the present essay does not adequately pose, much less address. If, as here appears, Christian belief holds that knowledge of God by faith is superior in most if not all relevant respects to reason's access to him, why should it be necessary to insist upon reason's own theological competence? The first part of this essay may leave the mistaken impression that the issue is, from the standpoint of faith, merely

Council appears hereby to be indicating that a purely rational apprehension of God is possible only for some few human beings, presumably those able and willing to devote sufficient time and talent to the task. What is more, the Church also here admits that whatever certitude they might attain will be less than firm, and possibly also colored by error. Reason's access to the divine will never be more than tenuous, it would seem, its theological apprehension always rather vague. To expand upon the Council's own formulations would therefore require that we speak with clarity and precision, and without hesitation, about a cognitive achievement that is in and of itself necessarily halting, obscure, and inexact. Such a task plainly calls for some discretion.

Let us begin by considering only a few of the more obvious difficulties that follow from this second formulation from Vatican I. Notwithstanding St. Paul's talk of our being able to see "the invisible," what we know is normally first given not in some pure eidetic vision, but in words, in some opinion about the thing we come knowingly to apprehend. What sort of opinion, though, would provide a suitable starting point for a rational ascent to the divine? How, moreover, is genuine theological knowledge to be distinguished from correct theological opinion? And from the standpoint of human intellection, what precisely is the difference between reason's "sure [*certa*]" possession and faith's "firm certitude [*firma certitudine*]"? Furthermore, how far can reason stray from full rational awareness of God before it ceases to have him truly in mind? And for that matter, what can it mean to say that rational theology is "sure" if its knowing is compatible with error? The work of fleshing out the human significance of *Dei Filius* is difficult especially because we must describe a position that we know, in faith, to be inadequate, but as if from the standpoint of one who was not altogether aware of its inadequacy. An exact and complete phenomenology of a purely natural theology would call for both great faith and exceptional

rhetorical or pastoral in character. In truth, the deepest reasons for the Church's teaching on this point are intrinsic to Christian revelation as such. Only at that level can the reiteration of Rom. 1:19-20 be properly understood. Thus while the Church obviously thinks St. Paul's claim regarding the reach of reason to be true, what is at stake, so far as she is concerned, has more to do with the nature of the God of Christian revelation, and of the faith by which he is known, than it does with reason's God. For the human appropriation of revelation must be compromised when believers cease to believe that human intelligence possesses at least the rudiments of faith's divine vocabulary. To show how that is so, however, exceeds the bounds of the present discussion.

dialectical ability. The conclusion seems unavoidable that for the ordinary Christian at least, the God of reason is, perforce, something of an unknown.

Which is to say that the believer's plight is not so different from the unbeliever's after all. Let us recall another celebrated Pauline statement, once again addressed to residents of a great city, but this time delivered in person. "Men of Athens, I see that in every respect you are very religious." So begins the apostle's famous discourse on the Areopagus.³³ On this occasion his interlocutors are pagans, of course, not Christians so his tone is, understandably, much more conciliatory than was the Letter to the Romans. Consequently, he now says very little about the culpability of pagan ignorance,³⁴ and still less about the degeneracy of pagan deeds. He goes out of his way, instead, to compliment the crowd of unbelievers assembled before him for the very thing he might well have regarded with greatest suspicion: their piety. Such praise is all the more surprising in view of the fact, already reported by the author of the Acts of the Apostles, that St. Paul had become "exasperated" when he discovered, upon arriving in Athens, that the city was "full of idols." St. Luke, to whom authorship of this chronicle has traditionally been ascribed, only adds to our surprise by prefacing his restatement of St. Paul's discourse with the opinion of Athenian mores prevalent in the ancient world: "all the Athenians as well as the foreigners residing there used their time for nothing else but telling or hearing something new."³⁵ This commonplace helps to explain the presence of so many idols in the city, no doubt, but does nothing to clarify the apostle's magnanimous appraisal of Athenian religiosity. We might be forgiven for concluding that St. Paul had here stooped to the use of a little wry flattery. It is most unlikely, however, that he would have said a single word to those gathered around him had he been convinced that their piety was, in truth, utterly hollow.³⁶ But given his own understanding of reason's proper potential,

33. Acts 17:22-31. The whole episode of St. Paul's time in Athens is covered in Acts 17:14-34.

34. See Acts, 17:29-30.

35. St. Luke does not here mention St. Paul's severe disapproval of all idle talk, for which see, e.g., 1 Cor. 1:17-30, Col. 2:8, 1 Tim 1:4-6 and 6:2-51.

36. It is, admittedly, not entirely clear just how willingly he spoke on this occasion, for we are told that certain men "took hold of him and led him to the Areopagus" (Acts 17:19). Yet as St. Luke also reports that St. Paul had been going to the Athenian marketplace daily, in order to debate "with whoever happened to be there"

and his express admission that certain human beings have proven, apart from Biblical revelation, to be “just in the sight of God,”³⁷ he could not reasonably exclude the possibility that there be someone in attendance that day with a real interest in his gospel, despite the city’s notorious reputation for high-flown chatter. And, as it happens, St. Luke concludes his account of their visit by noting without further comment that “some did join [St. Paul] and became believers.”

Having signaled his good will toward his audience, St. Paul proceeds to indicate the reason for his surprising judgment: “For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed ‘To an unknown god.’” More precisely, he invokes that strange monument to the strange in order to establish a fundamental point of agreement between him and them. He thereby sets the stage, both rhetorically and logically, for all that follows. Thus, he immediately goes on to say, “What therefore you unknowingly worship, this I proclaim to you.”³⁸ The concession is an astonishing one. In such circumstances, one might have expected him to begin by endorsing some partial theological truth in circulation among them. And though he will do so in the body of his speech,³⁹ he launches into his argument by claiming, in effect, that he and they already venerate the same God. The premise of the entire speech is that the god the Athenians call “unknown” and the One whom he will now proclaim to them are in some sense identical.

By beginning in this way, St. Paul obviously advances a couple of tactical purposes. St. Luke had already noted, in words that inevitably call

(17:17), which of itself already distinguishes his conduct in the city from his evangelic activity elsewhere. For although he will subsequently say, in his defense speech before King Agrippa and the Judean procurator Festus, that his evangelizing was never “done in a corner” (26:26), it was “his custom” to preach not in public places, but in the synagogues of the cities he visited (17:1–2)—as he also did in Athens (17:17)—where he would address not only Jews and Jewish converts but also “God-fearing gentiles” (13:42). Acts does report a few other episodes in which St. Paul spoke publicly, apart from his time in Athens, but in almost every instance, he had been compelled to do so by religious or civil authorities, as in Jerusalem before Agrippa. The only other mention of his speaking in the marketplace concerns his stay in Philippi, but on that occasion he was dragged there by an angry slave owner (16:19). The only other time he is said to have spoken in a civic space of his own accord, he was in Lystra, where he sought to prevent a crowd of people, inspired by a miracle they chanced to see him perform, from committing an unwitting blasphemy (14:8–18).

37. Rom. 1:13–17.

38. Acts 17:23.

39. Acts 17:28.

to mind the trial of Socrates, that among those who brought his friend to the Areopagus were men who had sized him up as “a promoter of foreign deities.”⁴⁰ By appealing to their “unknown god” he lays the grounds for acquittal on any charge of impiety that might be leveled against him. Second, the identity he proposes between that “god” and his “God” would have worked to no small rhetorical effect, especially among an audience whose appetite for novelty was legendary. For what could be more unexpected than the abrupt disclosure of something new dwelling hitherto unnoticed within the old? Still, it would be a mistake to reduce this startling identity to an orator’s trick or a lawyer’s ploy. St. Paul was not the sort of man to trade illicitly upon equivocations. Better to take him at his word, in which case he is claiming that anyone who bowed reverently before the city’s altar to a god unknown would there meet up, albeit inadvertently, with God himself. Pagan Athens obviously knew much less about the divine than it was given to think. But it also knew a good bit more than it believed.

Why does the apostle to the gentiles locate the truth of Athenian piety at a shrine that would have played at best a marginal role in the religious observances of the city? And do his reasons have any application beyond the city’s walls? To answer these questions, we shall first consider more closely the character of Athenian interest in the “news” St. Paul would bring them. We shall then offer a few summary remarks about the body of his speech, and what it suggests about the identity he effects between their unknown god and the God he would make known to them.

Initially at least, Athens provided Paul of Tarsus with a more diverse and more eager audience than he would find in any other city that received him as a stranger. Certainly, he never encountered a more sophisticated one.⁴¹ As St. Luke indicated, however, most of those who followed him up the Areopagus sought some respite from the tedium of their idleness, or an opportunity to exercise their eristic skills against a new opponent. And from that point of view, the God St. Paul announced to them could not possibly be more unsuitable. Because his God figures in no greater scheme of things, he cannot be made the in-

40. Presumably, because they had heard him preach about Jesus and “Resurrection”—a female divinity, they imagined—in the marketplace (see Acts 17:18).

41. Among his interlocutors that day were representatives of both the Stoic and the Epicurean schools are said to have been among St. Paul’s audience in Athens (Acts 17:18).

strument of their banal purposes, or indeed of any human project. It was all but inevitable, therefore, that most who listened that day to this odd Jewish preacher would soon leave disappointed. Although it was at their invitation that he spoke to them, his words could never have held their attention for long because they had no real desire to understand what he might say. Given their habitual stance toward knowledge and the good of knowing, they had all but eliminated themselves in advance from the possibility of God's company.

The apostle surely did not expect much from the bulk of those Athenians who had gathered around him. The altar to the unknown god suggested, nevertheless, that vain curiosity was not the only cognitive passion at work in the city. It is likely that Athens had erected this shrine to the strangest of all its deities by way of covering its religious bets, as it were. Even so, such a structure bespoke a seriousness of purpose not apparent in those who prattled their days away. Like any public monument, it made a public claim, one to which the city committed itself for as long as it allowed the altar to stand. By implication, this civic monument also made a claim upon the residents of the city. It called to their attention and charged to their concern what was to St. Paul a fundamental truth, namely, that the city was ignorant in important respects about the divine. The relative permanence of the shrine implied, in addition, that Athens did not expect to overcome its ignorance as a matter of course, or by dint of its own efforts. On the other hand, by tacitly encouraging prayers to the divine known as unknown, the altar testified to both a desire and a hope that those divine things hidden from Athenian sight might, in a way and at a time that was not of their choosing, be made manifest to it. To consider this solitary construction from the apostle's perspective, then, it would have suggested that anyone disposed to worship before it had every reason to listen attentively to his words.

To state the significance of the altar in more general terms, one could say that it functions as a sort of rational shibboleth to Christian revelation. Given the role it plays in this singular speech (for we have no other record of either St. Paul or any other New Testament figure speaking at this length to the gentiles), it suggests that knowledge of one's ignorance about things divine marks the point of convergence between pagan reason and Christian faith—provided, of course, that one does not derive from the fact of that ignorance a proof of its invincibility, and so con-

fuse the rational promise of God known as unknown with the obscurantism of a god dogmatically defined as unknowable.⁴² Only those cognizant of the poverty of their mind's possessions, inclined to think that the means to make good on their lack do not lie immediately at hand, yet not so despairing of their situation as to cease scanning the horizon for a remedy for their indigence would, in their reflection upon things divine, be open to the gospel.

Or since the lived awareness of such ignorance is most accurately embodied in the act of questioning, one could say that "Athens" and "Jerusalem" meet in the question *quid sit deus?* For once "unknown" assumes the status of a divine name, one could scarcely give human voice to it without at once desiring to know better that to which it so tentatively points. In this way, the question could justly be described as both the source of "Athenian" or rational piety and its summit. That it constitutes its source is obvious enough. Though the signs inviting mankind to seek out what is ultimate lie all around us, they will remain forever unnoticed unless and until we are rationally disposed to attend to them. Yet whatever truths about the divine that pursuit of this question might yield, they could never adequately satisfy the knowing lack that occasioned them. And in that sense, the theological question might also be described as the summit of Athenian piety. To pose it properly, therefore, would be to pose it again, and again. Finally, as both source and summit of a rational or human piety, the question *quid sit deus?* opens up a cognitive space for the infinitely greater truth about God given in Christian revelation. One would not go far wrong, then, were one to regard it as the human origin, though not the human end, of a suprarational or truly divine piety.

The apostle's identification of the god that Athens left unnamed and the God he would announce to the city suggests, in remarkably concrete terms, that reason knows God best when it knows that it does not know him as he is to be known. That faith and reason converge in a question is confirmed by another striking feature of the speech on the Areopagus: its brevity.

As we noted earlier, there is no record of St. Paul ever having essayed anything like a philosophical demonstration of the invisible reality of

42. Both the ancient poets and the sophists were disposed to this confusion. See, e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.2.982b28–983a10; and Diogenes Laertius, "Life of Protagoras," *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* IX, 51.

God. That he did not attempt such a thing while in Athens might seem particularly troubling, however. Elsewhere the apostle to the world beyond Palestine confesses that he was so eager to proclaim Christ that he became "all things to all men."⁴³ Nevertheless, in the body of his discourse to an audience of dialecticians, he limits himself to the bald assertion that his God made all that exists, which means, he adds, that human hands can neither confine him to the space of any human sanctuary, nor serve him by rectifying what we might imagine to be some divine deficiency. For the rest, he merely outlines, in a sentence or two, what God's creative act signifies for human beings and human communities; he appeals to two short verses from two Greek poets in support of his announcement; and he adds in a concluding sentence that this same God will "judge the world with justice."⁴⁴ Why such haste?

If it is correct to say that reason at its best will always punctuate its use of the word "God" with a question mark, then St. Paul's apparent dialectical reticence on the Areopagus need not be construed as a shortcoming. Whether sound or not, demonstrations of God's existence risk conveying the impression that reason, having established so much, can do no more, and so is free henceforth to direct its attentions elsewhere. Theological discussions of a cosmological sort, which by the apostle's time had become a fairly respectable activity in Athens, have often concluded in just this way. The divine is effectively reduced to the function it plays within some system of celestial mechanics, which means that it can have very little to do with human life as such, apart from its propaedeutical role in the formulation and cultivation of a rational morality.⁴⁵ If, however, a man were to edge haltingly in his thoughts toward the divine conceived as the first and last horizon of all things, he

43. 1 Cor. 10:19-23.

44. The first verse he cites may have been derived from a saying of Epimenides; the second was from a poem by a Stoic poet, Aratus of Soli, active in the third-century B.C. Jesus Christ is mentioned only elliptically in the speech, at the very end, with reference to God's judgment of the world. How much more St. Paul would have said on this occasion about the one thing needful is unclear, because, as St. Luke notes, the apostle no sooner adverts to the Resurrection when members of his audience "began to scoff" or otherwise expressed their lack of interest in such talk, at which point St. Paul takes his leave (Acts 17:30-33).

45. Notwithstanding the many differences between them, both the Stoics and the Epicureans aspired to settle human uncertainty about the divine once and for all in order to secure the possibility of a rationally "blessed" life, which is to say, a life that is not ordered to an understanding of the divine as its abiding task.

would inevitably be moved every step of the way to reconsider all aspects of that "thing" which is his own life in its light.⁴⁶ Without endorsing the excesses of those Christians who, following Heidegger, are forever declaiming against "onto-theology," one can admit that certain attempts to make good on St. Paul's claims for human intelligence have often been as much a hindrance as a help to faith.⁴⁷

Furthermore, whatever worldly evidence St. Paul might have adduced in support of his claims about the divine, miracles included, and whatever the logical and rhetorical forms he might have employed to marshal that evidence, nothing he could have said would ever have been adequate to the divine reality to which he never does more than to point. In that sense, his proclamation on the Areopagus did not intend to *prove* anything. It is more accurately understood as an invitation than a demonstration. Whatever may have been the motives of his interlocutors when they initially invited him to speak about his "new teaching," they obliged themselves, by virtue of their request, to try his response on, so to speak, for rational size. It was their responsibility to attempt to verify (or falsify) what he told them about his God, in the light of their own prior experience and understanding to be sure, but also on the basis of anything else he might have said had they been serious enough to press him further. That their first question to St. Paul was also their last suggests that it was they, not he, who failed to do justice to the terms of their rational humanity.⁴⁸

46. See Acts 17:26-31.

47. In his *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation*, ed. Alexander Dru (London: Sheed & Ward, and Veritas Publications, 1968), Hans Urs von Balthasar considers the advantages and disadvantages, in the patristic period and in the age of high scholasticism, of what he calls the "cosmological method" as an introduction to Christian revelation; he also describes the eclipse of that same "method" in the modern period, and the risks and opportunities attendant thereupon. Michael J. Buckley argues in *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) that late scholastic efforts to articulate a purely "natural" theology, formally separated from theological reflection upon biblical revelation, did much to contribute to the theoretical turn away from the Christian God in the modern era. Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729*, vol. 1, *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), advances a similar thesis.

48. Even or especially at its best, reason risks confusing the goodness of knowing with the goodness of being in the know; and in its quest for self-satisfaction, the reasoning being only compounds his ignorance. Balthasar, summarizing patristic exegesis of St. Paul's assessment, in the Letter to the Romans, of the pagan failure to recognize God in his creation, describes it as a refusal of "the act of obedience that is an essential aspect of reason. Instead . . . they [impious pagans] 'absolutize' their natural

To conclude, the very economy of St. Paul's speech on the Areopagus confirms the abiding priority, for him, of reason's grasp of its ignorance about the divine to any particular theological conclusions it might come to. Only on the basis of that assumption could it have made sense for him to speak at all, and only on that basis would it have been reasonable to suppose the Athenians capable of understanding, even if only partially, what he disclosed to them.

We turned to an episode in the Acts of the Apostles in order better to understand what it would mean for human intelligence to realize the capacity St. Paul, and with him the Church, ascribes to it. It may seem, however, that we have merely exchanged the lack of specification entailed by a formal definition for something far vaguer. And in truth, the question *quid sit deus?* is in its own way as abstract as the canonical formulae of Vatican I: the divine cannot be known in the interrogative mood except insofar as that question is set in rational motion by a particular human being, at a particular time, in a particular place. The knowledge embodied and achieved in such activity will, accordingly, always be inflected in a unique way by each and every human being who poses it seriously. Otherwise stated, one cannot know the real force of this question unless and until one has begun to ask it for oneself. In short, a rational apprehension of God could never be fully encapsulated by a set of propositions, howsoever true they be. And to take note of this fact can help to make clear how the Church could reasonably insist that the God of faith is also the God of reason.

Returning now to *Dei Filius*, we might note that when Vatican I characterizes the God of reason as "principle and end" it does nothing especially new. Has there ever been a time when human beings did not conceive of the divine more or less along such lines? What is novel about the Council's formula is the qualification that is the denial of any qualification "of all things." Or what amounts to the same thing, what is new is the claim that the principle of things is also the end of things. Yet in light of St. Paul's focus upon the "unknown god," perhaps we should read the Council to be identifying not so much a fixed doctrine, rationally comprehended, but rather the permanent horizon of all theological inquiry, to which reason as such is drawn ever onward. A rational awareness of

understanding, its powers, and its results. And that is precisely why they put something created in the place reserved for God. And so they become fools *because* they want to be wise" (*The Theology of Karl Barth*, 314).

God as the "principle and end of all things" would thus mean an awareness of the question reason is always ultimately seeking, that unified and unifying account of the whole of things that begins to be available to human beings only as receding in the very moment they approach it.

Indeed, if one does not construe the Church's teaching in this way, it is difficult to see how rational cognition of God could be open to completion by Christian revelation. If, however, the reach of reason exceeds its grasp, then Christian belief, though beyond human conception, can be humanly appreciated as a completion of our rational aspirations. It would also be hard to see how reason's access to the divine could ever be compatible with error, as Vatican I allows, unless such knowledge concludes with a question mark. When, contrarily, a man is mindful of his ignorance about the divine, then even though his inquiry should cause him to fall into error, he need not necessarily be defined by his mistake. Thirdly, were God as apprehended by reason not conceived in terms that are ultimately aporetic, how could we avoid regarding him as somehow bound, like all else we are given to think, by the world? The mind's natural theological reach need not be worldly, or idolatrous if you will, provided that any "answers" it formulates not overshadow, or fully satisfy, its question. Finally, if the God of reason is not revered as unknown, it is difficult to see how a genuine knowledge of the divine could ever have been a common human possibility, as St. Paul seems to have insisted in his Letter to the Romans. It is by no means utterly implausible, however, that ordinary human beings could come to recognize their ignorance about what is truly first and last, and seek, within the limits of their circumstances and talents, to press beyond their knowing lack.

Before concluding, I must add a caveat or two. Elsewhere in Romans the author proposes that there is a "natural law" written in the hearts of men. This has led the Catholic tradition to speak of an inchoate sense of the divine at work in every human being.⁴⁹ In proposing that the God of reason is preeminently the God unknown, however, I am not suggesting that the law inscribed in our hearts, which is a thing easily overwritten by sin, of itself constitutes a natural knowledge of God. To seek the truth about the divine is undoubtedly an expression of the "natural law," indeed a preeminent expression,⁵⁰ but that search is reasonable or

49. Rom. 2:12-16, together with St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* q. 22, a. 2, ad 1.

50. *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 2, c.

knowing only in the measure that it is active or self-aware. One can pose the question *quid sit deus* vaguely or incisively, doggedly or halfheartedly, persistently or intermittently. One cannot pose it unaware that one does so.

I also hasten to add that I do not intend anything like a transcendental argument for God's existence. Arguments of that sort turn upon an analysis of the nature of human reflection, considered in an unsustainable abstraction from any particular thing we are given to think. Thus, the very structure of reason is thus said to require an identity between intelligibility and existence, otherwise our knowledge would not be knowledge of the way things really are. That is to say, our knowledge would not be knowledge. If, however, this identity is to hold, then, the argument concludes, God, the infinite fullness of being and of truth, must exist. Elegant though this line of reasoning may appear, it begs the relevant question, namely, is "to be" absolutely identical with "to be intelligible"?⁵¹ Indeed, it is the very apotheosis of question begging. Were it the case that human reason actually comprehended the identity between these two "transcendental categories," then as surely as night follows day, we would know that the Christian God exists. In the very moment that this identity became self-evident to us, however, any question we ever had would be dissolved, including the question about God's existence, at which point it is far from clear how we could continue to keep him in mind. To concede the transcendentalist's major premise would entail that a rational apprehension of God cease at the very moment it began. That which I have outlined here should not be construed as a demonstration of God's existence, a transcendental demonstration least of all.

Be that as it may, it might seem that the problem that set our discussion in motion still confronts us. Even if St. Paul really had observed in Athens an altar exactly of the sort he describes, it is noteworthy that he does not claim to have seen anyone actually worshipping before it.⁵² Granted that a rational knowledge of God would be marked by an

51. See Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 108–9.

52. There are references in classical literature to Athenian devotion to "unknown gods," and archeologists have confirmed the existence of altars dedicated to them, but apart from Acts there is nothing to indicate that Athens provided for the worship of an "unknown god." Thus, it is possible that St. Paul exercised some hermeneutic generosity on this occasion. See Gerhard Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), 238. Cf. n. 24, *infra*.

awareness that nothing one had yet encountered within the world sufficed to show the world to be answer to one's search for what is first and last, is such knowledge a real human possibility? Is it reasonable to suppose that man's question about the divine could ever be pursued with sufficient energy and consistency that it would overcome the gravitational pull of creation, and the evidence it continuously offers of its own integrity, which is to say, its relative primacy and finality?

The fact that St. Paul's unprecedented encounter with the men of Athens began so inauspiciously, with an assembly of garrulous sophisticates, and ended so abruptly, with so few of them unchanged, suggests that it is humanly very difficult to sustain the theological question. Even if a man should not succumb to idle or vainglorious prattle, it would not be at all surprising, given the magnitude of the inquiry, were he eventually to abandon it outright or to settle upon the idolatry of a less than rationally satisfying response, sheerly out of weariness or confusion or impatience. At the very least, therefore, an ongoing ascesis of a sort would be necessary in order to counter the vagaries of our nature. More precisely, the human being could make no headway at all, when navigating the theological question entirely by his own lights, unless he came to prefer the truth about God to his very self. In comparisons between popular and philosophic paganism, it is sometimes said that howsoever wrongheaded the piety of the many may have been, it was closer to Christian faith in one important respect: the many, but not the philosophers, understood the necessity of offering prayers and sacrifices to the divine. This opinion fails to appreciate the affinities between the detachment required for rationally pious inquiry and those prayers and sacrifices Christians believe to be pleasing in God's eyes.⁵³

Rational ascesis is not, to be sure, simply the cognitive equivalent of a hair shirt. To seek the truth about the divine is not to go entirely against the human grain. After all, it is a constant of human inquiry that the longer one investigates anything, great or small, the more questionable does that thing come to seem. Yet this experience need not lead to "skeptical" resignation; it might with greater justification lead to an intensifi-

53. See 1 Cor. 8:1–11, 10:17–29, and 14:13. On the analogy between the "ascesis" involved in the rational search for the divine and the Christian understanding of prayer and sacrifice, see Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 22–23, *inter alia*. The present essay is indebted to Giussani's reflection not only for this point, but generally.

cation of one's investigation, for the desire to understand is never slaked without being whet anew. The more we allow some aspect of reality to elicit our knowing interest, the more interesting does reality as a whole become for us. It is true that discussion of the deepest and highest themes can appear to run in circles: *tot sententiae quot philosophi*. Nevertheless, anyone who has sought to understand anything at all will have discovered that his every finding proves a spur to further seeking. And were it permissible to generalize upon this common rational dynamic, one might well conclude, at least in a provisional way, that the question as to what is truly first and final is, at least in principle, humanly sustainable on the basis of the evidence currently at hand.

The example of the ancient philosophers would seem to confirm the point, which means that our earlier remarks about them must be qualified. If it is true that they tended to identify the divine with certain rationally accessible necessities operating within the created order, no ancient philosopher, indeed no philosopher before Hegel ever claimed to possess a science of the whole. The best of pagan philosophy openly admitted that it had not resolved every philosophical aporia, and that a genuine science of the divine remained for it as much, or more, a desideratum than an accomplished result.⁵⁴ Strictly on their own terms, then, the ancient philosophers had no reason to conclude that the world could be exhaustively explained in worldly terms, or that the wholeness of the visible whole was self-explanatory. For the wisest of them, the question *quid sit deus* would have persisted as a question. Or rather, it may well have done so—for it is difficult to come to any exact determination about such matters. It is entirely possible, in any case, that in the measure that the ancients refused to allow their answers, the necessities disclosed by their thoughts, to eclipse the question from which they issued, to that extent they possessed a rational knowledge of God, by and large unknown to be sure, as the source and culmination of all they sought to know. And on that basis, we might well conclude that the teaching introduced to the Church by St. Paul, and formalized by *Dei Filius* is not merely reasonable, but preeminently so.

54. See, for example, Plato, *Timaeus*, 19b–20d; and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VII.1.1028b3. This is not to deny Sokolowski's claim that pagan philosophy involves a certain "simple acceptance of limitation . . . and the acknowledgment of elements of rude unintelligibility that show up along with the reasonableness of things" (*The God of Faith and Reason*, 109). It is only to propose that such acceptance and acknowledgment is not coterminous with philosophical perplexity.

III.

Thanks to missionary activity that began within a few years of Christ's earthly life, almost all parts of the globe now bear traces of the gospel, even where the Christian faith is not visibly present. For example, certain institutions that are now commonly thought to be thoroughly "secular" in character, such as hospitals and universities, have roots, historically, in the Church's mission to the world. By the same token, two millennia of evangelization have transformed the way the divine is conceived by many who are neither Jew nor Christian, which is to say that "pagan" religiosity is now rarely to be found in "pristine" form, so to say.⁵⁵ The dissemination of Christianity does not entail the obliteration, in practice, of the distinction *Dei Filius* sought to secure in theory. The fact that some level of familiarity with the Christian God nowadays often precedes faith in this God does not signify that all prospects for a strictly rational apprehension of the divine have been eliminated. Nevertheless, the worldly successes and failures of the Church's mission have introduced certain complications into the encounter between believing faith and unbelieving reason.

To this someone may object that many traces of the biblical God have, by now, become so badly worn that they provide only the faintest indication of their real source. True enough, but this does not run counter to, but rather confirms my claim. For one obvious consequence of the "sedimentation" of Christian revelation—to invoke a term from Husserlian phenomenology—is that many who have had no real or direct encounter with the Church may assume, mistakenly, that they already know what Christians mean by the word "God." Such pallid familiarity need not always breed contempt; it is just as likely to foster indifference; but either way, there is a risk that reason's natural openness to the divine has been compromised. Contrarily, but to similar effect, residual impressions of the gospel have inspired innumerable forms of syncretic piety bearing only vague resemblance to the genuine article; and if Chesterton was right to describe error as a truth gone mad, such simulacra of Christian belief are even less likely to win rational credit

55. Contrarily, Christian susceptibility to superstition proves that pagan religiosity has a certain "natural" appeal, the truth of which, Sokolowski argues, concerns the natural worldly necessities to which the pagan deities mutely point (see *Eucharistic Presence*, 41, 136, 159–60, 170, 222; also, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 14–15, 36–37).

for the God of reason and revelation among reasonably minded unbelievers than are opinions about the divine of remotely Christian origin. The dissemination of the gospel could not have occurred without the possibility of dilution or distortion; and such degraded imitations of Christ may well have an adverse effect upon the life of the mind.

In its various corrupted forms, Christianity appears to offer and ask too little of reason. I began by observing, however, that the Christian faith might more justly be accused of imposing undue burdens upon it. In this regard, it cannot be denied that the properly Christian mysteries constitute an acute provocation. Generally speaking, the ancient philosophers moved only gradually toward a consideration of the highest and deepest themes. And surely the care and circumspection with which they normally posed their questions about the divine was appropriate, humanly speaking, both to the subject and to their situation. In comparison to the leisurely pace of Greek philosophical theology, however, the explicitness of Christian revelation might well appear, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "too much." Indeed, the Pope is so bold as to say that God, by revealing his divine Fatherhood "so openly" through the person and mission of his Son, has, "[i]n a certain sense . . . gone too far."⁵⁶ The demands the God of faith seems to make upon human intelligence may also have contributed to neglect of the God of reason.

That which more commonly obscures the rational evidence for God in our age, however, is far more banal than anything we have yet mentioned, namely, the doubts that haunt so many of our contemporaries about the possibility of knowing anything at all, much less anything of consequence about the divine. This situation surely did not arise by chance. The most authoritative "skeptics" of our day, who first taught us to set our rational sights low, clearly were seeking a way to correct the error they took Christianity to be. That their leading principle, if we can call it that, came to include anything and everything bearing some connection to what is first and final, was, one might say, merely an unintended consequence of their theoretical policy.⁵⁷ According to Nietzsche, however, it is Christianity that is chiefly to blame for the spiritual vacuity of modern "nihilism." For in locating the truth about the divine in a "heaven" beyond or apart from the world of human experience, does it

56. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 40–41.

57. The skeptical bankruptcy that characterizes much of modern thought is a central theme of *Fides et Ratio*. See §§5–6, 45–47, 55, 81–90. Also n. 1, *infra*.

not denigrate everything worldly, including man himself? On this basis, he concludes with evident relief that the Christian religion will itself be the final victim of its earthly triumph. One need not endorse Nietzsche's subtle and provocative genealogy of modernity in every respect to allow that there is some truth to it. To abandon the biblical understanding of God and creation might seem, prospectively, a liberating thing. In truth, "conversions" of that sort rarely if ever herald a recovery of pagan "innocence." Thus, to modern "post-Christian" eyes, the world appears empty, forlorn, and incoherent in a way that is foreign both to the Church's faith and to pre-Christian reason. And in the aftermath of modernity's theological doubts, when even truths once commonly understood to be self-evident have fallen under general suspicion, one obviously cannot presume a general awareness of, or interest in, the evidence of things unseen.

How ought faith to respond to unreasoning, unassuming, or uninterested reason?

As we have observed, St. Paul invested little or no evangelical energy in attempts to demonstrate by unaided reason the existence of that which, according to the faith he had freely received, reason ought already to have acknowledged without his help. Indeed, were a Christian to propose a rational argument for God that pretended in no way to depend, humanly, upon the faith from which the missionary impulse for his gesture obviously derived, the only thing he could reasonably expect from an open-minded but unbelieving interlocutor would be his continuing incredulity. If, contrarily, St. Paul's words to the Athenians were to be our guide, the Christian need not scruple about invoking, albeit discretely, something of the light of his faith. Why call it "light" at all if it does not offer some promise of elucidation to those who are, theologically, in the dark? To be sure, the apostle will not offer meat to those still suckling. Still, he does advert to the Resurrection in his discourse to the Athenians, as we have seen, although he must have known that such talk risked seeming like "folly" to many of them.⁵⁸ In a similar vein, John Paul II calls attention to the rational evidence accessible to unbelievers in the witness of Christian martyrs.⁵⁹ Christian evangelization should

58. 1 Cor. 3:1–2; 1:18–23.

59. *Fides et Ratio*, §32. This observation is an extension of the Pope's striking assertion, made earlier in the encyclical, that "Reason cannot eliminate the mystery of love which the Cross represents, while the Cross can give to reason the ultimate

not allow the formality of the distinction between faith and reason to trump, in practice, what the Church professes as God's own preferred "method" for introducing himself to humankind: the humanity of his divine Son.

It must also be said that in an age as doubtful and as jaded as ours professes to be, there is ample opportunity for believing reason to reawaken in unbelieving interlocutors the human questions for which the Resurrection was to be the supra-abundant answer. For as we have also noted, Christian revelation is able to engage human intelligence only in the measure that it is active, or questioning. Faith and reason might very well agree, therefore, that what is most needed in our day is a more genuine skepticism.⁶⁰ To be sure, the believer could not possibly help to rekindle the properly human desire to understand were he to imagine that what he had been given to know by Christ had sealed the doom for natural human perplexity. What is needed from the side of faithful reason, accordingly, is an intensification of the questions that had already appeared within reason's ordinary horizon, and that the Church proposes both to answer *and* to ask again in terms beyond but not contrary to reason's measure. Such a zetetic faith, by embodying Christian revelation in a way that does not diminish but rather enlarges the believer's own humanity, would surely allay some of the confusions of the rationally bewildered, the apprehensions of the rationally diffident, and the suspicions of the rationally aloof.

answer which it seeks. . . . The wisdom of the Cross, therefore, breaks free of all cultural limitations which seek to contain it and insists upon an openness to the universality of the truth which it bears" (23). On this point, see also Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 115-16, 123-24, 142.

60. This theme runs throughout *Fides et Ratio*, but see, inter alia, §§48, 55-56, 73, 81-83, 92, 102-104, 106-107.