



## **A God Out There?**

*by David Thomasana, O.P.*

Like the childhood game of chutes and ladders, the history of thinking about God has had its moments of extremes. Sometimes in this history, God's complete transcendence has been emphasized; at others, his total immanence. In the former case, God was placed so far "outside" of the universe that he appeared to lose all relevance to the daily human course of events. In the latter instance, God was transposed into such intimacy with creation itself, being equated with "nature,"

that he again lost all relevance. The totally transcendent view of God demands that he remain beyond the ladder to the world; on the other hand, the immanent view of God pushes him down the chute until he is so within the universe that he can be identified with the vital forces present in the world. What resulted from the game of chutes and ladders is with us now. The irrelevance of God is part of our social condition. And this irrelevance is a primary factor in the rejection of God by contemporary atheism.

Conditions for unbelief in our day are prevalent enough without adding a false conception of God. The truth is that false and confusing conceptions of God are part and parcel of our cultural baggage, and cause untold damage and anxiety for man. In an attempt to clear out some of this baggage, we will offer a possible key for a solution. The arguments which led to either extreme are composed of brilliant insights and took place in the context of bitter disputes. From our vantage point, engaged as we are in our own difficulties, these insights must be modified and introduced into a new context if they are to have any meaning. The key for a solution is the discovery that the two emphases have forgotten or denied an important aspect of the mystery of God in relation to the world. This aspect leads us to suspect that God is both immanent and transcendent at once.

Were we somehow able to stand above the history of thought about God, the positions of this thought would appear like a meandering river through a meadow. The extreme loops of the river would be the two extreme positions of which we have been speaking, namely, deism and pantheism. In this poise of standing above history we could ask the all-important question: Why the meandering? One answer seems obvious. The meandering path was dictated by the needs of various cultural positions in which the ideas were formulated. But a further reflection will indicate another dimension. Why is the meandering possible? It could only be possible if, at the core, thinking about God bumps into a mystery. A mystery would then allow for a wide berth of opinions, views, insights, and errors.

In the immediate past, God has once more been "laddered" to the beyond. In reaction to this transcendent shove, many thinkers today are correspondingly "chuting" God into the within. We are suggesting that we pause in this dialectic between immanence and transcendence, between God as the "ground of being" and God as the "totally other." In this pause, perhaps we will discern that God is neither solely one

nor the other, neither totally "in the world" nor totally "outside the world."

Before continuing this discussion, we should indicate what we mean by "God." The description of "God" used in this study is a simple one. God is taken as the creator of this world. It is this understanding of God which is handed down to us from Hebrew and Christian thought. And this understanding of God can serve as a common understanding of what is meant by "God," regardless of whether or not such a creator exists. On the basis of this understanding alone, we are able to choose the two extremes to be avoided: deism and pantheism. Creating implies some link with the created. God, understood as creator, would have to have some link with the world, some bond or communication with the "work of his hands". Both deism and pantheism obliterate such a link. The former by allowing God an act of creating, and then leaving him to watch helplessly while the effortlessly determined world spins through history, has led to the rejection of God subsequent upon modern man's notions of freedom and his need for reassurance that God is nearby. The link in this case was in the past and tenuous at that. Pantheism could afford the reassurance that God is close at hand, but it seems to destroy the *apartheid* between creator and creature by too close an identification. There is some question too as to whether pantheism really affords man his individual freedom. The link in pantheism is reduced to a point of no extension. In short, creation supposes a link; deism removes the link from the present situation; pantheism removes the link altogether.

Although a great deal of our subsequent conclusion depends upon the two poles we choose as guiding our dialectic, the opposites of pantheism and deism seem unavoidable on the basis of our working definition of God as creator.<sup>1</sup>

### **Immanent or Transcendent**

There are several ways of understanding the phrase that God is neither just wholly immanent nor just wholly transcendent. The first way is that of "negative" philosophy of God. God is no-thing; he is unknown and unknowable. Consequently God is neither immanent nor transcendent since these conceptions demand some knowledge of his activity. St Thomas Aquinas at first glance seems to support this view. "Now we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not."<sup>2</sup> In support of his contention, Thomas had previously argued that to

understand any proposition or statement about God it would be necessary to both know the definition of the subject of the statement and the predicate. However neither of these conditions is fulfilled, and for this reason, God is unknown to us. His essence and the existence we predicate of him in the statement "God exists" are both unknown to us in their definitions. Thus St. Thomas was careful to avoid using the name or pseudo-definition of God in the middle term of the five ways concluding only to five different principles generally said to be "God by most people. Bertrand Russell is correct in reacting to the usage of most people of the phrase, "I have proven that God exists." This is an impossibility. All that can be proven is that "exists" belongs to the subject, "God," that is, that the phrase "God exists" is true, depending of course on whether one accepts the proofs. It is this acceptance of some sort of proof which is in fact the bone of contention. Nevertheless St. Thomas separates from the "negative" view we have been discussing just at this juncture, since his psychology offers him some experience of God, and consequently, some possibility of proving at least one thing about him, namely, that existence belongs to him. Departing in this way from the observations of a purely "negative" philosophy of God leads Thomas to a "negating" philosophy about God which consists in positive statements about our negative conclusions.

We too will go further than a purely negative philosophy of God, but for a slightly different reason. A purely negative philosophy of God permits but one way of understanding God, the utterly transcendent way which we have chosen as an extreme to be avoided. If God is nothing or non-being, then he is placed outside of our ken, ejected into the beyond. For this reason as well, we might regard Barth's conception of God as *Der Ganz-Andere*, The Wholly Other, a valuable but too one-sided account of God's relation to the world. Tillich seemed to recognize the transcendent default in his own development of a philosophy about God as non-being, and tried to remedy this default by using the conception of God as the "ground" of being. In this way, something of the immanence of God could also be expressed. In any case, by saying that God is neither transcendent nor immanent, we do not wish to be understood to mean that God is no-thing.

A second, more fruitful way of understanding our contention about God is to regard God as neither immanent nor transcendent because these two terms merely express his relationship to us. This understanding would be found in the area of a negating philosophy discussed

briefly above. In this view, it would only be God's relationship to the world which would be immanent or transcendent. The relationship itself depends upon the description of God as creator and as consequently being linked somehow with the world. Although an understanding such as this one could offer a rich source of discussion, we want to stress something even more radical than the relationship aspect or at least to discuss it in a more fundamental fashion. What is important in this area for our study however is the observation that the discussion and method of approach to the immanence and transcend of God depends upon the type of evidence we proffer for his existence. If we begin with the traditional five ways as outlined by Thomas, we are immediately led to the transcendence of God through the three ways of speaking about him which result from the proofs.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand if we begin with man's immanent experience of God, we have as our starting point an immanence of God.

What we wish to suggest is a third way of understanding our statement. God is neither immanent nor transcendent because he is both at once. The two terms are mutually implied in one another. This insight is of tremendous significance and implication for a contemporary dialogue about the Death or Disappearance of God from the daily events of men. God is both at once because, as creator, he is related to the world in both ways at once. We might conveniently approach the immanence-transcendence implication first from the point of view of the terminology itself, secondly as viewed from St. Thomas' own method of discovery of this insight, and finally close with a program whereby such an insight can enter the developmental stream of philosophy today.

### Terminology

No clue to the mutual implication of immanence and transcendence in one another is given by their dictionary definitions. Coming from the Latin "to remain in or near", immanence has the contemporary meaning of inherent, operating from within. Said of God it signifies being present throughout the universe. On the other hand, transcendence, derived from the Latin "to climb over," today means to exceed, surpass, excel, to be separate from or beyond experience or the world. In neither definition is anything said of their mutual bond with one another, especially when used to describe God's relation to the world, or better, the universe as related to God.

Both words have taken on a more specialized meaning in contemporary philosophy. In phenomenological and existential writings, whatever is immanent is that which is totally of the subject, me; whatever is transcendent is what is produced, constituted, or discovered by the subject as something which has an "objectivity," a beyondness from pure subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> Even though the terminology at this point has changed to a man-centered point of view, we may observe the outcome of the investigation from this point of view to be precisely what we are contending; transcendency implies immanence. When one is absent so is the other. Due to the alterations and reformulations of what is meant by the two words, immanence and transcendence, from now on we will refer rather to presence-absence. When speaking about God's relation to the world, then, we will consider presence to mean simply his being-there in creation and absence to mean his being-away from creation. Not only do we wish to stress that every presence implies an absence in respect to God, but also that the greater the absence, the greater the presence, and vice versa!

In order to understand in part what we mean when we say that to be present and to be absent are mutually inclusive when said of God, we can see the two relationships to the world of "presence" and "absence" interwoven like Father and Son. Without a father a son cannot be, and without a son, a father is not established (that is without an offspring). Based upon the fundament of generation, both the relationships are mutually inclusive. In the same way, the presence-absence dialectic is also based upon one foundation, namely that of the link of God with the created universe. We would insist that neither presence nor absence can be defined without implying one another when said of God. And this observation would lead us to the second assertion mentioned above, that the more absent God seems to be the more present he really is!

In support of this assertion, we could cite what we have just said about their being mutually implied in one another. If presence of God and absence of God are mutually implied in one another such that one cannot be defined without the other, then it follows that they will be mutually gradient; their degrees will also correspond with one another. But this is extremely difficult to grasp. Our ordinary experience discovers the opposite to be the case. When an object is seen by us, it is present to a certain extent in our consciousness, and absent in that it is not *us*; it is an "other." There is automatically established in this

case, an *inzwischen*, an “in-between” which allows us to recognize the object, it is simultaneously most *absent* from our being. In this case we perceive that the object’s presence to us in consciousness mutually implies its “absence” from our own being. However, when the object is removed from our presence of consciousness, its absence is not correspondingly increased. Its presence has decreased but its absence has not appreciably changed. It is still “other.” Likewise when the object is made more present to us, after we’ve had a chance to examine all of its characteristics, its absence has not thereby increased at all. On the level of objects then we can only verify the fact that absence-presence are correspondents, but not gradients. How are we able to explain the statement that the more present God becomes the more absent he must also be? The clue lies in the realm of consciousness and knowledge. As we have earlier mentioned, there is an intentional relationship between the “object” of consciousness and the “subject” of consciousness, between the knower and the known. Now the more exalted an idea or object known, the more we are aware of its absence in respect to our being. It transcends us. We can see this in having an idea of God. While the idea is more *present* to us than an external object, it is simultaneously most *absent* from our being. In this case then, we have some verification of the gradient aspect of God’s presence-absence; although here spoken of in the area of an idea about God, it is possible to extend this understanding of presence-absence in degrees to God’s relationship to the world. Another element has also entered our discussion at this point, and that is the fact that what is known is a person, another subject who knows. And this is the reason that a *gradient* relationship between presence and absence can be set up. We do not wish to develop this point however.

Let us now examine how the insight of presence-absence was formulated in St. Thomas’ system and see if it would lend itself to reformulation in contemporary terms. We are not desirous at this juncture of defending St. Thomas’ particular approach but of suggesting the insight which results as valuable to mediate between the two extremes of presence and absence.

### **The Approach of Aquinas**

Clearly St. Thomas must begin with the discovery of the “absence” of God from this world due to his metaphysics. We can trace his “negating” philosophy back to the starting point of his metaphysics.

As a consequent of this starting point, St. Thomas is left with the three ways of philosophizing about God and with an analogous concept of Being which covers all that has existence, including God. But it is the connection of the proportion of existence to essence which will militate against seeing that in this seemingly "total" absence of God, there is at the same time an intimate connection with the world, a "presence." The starting point of the metaphysics which determines the "absence" orientation is the negative judgment that "not all being is like this." After examining as completely as possible the realms of moving things, both in general philosophy of nature and in rational psychology, we come to the discovery that *not all being moves*. This negative judgment opens up the possibility of the science of a metaphysics which will study all being, both moving and non-moving under the general analogous title of *ens commune*. Notice that we did not say: "Whatever else there is is non-being." With that judgment, we would certainly have a total absence! But the judgment we made is a negative judgment which *includes* the new discovery as being, and does not exclude it. Hence, its result will be an *absence* of the mode of proportion of its essence and existence, which immediately implies some similarity and hence *presence* with the moving being.

The last point needs further elaboration. This can be furnished by the place of the five proofs in the *Summa*. They too serve to establish an absence of God; whatever he might be, he is certainly not just moving being. As we mentioned before, however, the five proofs do not terminate in the second question, but in the eleventh. This is significant in that the proofs themselves furnish the materials for further analysis on the part of Aquinas. In this analysis, he formulates a description of God as pure act. Pure Act totally *absents* God from creation. Within the analogous concept of being, moving beings (creation) are seen as receiving their existence (since they are contingent and can lose it) whereas Pure Act expresses the complete *unity* of existence and essence in God. The central point at issue is this: pure act of itself does not seem to imply any connection with the potentialities, limitations, and movements of creation. Nevertheless, we must be cognizant of our approach. The approach began with sensible things regarded as needing some sufficient cause at this moment. In other words, the five proofs and the negative judgment all exhibit as their term some "absent" principle, but at the same time imply a link with the sensible objects, because every cause is linked with its effects.



Thus for St. Thomas pure act as applied to God must of necessity imply at once some connection with creatures. The basic reason for this connection lies in the fact that the very words used, "pure act", as well as the discovery of the reality of pure act are derived from the sensible universe. As a result, we cannot think of God as pure act without simultaneously thinking of him as being connected with the world in some way. God as pure act is most absent but most present. He is absent because nothing on earth or in the universe that we can experience directly is pure act. He is most present because nothing we experience would be without him. And here lies the mystery! Because God has no potency, limitation, or matter, he is further away ontologically than anything we encounter. Nevertheless, because he supports things in their very existence, he is closer to things than any other thing, closer to man than any other person. God's absence protects us from a pantheism of irrelevancy and hominization of his being, while his presence protects us from a deism of irrelevancy and idolatry. Both extremes can be avoided with the insight of the mutual implication of presence and absence.

The problem now is whether this insight can be effectually conveyed to our society and culture which does not have a common metaphysics in which to express it. How can we speak to the world about God?

### **Presence-Absence and the World Today**

What follows can hardly be more than a suggested program for a dialogue with the world. Perhaps the two main characteristics or needs of our present-day society in respect to God are a desire for reassurance that he is "nearby" and a demand that God not interfere with man's freedom. Both of these desires have contributed to the "Death of God." We can immediately afford some reassurance to the death-of-God thinkers with our observation. Why? Because they generally admit of a premise that since God is absent from our experience (by which they mean my own personal as well as cultural experience), he is dead. What we are maintaining is that this is logically false. God's absence does not imply his death, but an even greater presence! The great mystics can teach us an immense clarification on this point, showing that it is above all a deep truth and not a trite "philosophical" answer to an "existential" concern.

In a discussion with our age, we suggested briefly that we drop the terms "immanent" and "transcendent" because of their variegated

philosophical connotations, substituting instead, the words "presence" and "absence." But the insight remains the same. They are mutually inclusive. Although Robinson, Barth, and Tillich have formulated attempts in the theological focus on the problem of God, we do not feel they have been entirely successful. Most thinkers, in fact, either put God too far "out" of the universe or too far "in." By the recognition that he is both at once, we could avoid many of the pitfalls and consequent rejections of our doctrines by the modern age. The following is a suggestion as how we might be able to carry out such a program.

We might begin with the method of subjectivity which has been so successful in formulating living philosophies since the time of Descartes. Within the approach of subjectivity, of man's consciousness, we would then discuss man's experience of God, in the psychological reflections of Jung and the philosophical argument of Newman. But this seems to place God only within or present to me, and could be just a construction of my own. In other words man would be somewhat satisfied to discover that God was "nearby," but would wonder whether it was just a fulfillment of a need on the part of his own consciousness. A further development would then proceed along the lines of the moral argument of St. Thomas and Blondel. For Blondel, it takes three forms, all of which culminate in the possibility of there being an "absent" supernatural order, that is, an order which transcends man and the world. The argument of St. Thomas, developed by Cajetan, runs along somewhat similar lines; man has built-in desires which go far beyond his capacity to fulfill them. What still remains unproven however is that these "natural" desires could go unthwarted. Hence only the *possibility* of an "absent" God is established. Even so, Blondel's arguments do protect man from considering God to be merely the sum total of human aspirations.

The establishment of the "absence" of God is the problem, and a serious problem within this program. For if he is not "absent" but closely identified with "me," then what happens to the freedom which man so ardently wishes to preserve for himself? At this point a theology of a personal God, another subject who is love itself, could lend the certitude we need, but this would be a certitude of faith and not of reason. It would be a richly rewarding study just the same since persons are present to one another first by signs and visible actions. The in-between begins to close when the signs are no longer needed. A greater

presence is established through love, so that, when an absence between the two persons occurs for a short time, the presence in love could continue to grow. The greater the absence the greater the presence! Such a personal approach to the philosophy of God, aided by theology, would also help our understanding how God, by his "absence" preserves our freedom, allows us to mature in love. Yet the "presence" would assure us that we are not dealing with the deistic God, the irrelevant one of "far beyond."

Our final argument to try to establish the "absence" of God, his "outsidedness" in respect to our own fabrications might possibly come from the present-day awareness of meaninglessness within the context of the subjective approach of phenomenology derived from Husserl. Here the important thing to remember would be that by constituting objects of consciousness, man does not thereby "create" them. There is a certain "givenness" about the meaning which we clarify in our experience and which we cannot explain from within our own subjectivity. An argument such as this and other similar ones would serve to establish the meaning or at least the basis of meaning being thought into the elements which are given to us in consciousness by some external being, some "absence" which has kicked us and these meaning-foundations into existence and holds them there.

These few suggestions only awaken the desire for a fuller treatment and more extensive study. However the basic insight will help us steer through the many difficulties we come across in our search to speak relevantly about a relevant God to a confused world.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> We could not conceive of anything so great as God if we did not have some link through existence by which we could validly say that God and the world are linked or correlated. Neither could we conceive of a God if he were identical with nature, for there would be no foundation even for a simple mental distinction, no reason to suspect that something "other" than nature exists, even if this "other" were nothing but the distinction itself.

<sup>2</sup> S.T., 1, Q.2, A.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Q.12, A.12. (The three ways are: of negation, of superexcellence, and of causality.)

<sup>4</sup> The transcendence here does not necessarily imply that what is discovered as opposed to my subjectivity and correlated to it is "beyond" or outside of me as an individual, but simply as correlated to my consciousness. Husserl devoted his life to this basic observation, however, that objectivity and subjectivity are correlates and imply one another. This is developed in his notion of intentionality.