THE IDEA OF GOD

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*A Whiteheadian Critique
of St. Thomas Aquinas'
Concept of God*

by

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To
Jennifer (1960-65)
whose life was perfect in its beauty

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The book, itself, is a much revised version of a doctoral dissertation submitted at Union some years ago.

I am grateful for the good will of my wife, children and friends.

Louisville
August 1973

Burton Cooper

I would like to add a belated acknowledgement to the feminist movement in theology. Were I writing this book today, I would not, of course, refer to God simply in the masculine gender nor would I use the term "man" in a generic sense.

BC

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used in footnote references :

PATRISTICS

C. Ar.	— Contra Arius
C. Cels.	— Contra Celsum
De Inc.	— De Incarnacion
De Princ.	— De Principiis
De Trin.	— De Trinitate
Naz.	— Gregory of Nazianzen
Nyssa	— Gregory of Nyssa

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

C. G.	— Summa Contra Gentiles
De Pot.	— De Potentia
De Ver.	— De Veritate
Summa	— Summa Theologica

WHITEHEAD

P. R.	— Process and Reality
S. M. W.	— Science and the Modern World

PREFACE

Thinking about God is historical thinking and that in two senses : the idea of God has a history, and those who think about God think through an historically formed mind. The task of the theologian, is not the attempt to move outside his historicity – such an attempt constitutes a fallacy and not a virtue – but to accept its implications and limitations. Methodologically this means that the theologian must point to the historical perspectives that underlie the idea of God in its development and, in his own constructive thought, must work self-consciously with an historical perspective informed by the psychological and cosmological understanding of his own time.

This book centers on that idea which traditionally has been associated with the very godness of God – the idea of divine absoluteness – and puts certain historical, logical, religious and, finally, cosmological questions to it. The roots of that idea lie in Greek thought, which entered Christian theology via the early church fathers; even so, there is much indication, particularly in Patristic trinitarian thought, that the Biblical heritage is pushing theological thinking towards a social or relative concept of divine being (ch. 1). The idea of divine absoluteness achieves full and systematic development in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, so that a close analysis of Thomas is highly revealing in terms of laying out the logical and theological problems that arise out of the notion of absoluteness (chs. 2-6). What is interesting is that Thomas' trinitarian theology, even more than Augustine's, suggests a social or relative mode of divine being. Neither one of these thinkers drew out the social implications of trinitarian thought, the present situation is that trinitarian thinking stands as a rich but untapped theological doctrine in search of an ontological alternative to absolutism (ch. 7).

There is, of course, every reason to believe that Thomas was

sensitive to the tensions in his thought as well as aware of the fact that trinitarian theology strains against an ontology of the absolute; it is not a superior awareness on our part of internal difficulties in Thomas' thought that divides us from him. The real dividing point is an historical one - something has happened in our history. Modern science has so qualified our understanding of things that we can know, perhaps even must know, ourselves and our world in a new way. The fundamental principle which informs our re-knowing is stated by Gerhard Spiegler when he writes that

In an age when the principle of relativity has established itself in the foundations of both modern physical science and historical scholarship, it seems appropriate to at least entertain the thought that Christian theology will also have to forego its mooring in modes of thought entirely predicated on some form of substantive absolutist type of thinking.¹

What this means is that it is now possible for theology to break loose from the compulsion of its Greek heritage to conceive God as absolute; it need no longer be "unthinkable" to conceive deity and relativity together. The final chapter of this book, informed as it is by Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysical vision of a genuine reciprocity between God and world, seeks to work out a view of deity which is appropriate to the modern experience of nature and to the religious experience of the redemptive power of God. The justification of this procedure must lie in its fruits, which I believe to be threefold : some of the most intractable logical, moral and religious problems which have historically beset orthodoxy can now be met; an ontology is established which is at one with the direction of Trinitarian theology; and Christian faith is rendered more intelligible to the culture of this age.

It is impossible to write about the reality of God these days without speaking to those theologians who deny that reality. My feelings here are similar to those of Herbert Richardson when he argues that the "death of God" movement signifies not the birth of a new direction for theology but the end of the old one.² Though I would want to

¹ Gerhard Spiegler, *The Eternal Covenant* (New York : Harper and Row, 1967), p. xv. Spiegler strangely fails to mention that under the influence of Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy Charles Hartshorne, Bernard Meland, Daniel Williams, Norman Pittenger and, more recently, Schubert Ogden and John Cobb have been working out a theology thoroughly grounded in the principle of relativity.

² Herbert Richardson, *Toward an American Theology* (New York : Harper and Row, 1967), ch. 1.

add that those of us revising the concept of God have concerns similar to those who reject the reality of God, it is still, I believe, too hasty to say that we must now know our world as a world without God. Much theological confusion might have been avoided if we had seen quickly enough that the modern experience of nature meant the beginning of a post-Hellenic age rather than the beginning of a post-Christian age. What will not do in our era is not the idea of God as such but the Hellenic idea of God, not the idea of divine power but the Hellenic idea of divine power. Similarly what will not do is the Hellenic idea of being, time, eternity, otherworldliness, etc. The reason for this is clear enough: the world view on which the interpretation of these concepts was based has collapsed.

The rejection of Hellenic ideas which are deeply embedded in the Christian view of God is bound to undermine traditional doctrines. Nevertheless, such a move is necessary if we are to speak now, out of our own culture and history, about the reality of God and the meaning of redemption.