

Gregory Graham

Dr. Bruce D. Marshall

The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

8 February 2009

The Immutability of God

In I, 9, 1, St. Thomas asks the question, “Is God completely immutable?” His reply is in the affirmative, based on the truths about God that he has already established. He begins with his proof of the existence of God in I, 2, 3 where in his first way he demonstrates the need for a first mover that must be pure actuality. God must be pure actuality because any potentiality in God would require some other agent to actualize it. So, in I, 9, 1c, Thomas reminds us of basic Aristotelian physics that for anything to change it must possess some potentiality, which does not exist in God.

A second reason why God must be immutable involves the process of change or motion in Aristotelian physics. For a thing to undergo change, there must be some aspect of the thing that exists before and after the change, providing continuity, and another aspect of the thing that changes. These two aspects of the thing imply that it is a composite, having one part that endures the change, and another part that is changed. Since it has already been shown that God is not composite [I, 3], Thomas concludes that God cannot change.

The third argument states that when a thing changes, something is added to or taken away from it. However it has already been demonstrated [I, 7, 1] that God is infinite, and possesses the perfection of all of existence [I, 4, 2]. Therefore nothing can be added to God because he already contains all perfection, and if anything is taken away from God, he would no longer be infinite, so it is impossible for God to change.

One thing that St. Thomas does not address here is why the Incarnation does not result in a change in God. I expect that will be dealt with in III.

I have long held to the immutability of God with a thought process that resembled Thomas' third argument. I have read and heard a little about "Process Theology", but I have never given it much credence because it violates God's immutability.

However, it is more difficult to address the dynamic picture of God we see in salvation history. The best explanation I've been able to come up with is that for us, God appears to change, but really what is happening is that humanity is changing relative to God. As changing humans interact with the unchangeable God, the relationship between God and man changes on one side. However, from our perspective, it appears that God is changing. For example, if someone says that yesterday God seemed distant, but today he seems really close, what is changing is the spiritual state of the person, not God. On a larger scale, God seems different in the Pentateuch than he does in the Prophets or in the Gospels, but I account that to the differences in the people with whom God is interacting in each age.