



## The Heart of Light: God as Mystery

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### Abstract

This paper addresses two questions concerning the attribution of mystery to God. First, if Christianity is neither rationalistic nor agnostic concerning the knowledge of God, then what is the proper understanding of mystery when it is attributed to God? Second, if mystery conditions all theological thinking, how can the proper understanding of mystery be applied systematically across the full range of theological reflection? The response to the first question has three parts. First, God is incomprehensible not because we do not have access to God. God communicates God's self and we can know God's essence but we cannot comprehend God. Second, Thomas Aquinas shows us how we can know God yet God remains incomprehensible. Third, I elucidate the analogy of proper proportionality in arguing that although we do not fully know what we are talking about when we speak of God our concepts are not meaningless. In responding to the second question, I argue, in response to Karl Rahner's use of mystery in his treatment of the problem of suffering, that God's power cannot be absolute but must be related to God's goodness if one is to preserve the mystery of God across the full range of theological reflection.

### Keywords

mystery of God, knowledge of God, divine power, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner

Every Christian theologian worthy of the title recognizes that she cannot rein in or capture God through her concepts. Consequently, every careful theologian at some point appeals to the concept "mystery." The concept "mystery", however, is sometimes used to indicate only the limits of human knowledge. Gordon Kaufmann in his *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* understands the concept of mystery as a "grammatical or linguistic operator"<sup>1</sup> that indicates "that

<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 61.

what we are dealing with here, seems to be beyond what our minds can handle.”<sup>2</sup> In only emphasizing the limits of our knowledge, the concept “mystery” functions as a proper counter to any tendency to a facile and over confident rationalism. If mystery, however, only signifies the limits of human knowledge, it can lead to agnosticism. While Christianity is not rationalistic in its knowledge of God, it is also not agnostic; for the salvation and fullness of life of the human being entails knowledge. Indeed, John’s gospel describes eternal life as the knowledge of the one true God and Jesus Christ whom the Father has sent (Jn 17: 3–4).

The concept “mystery” is also sometimes invoked in the face of an apparent contradiction. In assessing the four-century-long disagreement on the question of grace and freedom between the Bañezian and Molinist schools, Jean Daniélou maintained that neither side had been able to overcome the contradiction inherent in holding both the absolute sovereignty of God and the capacity of free creatures for genuine choice. Daniélou judged that this impasse indicated that we were dealing with the mystery of God.<sup>3</sup>

Invoking the mystery of God when the terms of a theological debate cannot be reconciled can circumvent the theological process. John Wright has shown that the Bañezian and Molinist impasse was the result of the question being posed wrongly.<sup>4</sup> This impasse did not indicate mystery. It suggested that Bañez and Molina had set up a false problem. Even more importantly, invoking the mystery of God when one is faced with a contradiction in one’s theology suggests that mystery as applied to God means contradiction.

While mystery is sometimes employed to indicate the limits of our knowledge of God, or is appealed to when the solution to a theological problem is wanting, it is also often used to insist that the sovereign subjectivity of God, especially God’s will and its freedom, cannot be reined in by the human mind. While the incomprehensibility of God must be maintained, an overemphasis on the sovereignty of God’s will and its freedom can lead to an understanding of God’s freedom as absolute, which also leads to an understanding of mystery as contradiction. If mystery is equated with contradiction this has far reaching consequences for one’s doctrine of God. Thus if unintelligibility and contradiction are at the heart of mystery as predicated of God, then contradiction and unintelligibility would characterize the essence of God. And if contradiction and unintelligibility are

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, trans. Walter Roberts (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Company, 1957), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Wright, S.J., ‘The Eternal Plan of Divine Providence’, *Theological Studies* 27, no. 1 (1966), p. 29 n. 4.

constitutive of the divine essence, then God cannot be understood as the fullness of being, life, wisdom, and love.

This paper will address two central issues concerning the attribution of mystery to God. First, if Christianity is neither rationalistic nor agnostic concerning the knowledge of God, then what is the proper understanding of mystery when attributed to God? To respond to this question, my argument will creatively draw upon aspects of the work of Thomas Aquinas, the contemporary Thomist W. Norris Clarke, and Karl Rahner. Second, if the concept of mystery conditions all theological thinking, how can this understanding be applied systematically across the full range of theological reflection? A full answer to this latter question would require writing a systematic theology in which the major topics of theology are treated. Instead of undertaking such a task, which is obviously beyond the scope of this article, I will examine a particular instance of the use of mystery in treating a theological problem. I will examine Karl Rahner's use of mystery in his treatment of the problem of reconciling the omnipotence and omnibenevolence of God with the reality of human suffering. In examining Rahner I will show that maintaining that God's freedom is absolute in an effort to preserve the mystery of God, actually undermines the proper understanding of mystery. Here I will show how the divine will and God's sovereignty must be understood in order to hold onto the proper understanding of mystery. These conclusions will serve as a guide for theologians as they employ the concept of mystery across the full range of theological reflection.

## I. The Concept "Mystery" as Predicated of God

It is true that the concept "mystery" when predicated of God indicates the limits of human knowledge. More precisely, it indicates that creatures cannot comprehend God. The question, however, becomes: why can we not comprehend God? There are three possibilities of why we cannot comprehend something.<sup>5</sup> First, the object of our knowledge is incomprehensible because it is a contradiction (e.g. male sisters or square circles). It is incomprehensible because it is unknowable. Second, there are limitations on the capacity of this particular reality to reveal itself to us and limitations on our capacity to receive such a revelation.<sup>6</sup> For example, we are unable to know, in any great detail, the character of the distant stars in the universe or whether there is intelligent life in other galaxies. In both cases, the immense distances

<sup>5</sup> To comprehend something is to know it fully or to know it to the full extent that it is knowable.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in some cases, without such a revelation we can merely hypothesize about the existence of a particular reality (e.g. the existence of other intelligent life in the universe).

make it impossible to bridge the gap between the knower and the object of knowledge. Third, and this is unique to God, the reality can reveal its essence (thus there is no limit on the capacity of the reality to reveal itself) and we can know its essence, but we cannot comprehend its essence.

I would suggest that the central message of Christianity is that God has communicated God's self to human beings so that human beings can share in God's life. God has communicated God's self to human beings without God ceasing to be infinite reality and without human beings ceasing to be finite existents. And the capacity of human beings to receive that self-communication is made possible by God. As Karl Rahner correctly maintains, "God's self-communication is given not only as a gift, but also as the necessary condition which makes possible an acceptance of the gift which can allow the gift really to be God, and can prevent the gift in its acceptance from being changed from God into a finite and created gift which only represents God, but is not God himself."<sup>7</sup> We do have access to God. God has revealed God's self and we do know God. Thus we cannot maintain that God is incomprehensible because God is a contradiction, or that God is incomprehensible because we do not have access to God; rather, God has communicated God's self, but God remains incomprehensible.

Let us turn to philosophical theology to elucidate how we can know God, while God remains incomprehensible. Since God, following Aquinas, is the subsisting act of existence or pure act, God is not potential and limited in any way. As such, God is unlimited act. Because a thing is knowable to the degree that it has actuality or to the degree that it is,<sup>8</sup> God, as unlimited act, is supremely intelligible and supremely knowable. The proper metaphor then to employ when speaking of mystery is not darkness, which conveys contradiction and a lack of intelligibility, but light. For Aquinas, "the actuality of a thing is like a light within it."<sup>9</sup> If God is pure act, then God is "pure light".<sup>10</sup> Contradiction and darkness are not at the heart of mystery; the heart of mystery is intelligibility and light.

If the ground of the concept of mystery is that God is unlimited act and as such is supremely intelligible and thus supremely knowable, then it would seem that intellectual creatures as ordered toward the totality of being as true (preeminently God) could know God. Does this not, however, lead to a rationalism in which God is measured by

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> See Aquinas, *S.T. I q. 12 a. 7 corp.*

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, *Expositio in Librum De Causis*, lect 6, n. 68. All translations of Aquinas are mine.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

human reason? St. Thomas Aquinas is particularly helpful in clarifying the intellectual creature's knowledge of God and for treading a middle path between rationalism and agnosticism, between our capacity to know God, which is itself a gift of God, and our incapacity to comprehend God.

Since, according to Thomas, all our knowledge of God begins from sense knowledge, we can only know, and thus name God, from God's creatures. Even our knowledge of God through revelation is imbedded in and mediated by sensible images. A creature represents God not in terms of its likeness to another creature (in being of the same species or genus), but is like God in that it reflects something of God as its abiding source (*excellens principium*). The notion of causality operative here is not the impoverished Humean notion of causality, which reduces causality to "extrinsic antecedent-consequent sequences in time,"<sup>11</sup> but the much richer Thomistic notion influenced by Aristotelian efficient causality and Neoplatonic participation metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the foundation and condition of the possibility for the meaningfulness of our names or attributes of God is that God is the ultimate causal source of all the perfections we find in the world. In Thomas' conception of efficient causality the cause actively produces the effect (either in whole or in part) such that without the cause in this particular instance or situation the effect would not be. Furthermore, if every act is of its nature a self-revelation then every act of efficient causality, at least in some minimal way, is a self-expression.<sup>13</sup> Thus the notion of efficient causality of God's creative activity indicates that the universe is in some way a manifestation of the perfections that God *is* in God's infinite simplicity.<sup>14</sup>

Here I would like to place Aquinas' naming of God in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, which is in the context of the efficient causality of creation, into the larger context of grace. I would suggest that the *Summa Theologiae* must be read as a whole such that the

<sup>11</sup> W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The Philosophical Approach to God: A New Thomistic Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007) p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> See W. Norris Clarke, S.J., 'The Limitation of Act by Potency in St. Thomas: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?', in W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being—God—Person* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 65–88 and 'The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas', in *ibid.*, pp. 89–101.

<sup>13</sup> See Aquinas *Summa contra Gentiles*, III., 113, *De Potentia*, q. 2 art. 1., *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum*, Bk. I, dist. 4, q. 1, a. 1; *Summa Theologiae* I. q. 19 a. 2.

<sup>14</sup> It might be better here to refer to efficient causality as quasi-efficient causality to highlight the difference between inner worldly efficient causality and the efficient causality of God's creative activity. This would allow us to insist both that God's efficient causality in terms of God's creative activity is an absolute beginning ("creation ex nihilo") and to emphasize that the effect (i.e. creation) is distinct from God but not separate from God such that creatures are distinct limited participations in God as the infinite act of existence. Although Aquinas does not use this term, his participation metaphysics would support its use.

attributes of God developed in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae* develop a deeper and richer meaning as Aquinas moves through the work developing the doctrines of Christianity in terms of the Neo-Platonic schema of all things coming from God (*exitus*) and all things returning to God through Christ (*reditus*). In this context the attributes would not simply be in terms of the order of creation but would be fully understood in terms of the grace of Christ. Thus the idea that the attributes of God find their ground in God as the ultimate causal source of all the perfections we find in the world is to be understood not simply in the order of creation, in terms of efficient causality, but also in the order of grace, in terms of quasi-formal causality.<sup>15</sup>

We can, for St. Thomas, only know God in this life through his effects as these effects are represented in creatures. We cannot then know what God is. Since we cannot know what God is (i.e. quidditative knowledge),<sup>16</sup> we can only derive the attributes of God, which indicate the manner of God's existence, from the fact that God *is* and that God *is* without limit.<sup>17</sup> One type of attributes is the absolutely transcendental properties of being<sup>18</sup> which are derived not from the

<sup>15</sup> In creation God gives a gift (albeit creatures exist as distinct limited participations in the Infinite Act of Existence) and in grace God gives God's self. In speaking here of God as the ultimate causal source of all the perfections we find in the world, we are not simply speaking of God bringing things into existence (creation), sustaining them into existence (conservation), and moving them to act according to their natures (divine governance), but also the effects of God giving God's self to created persons, which would fall within God's governance. These effects are the fruits of the spirit. The created effect in human beings of God's self-communication (uncreated grace) is what is known as created grace. In Rahner's thought the self-communication of God in quasi-formal causality is uncreated grace or the indwelling of the economic trinity and it is the primordial grace that creates as its effect and as the condition of its possibility created grace, which is a created determination of the subject and is the disposition for union with God (i.e. sanctifying grace). See Karl Rahner, 'Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace,' in *Theological Investigations I: God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, O.P. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 341.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas' view of quidditative knowledge is ably summarized by Gregory Rocca: "The quiddity of something is what something is. The definition is the intelligible meaning (*ratio*) that manifests or signifies the quiddity of something, revealing that thing's essence; and the definition is not just any meaning but the essential, categorical meaning specific to the entity in question. A lapidary sentence provides a summary statement: 'A thing's definition is the meaning which the name signifies' (meta 4.16.733). Quidditative knowledge, then, is essential, specific, definitional knowledge." Gregory P. Rocca, O.P., *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> God is in no way limited because God is God's essence and as such God receives God's *esse* from no one. God has no potency and God participates in nothing. See *S.T. I. q. 3 a. 4 corp.*

<sup>18</sup> I have borrowed the language of "absolutely transcendental properties" and "transcendental relative properties" from Norris Clarke in order to describe Aquinas' treatment of attributes in terms of the transcendentals and in terms of the divine operation. See Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God*, pp. 83–88.

categories which express different ways of being specific to creatures which are determined by space and time (i.e. quantity, quality, etc.), but what is common to every being in so far as it is (i.e. the transcendentals). The transcendentals are not extraneous additions to being but are included in being as intrinsic to being, expressing a mode of being not expressed by the term 'being' (these include the one, the true, and the good).<sup>19</sup> The meaning of these attributes, according to Norris Clarke "is so closely linked with the meaning and intelligibility of being itself that no real being is conceivable which could lack them and still remain intelligible."<sup>20</sup> While the first type of attributes pertains to the divine substance the second type pertains to the divine operation itself.<sup>21</sup> The second type of attributes (i.e. the transcendental relative properties of being) is not derived from the very fact that something is, thus they are not co-extensive with all being; rather, they are perfections analogously derived from the human being and thus God as the infinite and perfect source of all being must possess these perfections (e.g. knowledge, love, providence, etc.).

While Aquinas denies that we know what God is and thus he denies that these attributes give us *quidditative* knowledge of God's essence, he does not simply end with a negative theology. He does not end up in agnosticism. In his more mature treatment of naming in the *De Potentia* and the *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>22</sup> Aquinas maintains in response to the negative theology of Moses Maimonides and Alain de Lille, that we can make affirmative judgments about God but not know what (i.e. quidditative knowledge of the essence of God) we are talking about.

In his introductory remarks to his treatment of the divine attributes in question three of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas says that "we cannot know what God is (*quid sit*) but what God is not (*quid non sit*)." Thus "we cannot consider God's mode of being (*quomodo sit*), but what God's mode of being is not (*quomodo non sit*)."<sup>23</sup> This method of considering what God's "mode of being is not" is the method of *remotio* or the *via negativa*. In the *via negativa* or *remotio*

<sup>19</sup> "That which the intellect first conceives as in a way, the most evident, and to which it reduces all its concepts, is being. Consequently, all other conceptions of the intellect [i.e. the other transcendentals] are had by additions to being." St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 1 a. 1 corp.

<sup>20</sup> Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God*, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> *S.T. I.* q. 14 introduction.

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent account of Aquinas' development from his early discussions in the *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum* and *Summa contra Gentiles* to his later account in the *De Potentia* and *Summa Theologiae*, see John F. Wippel "Quidditative Knowledge of God" in his John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), pp. 215–242.

<sup>23</sup> *S.T. I.* q. 3 introduction.



one removes “from God those things that are not appropriate to God; namely composition, motion, and similar things.”<sup>24</sup> The *via negativa* in Aquinas is often appealed to in order to indicate the limits of our knowledge of God. This does not, however, mean that all the attributes of God are negative attributes.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, after predicating simplicity, perfection, goodness, infinity, immutability, eternity, and unity of God, Aquinas reflects on the nature of these predications (I. q. 13 a. 2). He distinguishes between negative predications, relative predications, and positive predications. Negative predications (e.g. incorporeal, immeasurable, infinite) cannot be signified of God substantially and as such simply remove something from God. Relative predications (e.g. Lord, efficient cause, end) cannot be signified of God substantially and express creatures’ relation to God.<sup>25</sup> In establishing that we can predicate positively and substantially of God, Aquinas attacks two positions that deny that we can make affirmative judgments about God. He attacks Moses Maimonides’ over emphasis on the negative character of our predications. If our predications simply have a negative character and thus only indicate what God is not, then when we say “God is living” all that this would mean is that God is not inanimate.<sup>26</sup> To say that God is not inanimate, however, does not distinguish God from a plant or animal or any other living thing. Therefore, the predicate “living” as applied to God cannot be understood simply negatively. It has to be a positive predication that attributes a perfection to God. God is not simply living in the sense of being not inanimate; rather, God is the perfection or fullness of life.

Aquinas also rejects Alain of Lille’s position that all divine predications are to be understood only in causal terms (as such all divine predications are relative predications). For Alain of Lille, when we predicate goodness of God all we are saying is that God causes good things. This leads to a similar form of agnosticism. In this view divine predications are true only in a secondary sense. The particular attribute ultimately signifies nothing more than that God is cause. If God is the source of all goodness and all bodies, then, following the logic of Alain of Lille, to say that God is good and to say that God is a body are equivalent. If we accepted Alain of Lille’s position, we would, at best, have no way to order our predications, and, at worst, we would be led into error as in the example of God being predicated as a body.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Aquinas maintains that relative names signify God’s relation “to another (*alium*) or better another’s relation to God’s self.” (*S.T.* I. q. 13 a. 2 corp.)

<sup>26</sup> *S.T.* I. q. 13 a. 2 corp.



Aquinas' distinction between the *res significata*<sup>27</sup> (the perfection signified by the particular attribute) and the *modus significandi*<sup>28</sup> (the modes of expressing the perfection which bear the mark of their origin in our experience) allows him to retain the *via negativa*. Thus it allows him to avoid any limitation of divine transcendence, while maintaining that we can still make true judgments about God in the form of positive or substantial predications. Since God as the perfect and infinite source of creation possesses within Godself all the perfections of creatures, the perfection signified by the particular attribute (*res significata*) belongs more properly (*proprie*) to God and thus can be truly ascribed to God because the perfection itself does

<sup>27</sup> The term “*res*”, which literally means “thing”, can be misleading here because it seems to be referring to the thing signified or the concrete referent of the attribute in a given judgment, but *res significata* simply refers to the attribute itself.

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas' account of the *modus significandi* can easily cause confusion. What the term precisely signifies is the mode of expressing the *res significata*. While we can predicate attributes of God that unqualifiedly designate a perfection (i.e. being, goodness, wisdom, etc.) our modes of expressing these perfections (i.e. abstract and concrete names) are imperfect in trying to signify the perfections of God in God's infinite simplicity. These modes of expressing these perfections betray their origin in our experience of finite and thus composed creatures in which the attribute and the subject of the attribute are not identical. God's essence (*essentia*), however, is God's existence (*esse*). Since God's perfections do not accidentally inhere in God, but are God the attribute and the subject of the attribute are identical.

The only ways we, as finite creatures, can express the divine perfection is through abstract and concrete names. Through our use of abstract names (e.g. goodness), we can indicate that God is the attribute in God's simplicity. We can thus avoid any connotation of composition conveyed by the concrete name. Abstract names, however, are imperfect because they do not indicate that the perfection subsists. They do not convey “that which is, but that by which something is.” (*S.C.G. I. 30*) Concrete names (e.g. good), on the other hand, can be used to indicate that the perfection is or subsists, but here the perfection as concrete and determinate modifies a composed creature and thus fails to express the divine simplicity. Thus “in every name said by us, so far as concerns the mode of signification, there is found an imperfection which is not appropriate to God even though the attribute (*res significata*) in some eminent way befits God.” (*S.C.G. I. 30*)

Although this is the precise meaning of *modus significandi*, there are two other elements that are implicitly involved in the *modus significandi* and are always explicitly operative in Aquinas' analysis of the *modus significandi*. (See *S.C.G. I. 30*; *S.T. I. q. 13 a. 1 ad. 2*; *De Potentia q. 7 a. 5 ad. 2*; the latter does not explicitly treat the relationship between abstract and concrete names, as do the former texts, but simply maintains that the modes of signification are imperfect because they denote a definite form, which nevertheless is invoking the problem of concrete names.) The first element (mode of being) refers to the presupposition of all knowing and thus all naming and that is the imperfect way in which the *res significata* is concretely realized in the modes of being of particular finite things. The second (mode of knowing), follows upon the first and refers to the way we imperfectly come to know the *res significata* through its imperfect finite instantiation in particular finite things. For we only know the attributes through their finite instantiations in the world and we fall back upon these finite instantiation to exemplify anew the meaning of the *res significata*. Therefore, these two aspects are implicit elements within the intelligibility of the term *modus significandi*. (See *S.T. I. q. 13 a. 1 corp.*; *S.T. I. q. 45 a. 2 ad. 2*; *De Potentia, q. 7 a. 5 corp.*) Hence the foundation of the modes of expressing is the mode of knowing and the foundation of the mode of knowing is the modes of being. Thus all three elements are involved in Aquinas' conception of the *modus significandi*.

not include any imperfection.<sup>29</sup> The mode of signification, however, in its origin in human experience belongs to creatures and it is to this that the theologian must apply the *via negativa (remotio)*. Thus the theologian must not only deny (*via negativa*) that the perfection is in God in the limited and finite way the human being experiences, understands, and expresses this perfection, but must also maintain that this perfection is in God in an utterly perfect way that transcends our imperfect experience of the perfection (*via eminentiae*).

Aquinas allows us a way to avoid both rationalism and agnosticism by showing how we can make positive or affirmative statements about God, but not fully know what (i.e. quidditative knowledge) we are talking about such that God remains incomprehensible in God's infinite fullness. Thus we can say that God exists, is true, good, one, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent, etc., but the full meaning of these predications eludes us.

If we can make affirmative judgments about God, but not fully know what we are talking about, does this mean that our concepts are empty and thus meaningless? While the full meaning of these predications eludes us, we can apprehend or have a dim sense of their meaning through the analogy of proper proportionality. In contrast to univocal terms, which are applied to many different subjects and have the same precise meaning with clearly determined limits, and equivocal terms, which have the same sound or written sign but have a completely different meaning (e.g. the bank of a river and the bank to put one's money), analogical terms are applied to different subjects with a meaning that is partly the same and partly different. The analogy of proper proportionality is a type of analogy that expresses literally and properly "some real intrinsic similarity found diversely but proportionately in all the analogates."<sup>30</sup> These real similarities are found in the order of activity and not in the order of forms or essences, precisely because words used analogically range over many different forms or essences. Thus while we can truly say that "fido knows," "John knows," and "God knows," "their ways of knowing are irreducibly different based on their diverse natures."<sup>31</sup> We recognize a similarity in the activity of the dog, the human being, and God, but knowing is exercised in vastly different modes by the dog, a human being, and God. The "similarity lies on the side of the type of activity (knowing) common to all; the difference, on the side of the different ways the diverse subjects exercise this same kind of activity, according to their respective natures."<sup>32</sup> In univocal

<sup>29</sup> S.T. I. q. 13 a. 3 corp.

<sup>30</sup> Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God*, p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

predication the predicate exclusively determines the meaning of the term. For example, the predicate “white” is not modified by the subject it inheres in whether this be a house, a fence, a car, or a human being. In analogical predication the predicate not only modifies the subject, but the subject modifies the meaning of the predicate. While univocal terms have a rigid and determinate meaning, analogical terms are systematically indeterminate and open-ended. Analogical terms are “flexible or stretch concepts which shift their meaning more or less with different applications, taking on the contours of each yet always holding on to some bond of similarity strong enough to warrant unifying all the various applications under a common idea or meaning, expressed by the same linguistic term.”<sup>33</sup> It is the open ended and flexible character of these terms that allows us to use them when speaking of God. They allow us to make true judgments about God while maintaining that God is incomprehensible. And while any similarity between Creator and creatures is characterized by an even greater dissimilarity,<sup>34</sup> analogical terms allow us to have some dim sense of the meaning of the attributes we predicate of God.

We recognize that human knowing involves grasping an intelligible content and we have some sense of how we do this. When we say that “God knows” we are also indicating that God grasps an intelligible content, but we do not have an idea of what it is for God in one act of understanding that is identical with God’s act of existence to know God’s self, the whole existing universe, and all the possible ways that God’s goodness can be communicated. God’s knowledge is incomprehensible for us.

To love is to will the good of another or oneself. When we say “God loves” we are saying that God wills God’s goodness for God’s self as end and for God’s creatures as gratuitously related to God as their end.<sup>35</sup> We do not, however, know what it is for God in one act of love that is identical with God’s act of existence to love God’s self and all creation. We have some faint sense of the meaning of “God is love” from our experience of willing the good of others and others willing our good. We have a much greater sense, though far from comprehensive, of the meaning of the attribution “God is love” from the revelation of the depth of God’s love in the Father sending his only Son into the world so that we may have eternal life. Thus, while we do not comprehend God and the attributes that we predicate of

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> This is a paraphrase of the famous formula from the Fourth Lateran Council – “For between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them.” Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Vol. I* (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), Fourth Lateran Council, Constitution 2, p. 232.

<sup>35</sup> See *S.T. I. q. 6 a. 3, S.T. I. q. 20 a. 1 ad. 3.*

God are incomprehensible, this does not indicate that these attributes are empty and devoid of meaning.

The incomprehensibility of God is a permanent aspect of our relation to God because God is not only incomprehensible for us in this life but is also incomprehensible in the beatific vision. While finite creatures are capable through God's activity in the light of glory to see or know the divine essence in the beatific vision, we cannot comprehend the divine essence.<sup>36</sup> We cannot comprehend God because, even in the beatific vision, we cannot know God to the full extent that God is knowable. Intellectual creatures know the divine essence in the vision of God, yet we do not know infinitely.<sup>37</sup> In the vision of God, we will share in God's life and joy and this will be our supreme fulfillment; yet God will remain incomprehensible. More precisely, in experiencing God in union we will even more fully experience the incomprehensibility of God. Our experience and articulation of our experience will not be meaningless because it is incomprehensible. It will be the fulfillment of our meaning. While the order of vision and the order of grace are distinct they are continuous.<sup>38</sup> In the order of grace, our judgments that God is true, good, etc., are incomprehensible but we have some sense of the meaning of these terms through our experience of God's communication of God's self (i.e. grace) in this life.

In summary, we can say that mystery does not simply indicate the limits of human knowledge of God. Such a weak understanding of mystery would inevitably lead to agnosticism; for it would not make clear that human knowledge is limited vis-à-vis God not because God is unintelligible or contradictory, but because God as pure act is inexhaustibly intelligible. It is because God is infinite and inexhaustibly intelligible that God transcends the capacities of the finite intellect. Thus it is not darkness and opacity at the heart of mystery. On the contrary, infinite light and intelligibility are at the heart of mystery. Furthermore, God is mystery conditions the full spectrum of the divine-human relationship (i.e. the order of grace and the order of vision) because God is forever incomprehensible for created intellects. Whether we are speaking about this life or the beatific vision

<sup>36</sup> The light of glory is an ontological determination of the knower that disposes her to receive the vision. This determination is the effect of the self-communication of God in the person's interiority. If the ontological communication of God to the creature is the condition of the possibility of the beatific vision, then God is the giver of the gift of vision, the giving of the gift, and the gift itself.

<sup>37</sup> In the beatific vision, since the mode of the object is not the mode of the knower the human being in vision knows God as infinite and as infinitely knowable but does not know infinitely. See *S.T. I. q. 12 a. 7 ad 3*.

<sup>38</sup> As Rahner correctly maintains, "What grace and vision of God mean are two phases of one and the same event which are conditioned by man's free historicity and temporality. They are two phases of God's single self-communication to man." *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 118.

the created intellect cannot know infinitely (i.e. cannot know as God knows).<sup>39</sup>

Although the concept of mystery must be grounded in what God is in God's self; namely, infinite intelligibility, mystery is not an attribute about God in God's self, but our relation to God. Thus it is a relative attribute. God is not a mystery to God's self; for God through an infinite act of understanding, by which proceeds the Word, perfectly comprehends God's self; rather, God is a mystery to intellectual creatures. Mystery, then, when attributed to God has a twofold meaning: (1) God is infinitely knowable; (2) the creature as an obediencial potency to the beatific vision can know God but cannot comprehend God even in the vision of God.<sup>40</sup>

## II. Applying the Concept "Mystery" Across the Full Range of Theological Reflection

While it is very important that mystery is properly conceptualized in any theology, it is crucial that this concept is applied systematically across the full range of theological reflection. In the second part of this paper, I would like to turn to Karl Rahner. Rahner is particularly instructive in this regard for four reasons. First, while Rahner properly defines mystery and that definition conditions a great deal of his thought, he undermines his notion of mystery when he deals with the question of God and human suffering. Rahner was a conspicuously systematic thinker and so examining how he fails, at least in this instance, provides a good example of the difficulty in applying the proper understanding of mystery across the full range of theological reflection. Second, Rahner further exemplifies the negative effects on one's doctrine of God of equating mystery with contradiction. Third, Rahner is an example of how absolutizing the divine freedom in order to safeguard the notion of God as mystery actually undermines the notion of God as mystery. Finally, examining how Rahner fails to apply the proper understanding of mystery" across the full range

<sup>39</sup> The mystery or incomprehensibility of God, then "follows from the essential infinity of God which makes it impossible for a finite created intellect to exhaust the possibilities of knowledge and truth contained in this absolute fullness of being." Karl Rahner, 'The Hiddenness of God', in *Theological Investigations XVI: Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Morland, O.S.B. (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 229.

<sup>40</sup> Obediencial potency, following the work of Karl Rahner, is the nature of the human being. The human being is a 'potency' because the human being as open to the totality of being, including God, is an openness, passive capacity, or receptivity for the self-communication of God. To preserve the gratuity of God's self-communication the modifier 'obediencial' is employed. 'Obediencial' indicates that this human nature is obedient to the special influence of God and that the human being would still be meaningful even if God did not communicate God's self. As such God's creation of human beings does not demand that God give God's self to them. God's self-communication is truly gratuitous.

of theological reflection is instructive as to what must be kept in mind to allow mystery to condition the full range of theological reflection.

In his article “Why does God allow us to suffer?” Rahner briefly examines the various theistic solutions to the problem of suffering.<sup>41</sup> He argues that while all of them have an element of truth, none of them provides a final solution to the problem. To show why all the apparent solutions not only fall short, but must fall short, Rahner introduces his theory that knowledge must give way to love in the face of the incomprehensible God in the beatific vision. For Rahner, because a plurality does not ground a unity the plurality of powers (i.e. sense powers, knowledge, and love) of the human being is only intelligible in terms of a prior unity.<sup>42</sup> Thus the powers are equally original in their emergence from the basic act of the subject and they are involved in a perichoresis as determined by their transcendental end (i.e. truth and goodness). This order indicates that the completion and perfection of knowledge is love. For the object toward which the human spirit and its powers has been ordered transcends knowledge, so that “the real essence of knowledge is love, in which knowledge goes beyond itself and man freely surrenders himself to incomprehensibility.”<sup>43</sup> Thus “the mystery [incomprehensibility of God], being essential to the ‘object’ to which the intellect is primarily ordained, forces it either to consume itself in protest or to transform itself in the self-surrender by which it accepts the mystery as such, that is, in love, and so attains its proper perfection.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the point that knowledge is striving to reach is incomprehensibility in which knowledge transcends itself, and in doing so both preserves and transforms itself, by surrendering itself to the more comprehensive act of love. Rahner’s view that knowledge must give way to love in the face of the incomprehensible God in the beatific vision, allows him to maintain that the various intellectual attempts to solve the problem of God and human suffering do not and cannot provide a final solution to

<sup>41</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Why does God Allow Us to Suffer?’ in *Theological Investigations*, v. 19: *Faith and Ministry*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 194–208.

<sup>42</sup> A plurality cannot ground a unity. What grounds a plurality is precisely that which two or more things do not hold in common. As such that which they do not hold in common cannot ground the unity between them. When we distinguish A and B, we say that A is not B. This distinction or ‘not’ cannot ground the unity of A and B. A and B cannot be united unless they emerge from a prior unity or unless B as distinct from A emerges from A. If you are going to have unity and plurality, then the plurality has to originate from a prior unity.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God’, in *Celebrating the Medieval Heritage: A Colloquy on the Thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure*, ed. David Tracy, *Journal of Religion* 58 (Supplement, 1978), p. 124.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology’, in *Theological Investigations IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 44.



the problem. We cannot find a final solution to the question of why God allows us to suffer because “the incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the incomprehensibility of God.”<sup>45</sup> Only in an act of love will human beings arrive at a final answer and that answer will be God in God’s self. Understood in this way, the inability to answer the question “why does God allow us to suffer?” is “no longer the scandal in our existence, to be removed as quickly as possible, which must be elucidated as clearly as possible, but an element in the incomprehensibility that penetrates, challenges, and lays claim to our whole life.”<sup>46</sup>

As Rahner further develops this thesis, however, he undermines his understanding of mystery, which throughout his works is synonymous with ‘incomprehensibility,’ as inexhaustible intelligibility. He does this in two ways. First, mystery (i.e. incomprehensibility) is grounded in contradiction. Second, he overemphasizes the divine freedom as underivable (*unableitbaren*). Rahner suggests that mystery (i.e. incomprehensibility) is rooted in contradiction in the following remarks:

The incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the incomprehensibility of God. Not in the sense that we could deduce it as necessary and thus inevitably as clarified from something else that we already know of God. If this were so it would not be at all incomprehensible. But the very fact that it is really and eternally incomprehensible means that suffering is truly a manifestation of God’s incomprehensibility in his nature and in his freedom. In his nature because despite what might be described as the terrible amorality of suffering (at least on the part of children and innocent people), we have to acknowledge the pure goodness of God, which needs no acquittal before our tribunal. In his freedom, because this, too, if it wills the suffering of the creature, is incomprehensible, since it could achieve without suffering the sacred aims of the freedom that wills suffering. Suffering, then, is the form (as such, again, underivable) in which the incomprehensibility of God himself appears.<sup>47</sup>

Notice in this quotation that the divine nature is incomprehensible because of the contradiction between the suffering of the innocent that we experience and the goodness of God, which we know through faith. Similarly, the divine freedom is incomprehensible because of the contradiction that an omnibenevolent God could fulfill the divine purpose without suffering yet wills the suffering of the creature. What then typifies mystery for Rahner in his article on suffering? Contradiction!

<sup>45</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Why does God Allow Us to Suffer?’ p. 206.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.



Rahner also indirectly undermines the notion of mystery or incomprehensibility as inexhaustible intelligibility by understanding the divine freedom as underivable:

This mystery of God's incomprehensibility, however, is not merely the mystery of a being to be understood as static, but is also the mystery of God's freedom, of his underivable disposition [*unableitbaren Verfügung*], which has not to be justified before any other authority [*Instanz*]. It is to this that man surrenders himself even when he loves God face to face in eternal life and abandons himself unconditionally to God's incomprehensibility. God is loved in his freedom, God himself and not only what we have grasped of him in what must remain eternally no more than a fleeting glance.<sup>48</sup>

If the divine will has no deeper grounds and is as Rahner suggests underivable (*unableitbaren*), then the meaning of mystery will ultimately slide toward impenetrable darkness. If the divine will is not necessarily ordered toward the Infinite Good, then God's freedom, in having no grounds other than itself, inevitably becomes absolute with no ordered relation to the Good. If this is true, God's will could be completely arbitrary and God could do terrible things. Indeed, Rahner's absolutizing of God's freedom allows him to maintain that even though God could achieve God's sacred aims without suffering God wills the suffering of God's creatures: "suffering is truly a manifestation of God's incomprehensibility in his nature and in his freedom . . . . In his freedom, because this, too, if it wills the suffering of the creature, is incomprehensible, since it could achieve without suffering the sacred aims of the freedom that wills suffering."<sup>49</sup> Notice here, as has been mentioned, that incomprehensibility means contradiction and unintelligibility because God's actions do not make sense; for if God could achieve God's purpose without suffering why would God will human suffering?

If you understand mystery as that which is shrouded in impenetrable darkness, then this will affect how you understand the divine will and its freedom. If unintelligibility and contradiction are at the heart of mystery, then the divine will and its freedom will not be rooted in the light of being as intelligible. And if the divine will is not rooted in the light of being as intelligible, then you open the door for a divine will that is arbitrary and capricious. It is important to notice how one's understanding of God's freedom affects one's understanding of the mystery of God and conversely how one's understanding of the mystery of God affects one's understanding of God's freedom and informs one's doctrine of God.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

Now let us return to the central question of part two, namely, how can the understanding of mystery outlined in part one be applied across the full range of theological reflection? At this point the answer can be merely prescriptive based on the example of Karl Rahner. A full answer would require writing a systematic theology in which the major topics of theology are treated. Nevertheless, while this is programmatic it is substantive because the case of Karl Rahner deals with God's activity vis-à-vis the world. On this it must be suggested that to uphold the proper understanding of God as mystery one must see God's activity as conditioned by the intelligibility of existence that God is as pure act. In other words, what grounds the infinite knowability and intelligibility of God and God's activity, for created spirits, is that the divine will is conditioned by the intelligibility of God's being. More precisely, absolutizing God's freedom does not preserve a proper understanding of God as mystery, but mystery as attributed to God is preserved only if we understand the divine will in an ordered relation to the divine intellect contemplating the divine being as communicable (i.e. the divine goodness).

The example of Rahner is instructive in several respects. First, it shows how careful theologians must be when appealing to mystery. If mystery is equated with contradiction, this will have profound negative consequences for one's doctrine of God such that God could be capricious. While Rahner properly defined mystery but failed to apply this understanding systematically throughout his thought, many theologians who do not define mystery implicitly suggest that mystery means unintelligibility or contradiction when they appeal to mystery at the moment their theology runs into contradictions. If theologians employ the concept "mystery" when their shabby theological equipment begins to deteriorate<sup>50</sup> they need to explain why they cannot penetrate the subject matter further and thus indicate the range and limits of human knowledge in respect to the theological topic under consideration. In such an account, they need to insure that inexhaustible intelligibility, not contradiction, is the reason for the limits of their knowledge.<sup>51</sup> Second, it reveals the interrelatedness of the various attributes of God such that how one understands mystery will affect one's understanding of other attributes (i.e. divine will,

<sup>50</sup> This phrase has in mind T.S. Eliot's lines from East Coker of the Four Quartets "a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment always deteriorating." T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952), p. 128.

<sup>51</sup> An example of such an application of this understanding of mystery to a theological problem can be found in my "The Mystery of God and the Suffering of Human Beings", *Heythrop Journal* L (2009), pp. 846–863. Here I show the range and limits of human knowledge of God and preserve the mystery of God in response to the problem of reconciling human suffering with the Christian belief in a God of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness.

goodness, and intellect) and how one understands the other attributes will affect one's concept of mystery. This again suggests that theologians should not only properly conceptualize what they mean by mystery but pay careful attention to how it is being applied across the full range of theological topics. Third, it makes clear that when applying the concept of mystery across the full range of theological reflection one must recognize that for created persons what grounds the infinite knowability and intelligibility of God's activity is that the divine will is conditioned by the intelligibility of God's being whose ground is the divine being as communicable (i.e. the divine goodness). The divine will is not absolute but is relative to the intelligibility of God's being.

### III. Conclusion

The knowledge of God is integral to our salvation, for the knowledge of God, according to John's gospel, is eternal life. Knowledge presumes knowability or intelligibility. Hence, when we speak of the mystery of God we must be speaking of infinite knowability and intelligibility. The intelligibility of God, however, exceeds the capacity of the finite intellect even in the vision of God. Thomas Aquinas helps us to avoid both rationalism and agnosticism by holding onto our capacity to know God, which itself is a gift of God, while recognizing that human beings are forever incapable of comprehending God. The concept "mystery" as applied to God neither means we are dealing with a reality that is unknowable because a contradiction is present nor does it simply express the limits of human knowledge; rather, it has two aspects: 1) God is infinitely knowable and thus infinitely intelligible and 2) the creature as an *obediential potency* to the beatific vision can know God but cannot comprehend God even in the vision of God. In part two, we saw, by learning from the failure of Karl Rahner, that insisting upon God's freedom as absolute does not preserve the mystery of God, but undermines the proper understanding of mystery as applied to God. To allow the concept of mystery to condition all of our theological reflection, we must understand the divine will as relative to the divine intellect contemplating the divine being as communicable (i.e. the divine goodness). The divine will is not absolute, but is in an ordered relation to the divine intellect contemplating the divine goodness to be communicated.

To speak of the ordered relation of God's immanent operations of knowing and willing leads us into the order of processions in the inner life of the Trinity; for the Son and Spirit (for St. Thomas) proceed eternally as the term of the immanent operations of knowing and willing. God by one act of knowing knows all that God knows and in that act the Father speaks the eternal Word and all of creation.

Following (in the order of nature not time) the divine act of knowing, God in one act of will, loves all that God loves, and in that act the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. Preserving the mystery of God across the full range of theological reflection requires that we recognize the ordered relation of God's immanent operations in the inner Trinitarian life such that God's will follows upon (in the order of nature not time) and is informed by God's intellect. It is only in recognizing this that God who is mystery to us can be our final end and salvation.

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