

“I AM has sent me to you”: Impassibility and Compassion in Aquinas’ Treatment of the Divine Names

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Introduction

“The one who cannot suffer cannot love either.”¹ In his 1974 book *The Crucified God*, Jürgen Moltmann puts forth a jarring thesis: to propose a God who does not suffer in solidarity with creation is to commit blasphemy of the highest degree. He writes, “To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.”² Moltmann’s argument is indicative of a critical paradigm shift in contemporary theology. Since the late nineteenth century, and gaining particular momentum in the post-World War II era, a growing theological consensus has converged around the notion that the long-held doctrine of divine impassibility is no longer defensible. According to this theory, articulated to varying degrees and in a vast number of theological contexts, a God of love is a God who suffers in solidarity with humanity. As Weinandy observes, the reason for this sea of change in theological opinion was not originally philosophical but rather affective and historical: “Historically, the question of God’s passibility focused primarily and, at times almost exclusively, upon the issue of whether God could suffer. The catalyst for affirming the passibility of God, one that is still intensely operative, is human suffering.”³

Among the most compelling and oft-recalled examples of the need for a God who, in the midst of human suffering, suffers too, is Elie Wiesel’s haunting account of the hanging of two men and a child in the Nazi death camp of Buna:

All eyes were on the child... “Where is God? Where is he?” someone behind me asked... The two adults were no longer alive... But the third rope was still moving: being so light, the child was still alive... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes... Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “Where is God now?”⁴

To do “theology after Auschwitz,” to use the terminology of J.B. Metz, is to recognize that a God who does not suffer in active solidarity with his people is fundamentally inconceivable as a God of love. For Moltmann, writing from the German postwar context,

[a] God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so

¹ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, Translated by R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 222.

² *Ibid.*, 274.

³ T.G. Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 2.

⁴ E. Wiesel, *Night* trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam, 1986), 61-62.

completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears.⁵

For Moltmann, and the theological opinion he represents, the thought of an impassible God is a notion passé at best and monstrous at worst. Thomas Aquinas is frequently held up as the paradigmatic counterpoint to this position, an alleged champion of this uninvolved, unshakable, indifferent, self-centered deity. The understanding of divine impassibility Thomas articulates as part of his doctrine of God in the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae* is the flag under which have trod centuries of Christian theologians who, having muddled the passionate and creative God of Scripture with a Greek philosophical portrait of a cold and standoffish “perfect” deity, have sterilized the Christian understanding of who God is and how God relates to humanity.

It would be misleading to believe that Thomas’ life and study was led in isolation from the broad political and social misery that characterized thirteen-century Europe: a Dominican priest, Thomas wrote the *Summa* to train men who would become preachers. There is an often-overlooked pastoral motivation for Thomas’ scholarship. However, whereas contemporary debates seem to offer theologians two options – either affirm a suffering God who loves and cares, or uphold an impassible God who turns a blind eye to the cries of his people – for Thomas, divine impassibility (along with the other divine attributes: simplicity, infinity, immutability, etc.) is not inconsonant with divine compassion; God’s unchangeable nature affirms, not undermines, God’s ability to love.

This paper, born out of a frustration with the inadequacy of these two incomplete and dichotomous categorizations, will argue that Thomas’ understanding of the divine names in 1a, q. 13 illuminates the way in which he reconciles impassibility and compassion in God. It is not the goal of this paper to defend either the idea that God does or does not suffer, nor to affirm or deny the doctrine of divine impassibility on a scale any larger than the work of Thomas and selected contemporary scholars who assist in the project of unpacking and analyzing his thought. It is the goal of this paper to examine in as close a way as possible how Thomas’ defense of divine impassibility can be placed in dialogue with his understanding of the way that humans know and name God, ultimately revealing the inadequacy in the polarizing assumption that an immutable God cannot love.

I will begin by analyzing the structure and implications of Thomas’ defense of divine impassibility in Question 9. This will be followed by an analysis of how, in Thomas’ understanding, human knowledge of God, including God’s attribute of impassibility, affects human capacity to name God, here drawing heavily on the insights David Burrell. I will then explore the theological and scriptural implications of Thomas’ assertion that “The One Who Is” is the most appropriate name for God, ultimately arguing that an understanding of the Hebrew scripture from which this name is drawn reveals that God’s love and compassion on behalf of his suffering people is not opposed to but rather relies upon his unchanging nature.

Aquinas on the Unchangeable God of Love

At stake in the debate over whether or not God suffers in solidarity with humanity is ultimately the notion of divine unchangeableness, or immutability. As we have seen, immutability is among the most disputed facets of the doctrine of God because it speaks directly to the question of theodicy. For many Christians, it is difficult to align what is evoked by the

⁵ Moltmann, 229.

notion of immutability – stasis, indifference, and disconnectedness – with a profoundly human, if not always systematically articulated, sense that when creation is in pain, God is affected in some authentic way. For God to be affected, God would have to experience change. Thus, it is argued, a truly compassionate, empathetic God cannot be said to be “immutable.” God can only be said to be in relationship with humanity in any meaningful way if there exists within God the potential to be reciprocally influenced; a relationship devoid of mutuality is not a relationship at all.⁶

Thomas introduces the notion of divine unchangeableness when he puts forth five ways of establishing the existence of God at the outset of the First Part. The first and, for Thomas, “most obvious” of these ways is based on the notion of change.⁷ He argues, “We are bound to arrive at some first cause of change that is not itself changed by anything, which is what everybody takes God to be.”⁸ God, as pure act and devoid of potentiality, is the logical end to the regress of causes. Thomas returns to a more in-depth treatment of divine immutability in Question 9. The brevity of the question and of the three objections presented in each of the two articles serves as the first indication that Thomas, and the thirteenth-century theological milieu he represents, approached the debate over whether or not God could change with a much more limited set of concerns and from an entirely different point of departure than do twenty-first-century theologians. Thomas treats the notion of divine immutability in two strikingly straightforward articles. First, he inquires as to whether God is immutable.⁹ Then he asks whether immutability is unique to God.¹⁰

The three objections to Article 1 relate to the way in which divine action is conceptualized in the language of human encounter with the divine, drawing on quotations from both Augustine and Scripture. In the two Biblical examples, God is described in anthropomorphic language: he is “more mobile than any moving thing” (Wis. 7:24) and “draws near” to his people (James 4:8).¹¹ In all three counterexamples, mobility or change is attributed to God vis-à-vis his relationship with creatures. As the objections suggest, biblical language evinces a deeply engrained human understanding of a God who is affected by human suffering and actively responds on behalf of his people to alleviate their pain. In Hebrew Scripture, YHWH is a God who hears his people’s cry, liberates them from oppressors, and remembers their name. Accordingly, two of the three objections to Article 1 indicating divine “change” are drawn from the language and imagery of Scripture – as is the *sed contra*. By responding to concerns raised by God-talk in Scripture with more God-talk in Scripture, Thomas suggests the breach between human experience and divine nature, as well as the complications posed by evoking Scripture in theological arguments. The replies to the three objections suggest that much of biblical language is drawn from human experience of and response to God, and speaks at best

⁶ Proponents of divine passibility would probably not be pleased with Aquinas’ conclusion that while the intra-trinitarian relations are real, “in God there is no real relation to creatures” (1a. q. 28, art. 1, rep 3). Because God is beyond the world of creatures, creation coming forth not out of compulsion or necessity but rather out of divine mind and will, God is not related to creatures by nature and therefore bears no “real relation” to them. However, because they are subordinate to and dependent on God, “there is in creatures a real relation to [God]” (1a. q. 28, art. 1, rep 3). All quotations come from the English Dominican translation (1920) and subsequent citations will give only the numbers, omitting the title *Summa Theologiæ* or *ST*.

⁷ 1a. q. 2, art. 3, rep.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ 1a. q. 9, art. 1.

¹⁰ 1a. q. 9, art. 2.

¹¹ 1a. q. 9, art. 1, objs. 2, 3.

metaphorically about the divine nature itself. As we will see, these concerns re-emerge in Questions 12 and 13, in which Thomas establishes more clearly the limited nature of our knowledge of God and, accordingly, the multitude of complications posed when we attempt to speak meaningfully of him.

Thomas returns to the notion of efficient causation¹² and divine simplicity¹³ to demonstrate that the absence of potentiality, composition, and fullness of being in God preclude any possibility of change.¹⁴ Only God is unchangeable; by contrast, “all creatures can change in some way or other,” whether substantially, in place, or in their being ordered to a certain goal. Indeed, the entire universe as a whole is subject to God’s power and is therefore changeable.¹⁵ For Thomas, God is the first efficient cause of all change, as established in the first of the “five ways.” Developing this notion in Question 9, he writes,

Now, bringing things into existence depends on God’s will, and the same goes for preserving them in existence. For God preserves them in existence only by perpetually giving existence to them, and were he to withdraw his activity from them, all things would fall back into nothingness, as Augustine makes clear.¹⁶

For Thomas, it is God’s unchangeable nature that sustains and preserves all creation. Creation’s ability to endure despite change – including suffering – is a function of God’s unchangingness.

Thomas Weinandy and Brian Davies help to illuminate the question of suffering in God from a Thomistic perspective. Davies relates God’s immutability to his eternity, which Thomas treats in Question 10. Davies’ analysis correctly reveals that a closer consideration of eternity, the positive corollary of immutability, helps to overcome certain stumbling blocks posed by a less nuanced understanding of God’s unchangeableness. Thomas’ understanding of time is based on the Aristotelian notion of change as an indicator of the passage of time.¹⁷ Davies distinguishes a false understanding of eternity as “timelessness” with what he argues is a more appropriate Thomistic conception of eternity as God’s embrace of all time, the true measure of God’s fullness of being.¹⁸ Based on Davies’ analysis, one could argue that God’s immutability renders him not uncompassionate but, conversely, *eternally* compassionate. God does not need to be “moved” to compassion, so to speak, because in his embrace of all time, he is, in a sense, “already” liberating, healing, listening, and loving.

Weinandy, who maintains that “a suffering God is not only philosophically and theologically untenable, but also religiously devastating,”¹⁹ argues that it is precisely the absence of suffering in God that allows God to fully love and embrace those who do suffer. M. Dodds makes a similar point: “A fellow-suffering God turns out to be a rather imperfect lover since the concern is inevitably centered not on others but on himself.”²⁰ To restate his argument unphilosophically, because God does not have to deal with his own suffering in addition to ours,

¹² 1a, q. 2, art. 3.

¹³ 1a, q. 3, art. 1.

¹⁴ 1a, q. 9, art. 1, resp.

¹⁵ 1a, q. 9, art. 2, resp.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ B. Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press: 1993), 105.

¹⁸ 1a, q. 10, art. 4.

¹⁹ T.G. Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?” (*First Things* 117: November 2001), 7.

²⁰ M. Dodds, “Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love” (*Theological Studies* 52: 1991), 332.

he is able to be wholly “for us” in our suffering. Thus, “God is perfectly compassionate not because He suffers with those who suffer, but because His love fully and freely embraces those who suffer.”²¹ His argument echoes Thomas’ understanding of the correlation between divine love and divine freedom: “God, being limitless, and embracing within himself the whole fullness of perfection of all existence, cannot acquire anything. Nor can he move out towards something previously not attained.”²² The implication here is that in God, love and compassion are “previously attained” in such totality that no amount of human suffering could possibly evoke “more” compassion from God. Unlike humans, who on some level need to experience the suffering of the other in order to be moved to an appropriate, urgent, and fully compassionate response, God does not “need” to suffer in order to fully love the other.

Pastorally, the notion that God does not suffer merely because he does not “need” to do so in order to adequately love might seem an unsatisfying argument. If God’s love cannot be understood apart from his freedom and eternity, as Davies and Weinandy argue, then it stands to reason that, in freedom and out of love for creation, God could choose to suffer – and, as a not insignificant point of fact, did precisely that on the cross. Two analogies might serve to illustrate and deepen this point.

The first is a contrast to the pedagogical strategy of experiential learning. A student will gain a sufficient amount of knowledge about chemical reactions by reading a textbook and listening to her chemistry teacher’s lecture, but she will not grasp the significance of such reactions – and she will probably not enjoy chemistry very much – unless she goes to the lab and experiments with what will happen if she combines x with y to get product z. Another student can study Spanish for ten mundane years in an American classroom but finds that he learns more in a semester-long study-abroad experience in South America than he did in the entire decade he spent sitting in a desk. Such firsthand learning experiences are based on the proverbial distinction between “giving a man a fish” and “teaching him how to fish.” Experience inculcates both lasting knowledge of and, in the best cases, deep love for the subject matter.

A similar example is the experience of what is commonly referred to on college campuses and in youth groups as the “immersion trip.” A group of students travel intentionally and reflectively from the privileged place in which they live – the place that has formed their understanding of society and constitutes the metaphorical boundaries of their world – to another place – the inner city, a poverty-stricken rural area, the developing world – in order to be in solidarity with the economically poor. This experience of solidarity is often profoundly moving and mutually transformative, forging deep bonds between the group and the people they encounter and, in ways that could not have been possible except through such an encounter, fosters in the participants in the immersion experience an abiding passion for the country and people visited, a nascent restlessness at the comforts and excesses of the developed world, compassion for the plight of the oppressed, and a thirst for social justice that their privileged upbringings had not otherwise cultivated in them. This experience of solidarity inculcates loving praxis on behalf of the poor and marginalized.

These two examples serve to illustrate, analogically, the difference between human and divine love as it relates to experience: human compassion is stirred by experience. In general, the more one experiences something, the greater capacity one finds within oneself to care about the thing experienced. An in-depth discussion of the Incarnation lies beyond the scope of the present paper. Nevertheless, it will suffice to say that the Incarnation cannot be thought of as a

²¹ Ibid.

²² 1a, q. 9, art. 1

divine immersion trip: God's solidarity with humankind in Christ was not the result of God's desire to care more about people by learning more about them and experiencing more of their everyday lives. Rather, as John's Gospel affirms, the Incarnation was the effect, not the cause, of this love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."²³ God's love for humanity is preexistent and eternal. Embracing all time, God will not care more about human pain and suffering if he experiences them for himself because his love is so complete, all-embracing, and eternal that he could not possibly care more; there is no room for "more" in what is already "all." Examining Thomas' understanding of divine immutability reveals the fundamental fallacy in the notion that one must *either* affirm a God who loves and cares deeply for creation, *or* uphold an unchanging God who turns a deaf ear to the cries of his people and a blind eye to their pain. For Thomas, far from subverting compassion, God's unchangeable essence is connected to the steady perfection of his love for creation.

Aquinas on Naming "The One Who Is"

"To name a thing is to say something about it."²⁴ In this section, I will explain Thomas' understanding that the language we use to speak about God flows from the way we know God, the foundation for the analogical dimension of language used to speak about or name the divine. Ultimately, I hope to show that the way in which Aquinas treats the divine names illuminates the co-subsistence of immutability and compassion in God.

Knowing God

To grasp how Thomas conceptualizes his treatise on the divine names, it is necessary first to examine his understanding of how we know God. Thomas addresses the question of human knowledge of God in Question 12 of the First Part. Grounding his understanding of the possibility of predicating a name of the divine is the recognition that, in the case not only of God but of anything, "the way we apply names to a thing follows upon the way we know that thing."²⁵ To contrast Thomas with a postmodern example, Heidegger famously maintains that "language is the house of being,"²⁶ which one must enter in order to come to knowledge of our worded world. For Thomas, however, being is prior to language. Language does not construct but is rather derivative of how we know what is real, reflecting (not constituting) our knowledge of a thing. For Thomas, a thing is *known* through its knowable aspects and *named* in a way that corresponds to the namer's "act of understanding" these knowable aspects.²⁷ The name "signifies" (in the sense of being a sign of) the thing: this is the foundation of the analogical nature of our language about God.

Following from Question 12, then, it becomes clear in Question 13 that Thomas is concerned that the way in which we name God appropriately reflects how we know God: through negation. Thomas speaks of a "negative" function of the judgment in any affirmative

²³ John 3:16. NRSV

²⁴ D. Burrell, C.S.C., "Aquinas on Naming God" (*Theological Studies* 24: 1963), 193.

²⁵ Wippel, 536, cf. q. 13, Introduction.

²⁶ M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*, 1947.

²⁷ Burrell, 193-194.

statement about God.²⁸ The negative judgment “exercised upon a meaningful empirical statement” is necessitated by the fact that “any knowledge *we* can have of the infinite must always be in terms of the finite, for the proper object of the human understanding is a material thing.”²⁹ The following example from Burrell illustrates the function of the negative judgment: “statements like ‘God is just’ do mean something... but they have meaning not in virtue of some ‘analogous notion’ of justice, but precisely because of the negative judgment which intervenes to constitute them.”³⁰ In other words, the statement “God is just” is not a meaningless statement: we do know that God is just, but this statement is only meaningful in the negative judgment that justice in God is not merely a bigger, better form of the kind of justice with which we are familiar in humans. The same is true in speaking of divine compassion. To call God compassionate is not merely to attribute to God an amplified version of the human quality of compassion. According to the epistemological cycle of the *triplex via*,³¹ compassion in God must be understood with respect to the “ever greater difference” between what it means for a person to be compassionate and what the attribute signified by the word “compassion” could possibly mean when applied to God, freed of its social and etymological trappings. Thus, we come to know God through his effects, by making an epistemological connection from things seen to things unseen until this movement no longer becomes useful and “the rules of pure logic must take over.”³² Because of the ontological divide that separates the created realm from divinity, we cannot ultimately speak meaningfully of knowing God purely “through sensible familiarity and theoretic understanding” as we know and speak meaningfully of other things.³³

Naming God

At this point, the question becomes, in the words of Burrell, “How is it possible to say anything whatsoever of God and be speaking truthfully?”³⁴ Thomas establishes in Article 1 of Question 13 that God is fundamentally “beyond naming” because his essence/nature lies beyond human comprehension. Burrell notes that, in some sense, this is true of all things, terrestrial or divine: “The synthesis, or intelligible unity of all such [knowable] aspects [of a thing], would be *the* nature, or the thing in its intrinsic intelligibility, avowedly unknowable to us.”³⁵ For this reason, despite our loose use of the term in common speech – “Oh, that is his nature” – Burrell clarifies that we cannot, in reality, have full, aggregate knowledge of anyone or anything. It should not come as a surprise, then, to affirm that God’s nature lies utterly beyond all comprehension and, for this reason, beyond all names. Human ways of naming God are, at best, attempts to distinguish God from creatures without the expectation that our words actually signify the truth of God’s essence.

Despite the caveats, however, Thomas does conclude that there are words that we can use literally, and not only metaphorically, to speak of God. Understanding God as the uncaused, immaterial “first cause” of all things, as Thomas establishes at the outset of the First Part,³⁶ “then

²⁸ 1a, q. 13, art. 2, resp.

²⁹ Burrell, 192.

³⁰ Burrell, 202.

³¹ cf. R. Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Ashgate, 2006), 76.

³² Burrell, 196.

³³ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁶ 1a, q. 2, art. 3, resp.

while we still have no hope of approximating to *what* [God] is, we may come to know *that* [God] is, by taking in the place of descriptive statements of [His] effects. This general epistemological theorem implies that any knowledge we can have of God will be of Him as principle, and from His effects.”³⁷ Perceiving the perfections manifested in creation as flowing from God’s own perfections – being, goodness, and living, for example³⁸ – we can use such words to speak of God, aware through negative judgment that “these perfections certainly exist in [God] in a more excellent way than they do in [creatures].”³⁹ We can say *that* God possesses certain attributes (*an sit*), but we cannot know what these attributes are like in God (*quid sit*), nor how God possesses them (*quo modo*). Wippel summarizes Thomas’ denial that God’s effects can have quidditative, or essential, knowledge of God: “We can know that God is, and what God is not, but not what God is.”⁴⁰

When a thing is named, “the knower seeks for universality, for a knowledge increasingly independent of particular time and place, and ideally invariant under all linear and temporal transformations.”⁴¹ For this reason, the most appropriate name for God is not one that says much, but rather one that says as little as possible. To say too much would predicate a certain substantial knowledge of God that we cannot possibly have. This is even true of names that express human relationship to God (e.g. Father, Mother, Lord), arguably the deepest sort of affective “knowing” or encountering God. Even “God,” which ultimately means “first cause of all things,” is not the most appropriate name for God because it can be applied, though incorrectly, to other things.⁴² Thus, Thomas argues, “the words we use to speak of God are not synonymous.”⁴³ Ultimately, we are reminded “that the names which we use to attribute something to God signify in the way in which *we* understand them, as material creatures. What is at stake is a viable theory of meaning.”⁴⁴

It is from within this epistemological framework that Thomas concludes that “The One Who Is,” as revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus, is the most fitting name for God.⁴⁵ The argument centers around three factors, a sort of Thomistic litmus test for the appropriateness of a name for God: meaning, universality, and tense. Because God’s essence is his existence, it is fitting to call God “The One Who Is.” God is literally the One in whom Being *is* Existence. Second, because God’s existence is “as an ocean of being,” to recall Thomas’ striking metaphor, to call God “The One Who Is” is sufficiently “unrestricted”⁴⁶ and free of nuance. This takes care of the concern that an overly specific name predicates of God things that cannot be known, quickly becoming problematic and ultimately false. Finally, because God is eternal, naming God as concomitant with his being is especially fitting for the eternal presence it connotes.⁴⁷ God is eternally in the “present-tense,” so to speak: God was and will be and so, in every moment, “is.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, as Thomas clarifies in the response to the second objection, God’s existence

³⁷ Burrell, 200.

³⁸ 1a, q. 13, art. 3, rep. 1.

³⁹ 1a, q. 13, art. 3, resp.

⁴⁰ Wippel, 540.

⁴¹ Burrell, 195.

⁴² 1a, q. 13, art. 9, resp.

⁴³ 1a, q. 13, art. 4, resp.

⁴⁴ Burrell, 201.

⁴⁵ 1a, q. 13, art. 11, resp.

⁴⁶ 1a, q. 13, art. 11, rep. 1.

⁴⁷ 1a, q. 10.

⁴⁸ Here it is useful to recall Davies’ clarification that eternity in God does not connote timelessness but rather the embrace of all time.

“Is”) precedes his being a cause, which one refers to when one calls God, for example, “the Good.” “The One Who Is” does not communicate God’s substance (which is impossible for human minds and human language to do), only God’s existence, which is his essence. For this reason, the only more appropriate name for God would be the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), as it is the only name that communicates the incommunicable and individual substance of God, God’s own personal name.

“I AM WHO AM”: The Unchanging God of Love

At the outset of the First Part, Thomas proposes five ways in which the existence of God can be proven.⁴⁹ The “five ways” are, in a sense, self-affirming and even circular, as noted by countless critics of Thomas’ system. However, despite his own explanation of what he is doing (“There are five ways in which we can prove that there is a God”) it seems that Thomas does not so much seek to provide logical proof for God’s existence – which must ultimately be accepted on the basis of revelation – but rather to affirm that “God is” is a meaningful statement so that he can continue with the rest of the *Summa*. As Burrell states, in Thomas, “we are not concerned whether statements about God be true or false; only with the possibility of their being meaningful.”⁵⁰ After presenting three arguments against the notion that God exists, Thomas presents a *sed contra* drawn from Hebrew Scripture: “On the contrary, Exodus represents God as saying, ‘I AM WHO AM.’”⁵¹ As has just been discussed, it is this name, “I AM WHO AM,” which Thomas returns to in Question 13, arguing that it is the most fitting name we have for God. As has also been discussed, Thomas draws a clear connection between God’s self-affirmation in Exodus and the first and “most obvious” of his five ways for the demonstration of God’s existence, the need for an unchanged first cause of change. A closer look at the Scriptural context from which this quotation is drawn provides insights for uncovering the implications of Aquinas’ assertion that “The One Who Is” is the most fitting name for God.

In Hebrew Scripture, the revelation of the divine name to Moses, to which Aquinas makes reference in the *sed contra* of Article 11, occurs concomitantly with Moses’ commissioning as the prophetic deliverer of the Israelites and is bound up with the theme of divine accompaniment with the oppressed. Revealing himself to Moses atop Mount Horeb, in the form of a burning bush, the Lord identifies himself as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” (Exod. 3:6) The Scriptural account of the encounter continues:

Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’⁵²

⁴⁹ 1a. q. 2, art. 3, rep.

⁵⁰ Burrell, 192.

⁵¹ 1a. q. 2, art. 3, sc; Exod. 3:14.

⁵² Exod. 3:7-11.

The LORD comes to Moses unprompted and unsolicited; in utter freedom he appears to a man who did not appear to be looking for him. It is to this hesitant would-be prophet that God reveals his compassion for his people. Addressing Moses' reservations, the LORD continues:

He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.'"⁵³

In the tradition established by Hebrew Scripture, the revelation of the divine name to Moses, "I AM WHO AM" occurs concomitantly with Moses' commissioning as the deliverer of the enslaved Israelites, God's own people whose cries he has heard and agonies he has observed with no lack of outrage on their behalf. God arms Moses not with a sword or shield but with the power to speak the LORD's name to the powers holding captive his chosen people. To those who challenge him, Moses is to respond that he has been sent to save God's people on behalf of Being itself: "I AM has sent me to you."⁵⁴ According to this Scriptural account, God does not move, change, or permit himself to be violated in an ontological sense, in order to liberate his people. Conversely, there is a sense in which, were God to become anything other than unchangeable, the entire project of Israel's liberation would have been thrown off its hinges. It is through God's unchangeableness that his salvific accompaniment with the oppressed is possible. He is God "through all generations," the union of unchangeableness and eternity which Aquinas understands as two sides of the same coin. God's liberating action is the self-communication of his name to Moses and to all of his people. The LORD anoints Moses with the knowledge that – to draw from the well of Thomas' lexicon – his essence is his existence, he is Being itself, he is who is. There can be no more liberating revelation, no knowledge or action more perfectly suited to "bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly,"⁵⁵ than an affirmation that God is so truly the ground of all being that he says so just by speaking his own name.

The story of the LORD's salvific action on behalf of his suffering people is often employed to make precisely the point with which I began this paper: that a God who cannot be moved cannot love. But a closer look at the theological and scriptural foundations of Thomas' affirmation that "The One Who Is" – "I AM WHO AM" – is the most fitting name we can give to God reveals that God's love and compassion on behalf of his suffering people is not opposed to but rather relies upon and discloses his unchanging essence.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate the fundamental inadequacy of the polarizing notion implicit in much of contemporary theological discourse on God that theologians have

⁵³ Exod. 3:12-15.

⁵⁴ Exod. 3:14.

⁵⁵ cf. Luke 1:52.

only two options: affirm a suffering God who loves and cares for creation, or uphold a cold and unchanging God who turns a blind eye and deaf ear to the cries of his people. To this end, I have sought to examine in as close a way as possible how Thomas' defense of divine impassibility can be placed in dialogue with his understanding of the way that humans know and name God, ultimately revealing the inadequacy in the polarizing assumption that an immutable God cannot love. I have argued that for Thomas, divine impassibility is not inconsonant with divine compassion. Rather, as a close examination of Thomas' treatment of God's immutability affirms, God's unchangeable nature is deeply connected to his ability to love creatures perfectly, actively, and eternally. Far from being mutually exclusive attributes, immutability and compassion in God can be understood as complementary.

With a few careful exceptions, I have avoided the topic of the Incarnation in this paper, choosing to maintain, as Thomas does in the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, a tight focus on the divine attributes of the Godhead. In closing, however, it can be noted that an intriguing point of departure for a future paper would be to examine the thesis presented in the final section of this paper – that God's revelation of the divine name "I AM WHO AM" to Moses as a liberating action on behalf of his people, manifesting the union between his unchanging nature and his active compassion – in light of God's revelation in Christ. Having examined the implications of Aquinas' understanding of God's names, a captivating next step would be to extend this exploration to the question of what is revealed in the birth of the Son of the "The One Who Is," the one named Emmanuel, "The One Who Is With Us."