

## God: Essence and Attributes I

Semester: Fall 2020  
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### Course Description

This course articulates systematics on the *locus de deo uno* (the divine essence and attributes), with focus on what are often called the “metaphysical” or “incommunicable” attributes. The course aims to give the student some understanding of the divine perfections, in the vein of the orthodox tradition particularly as it has been expounded in the Latin West (a tradition frequently called today “classical Christian theism”). For this reason the course is a systematic presentation of divine attributes injected with extensive historical *ressourcement*. Main topics will include: the divine simplicity, perfection, infinity, divine presence, immutability, eternity, and special issues related to the divine names (this last serves as preparation for the “communicable” attributes covered in God: Essence and Attributes II). Through this course the student will obtain insight into the orthodox boundaries and methodological sensitivities involved with these questions as well as the breadth of the tradition on supplied answers, particularly as it occurs in the Reformed orthodox of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Care will be taken to equip the students with operating principles of good method when it comes to doctrine of God, so as to enable them to labor through other divine attributes and speak well of God generally in the practice of divine praise, in the spirit of St. Augustine: “What are You to me? Have mercy, that I may speak.”

Course readings will be in English. The primary text is the relevant questions in Thomas Aquinas’s *ST I* (qq 3–13), which will broadly serve as grist for the lectures. However, lectures will take care to pull from the high medievals (e.g., Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Capreolus, Denis the Carthusian), the neoscholastics (e.g., Cajetan, Ferrara, Banez, Zumel, Vasquez), and of course some of the best of the Reformed orthodox (e.g. Voetius, Polanus, Maastricht, Danaeus, Musculus, Maccovius, De Moor). The result will be a thorough exposition of the above attributes that deals with our contemporary scene on these questions primarily by a positive presentation of a carefully developed orthodoxy, which does not neglect a healthy irenicism.

### Course Format

This class is lecture-based but does leave space for student questions and engagement. Additional student participation and interaction can take place on a private discussion board. I am also available via email to deal with issues or questions.

Classes will meet via Zoom for two hours each week and will be recorded for temporary access for students to view who cannot participate.

### Course Requirements

- Reading of the assigned texts (10% of grade for for-credit students)
- Careful attendance and engagement with the lectures

### Additional Course Requirements for Course Credit

- A half-page summary of each attribute covered in the course, at a lay level. The purpose is to highlight the main elements of importance, in a way that would be suitable as a summary or rough hand-out for a Sunday School lesson or other ministry opportunity for teaching doctrine of God (35% of grade).
- One 3000-word essay providing a systematic articulation of some narrow element within the course's scope, in consultation with the professor. (Further details on this will be articulated) (55% of grade).

## Course Objectives

- Students will be able to articulate not just the basics of these attributes of God but understand the internal logic of systematic theology proper.
- Students will be able to understand the strengths and vulnerabilities of theological understanding and will be equipped to mediate the issue of simultaneously preserving orthodoxy while maintaining a strong irenicism that recognizes the complexity of the historic tradition and what this entails for the contemporary church in all her forms of communion.
- Students will be able to articulate the place of the attributes within the entire sphere of theological loci.
- Students will be able to navigate contemporary accounts of essence/attributes. The student will be expected to humbly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of accounts currently on offer and adjudicate them from the standpoint of orthodoxy while continually preserving the spirit of irenicism, especially as informed by the Reformed commitment to Holy Scripture and its intense articulation without perverted speculation.
- Students will be introduced especially to the pastoral/practical implications of essence/attributes and pushed to deploy doctrine to promote “knowledge unto piety” both in themselves and in others within the universal church.

## Course Text

Thomas Aquinas, *ST* qq 3–13. (If Latin is known, please read the commentary Cajetan provides on these questions—available in the *Leonine* edition of Thomas [I can provide this pdf].)

Available here: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I>; additionally: <https://isidore.co/aquinas/>.

Thomas Aquinas, I *Sent* d 2 q 1 a 3. (For lecture 4; translation to be supplied.)

Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology*.

Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical Practical Theology*, vol. 2, select pages (tbd).

A note on reading Thomas: Medieval texts versus modern texts are extremely different in what they are; you cannot read them the same way. Reading Thomas is intensely difficult and *very slow*. He rewards careful, diligent, and repeated reading.

## Course Schedule

NB: Lecture outlines for taking notes will be supplied.

The readings tied directly to the lectures works through Thomas's *ST I* qq 3–13, and ought to be read on the week assigned. The other two works (Rocca and Mastricht) are to be read at the student's own pace throughout the semester.

Lecture/date	Topic	Reading
Lecture 1 (week of 9/28)	The Function and Order of Systematics in the <i>De deo uno</i>	N/a
Lecture 2 (week of 9/28)	Simplicity	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 3
Lecture 3 (week of 10/12)	Simplicity: Objections and Other Issues	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 3
Lecture 4 (week of 10/12)	Simplicity: Special Issue of How the Attributes Are not Mere Synonyms ( <i>I Sent</i> d 2 q 1 a 3)	Thomas, <i>I Sent</i> d 2 q 1 a 3
Lecture 5 (week of 10/19)	Simplicity: Its Distribution and Use throughout the <i>De deo uno</i>	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 4
Lecture 6 (week of 10/19)	Divine Perfection I	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 5
Lecture 7 (week of 10/26)	Divine Perfection II	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 6
Lecture 8 (week of 10/26)	Infinity I	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 7
Lecture 9 (week of 11/2)	Infinity II	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 7
Lecture 10 (week of 11/2)	Divine Presence	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 8
Lecture 11 (week of 11/9)	Divine Presence and the External Operation of God	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 8
Lecture 12 (week of 11/9)	Divine Presence: Special Issues	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 8
Lecture 13 (week of 11/16)	Immutability	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 9
Lecture 14 (week 11/16)	Immutability: Special Issues	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 9
Lecture 15 (week of 11/30)	Eternity	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 10
Lecture 16 (week of 11/30)	Eternity: Special Issues	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 10
Lecture 17 (week of 12/7)	Naming God I	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 11
Lecture 18 (week of 12/7)	Naming God II	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 12
Lecture 19 (week of 12/14)	Naming God III	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 13
Lecture 20 (week of 12/14)	Naming God IV	Thomas, <i>ST I</i> q 13

## Additional Details

I am delighted to help you in any way I can in issues or questions related to this course. Please use my email (e.g., not Facebook) to contact me, so I can make sure I do not miss your question but handle it in a timely fashion.