

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From David Burrell CSC to Sara Grant RSCJ: The distinctive relation between creature and Creator in Christian theology

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Abstract

I focus in this article on the work of the contemporary Thomist, David Burrell, and the ways in which he is influenced particularly by Robert Sokolowski and Kathryn Tanner in his articulation of the *sui generis* relation between creature and Creator. By paying close attention to Burrell's work on the metaphysics of creation I show how the notions of 'distinction' and 'relation' cannot be separated in his understanding of the world-and-God. I then examine how Thomas's own thinking through of these issues was carried out in engagement with voices from outside the Christian tradition and, finally, explore Burrell's invitation to extend the conversation beyond Abrahamic frontiers by turning to the work of a lesser-known Thomist scholar – Sara Grant.

Keywords: David Burrell; distinction; Sara Grant; non-dualism; relation

For creation is not a change, but the very dependence of the created being upon the principle from which it is produced. And thus, creation is a kind of relation.¹

David Burrell on the distinction-and-relation between the world and God

David Burrell² has made the task of spelling out the nature of the distinction-and-relation between the world and God central to his work.³ It is a task which has been unhelpfully complicated, he thinks, by an over-emphasis (especially in post-Reformation Christian theology) on the doctrine of redemption rather than the doctrine of creation. By focusing disproportionately on redemption as the

¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter, SCG) 2.18.2 (*Non enim est creatio mutatio, sed ipsa dependentia esse creati ad principium a quo statuitur. Et sic est de genere relationis*). See also *Summa Theologica* (hereafter, ST) 1.45.3. ad 3.

²David Burrell (b. 1933) is a Roman Catholic priest of the Congregation of the Holy Cross (Congregatio a Sancta Cruce) and Sara Grant (1922–2000) was a Roman Catholic sister of the Sacred Heart congregation (Religieuses du Sacré Coeur de Jésus).

³David Burrell, 'The Christian Distinction Celebrated and Expanded', in John Drummond and James Hart (eds), *The Truthful and the Good: Essays in Honour of Robert Sokolowski* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), pp. 191–206.

conceptual framework which explains how and why the world is related to God (in response to the ‘gulf’ brought about by sin), we risk losing sight of the *original relation* between creature and Creator involved in creation.⁴ He thus calls for a ‘Keplerian revolution’ in Christian theology in order to redress this imbalance and to restore a vivid sense of a world always-already intimately connected to its Creator.⁵ It is for this reason that Burrell has focused over the last thirty or so years on clarifying the theological ramifications of the Christian doctrine of creation as he finds it in the pages of St Thomas Aquinas; and in the particular approach he has taken, he is widely recognised as a leader in the field.⁶ Specifically, Burrell focuses on how this ‘central though often hidden element’ in Aquinas’ philosophy (namely, the doctrine of creation) provides a context for understanding and speaking both of the *relation* and of the *distinction* between the world and God.⁷

One of Burrell’s most frequently acknowledged influences in this regard is Robert Sokolowski’s *The God of Faith and Reason*.⁸ When Burrell first came across this book in the early 1980s, he was struck by Sokolowski’s central argument: that Christian theology depends for its coherence on being able to explain how God is both *distinct from* but also *related to* what God creates – the world.⁹ Whereas doctrines like incarnation and redemption help to speak of this relation between the world and God, Burrell insists that these items of Christian belief should not ‘have to bear the burden of *establishing* a relationship, but rather of restoring one already embodied in an original order otherwise irremediably distorted by sin’.¹⁰ In other words, if God simply is the founding *raison d’être* for all else, then there must be some sort of ontological relation between the world and God,¹¹ just as truly as there must also be an ontological distinction between God and the world (since the world is not, after all, the *raison d’être* of God).¹²

⁴Burrell is not alone in noticing that creation and redemption can often be unhelpfully opposed in Christian thought; see also, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, ‘The God of Possibilities: Immanence and Transcendence Rethought’, *Concilium* 2000/4 (2000), pp. 45–54.

⁵David B. Burrell and Elena Malits, *Original Peace: Restoring God’s Creation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 1–4. Burrell calls for a ‘Keplerian’, rather than Copernican, revolution because his point is that creation and redemption need to be twin foci of Christian theology, held in productive tension with one another.

⁶Gregory Rocca, ‘Creatio ex nihilo and the being of creatures: God’s creative act and the transcendence-immanence distinction in Aquinas’, in Harm Goris, Herwi Rikhof and Henk Schoot (eds), *Divine Transcendence and Immanence in the Work of Thomas Aquinas*, (Leuven/Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2009), p. 3, n.7.

⁷See e.g. Burrell, ‘Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language’, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (2000), pp. 35–52; referring to Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas* (New York: Pantheon, 1957). Similar references can be found in almost all of Burrell’s work.

⁸Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

⁹Burrell, ‘The Christian Distinction’, p. 191.

¹⁰Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), p. 243.

¹¹Cf. Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, p. 237: ‘When one of those “things” is the creator of all the others ... then everything else is what it is *in relation to* that One. (As Aquinas puts it so succinctly and subtly: creation consists in a relation of the creature to the creator – that is, the very being of the creature is to-be-related.)’ Quoting Aquinas, *ST* 1.45.3.

¹²This is what philosophers of religion usually refer to as ‘the ontological distinction’, but which is generally referred to by Sokolowski and Burrell simply as ‘the distinction’.

This is why Sokolowski can say that ‘in the Christian distinction, God is understood as “being” God entirely apart from any relation of otherness to the world or to the whole.’¹³ On the other hand, however, the world could *not* be understood as ‘world’ apart from its relation to God, since without this relation established by and continually grounded in creation, it would not ‘be’ at all. In other words, given that there is a created world (even though there need not be), we must picture its constitutive relation to God not as an ‘extrinsic’ one – as if the two ‘things’ (world + God) exist separately and only later, as it were, become ‘connected’ (e.g. through a special act of grace like incarnation or redemption) – but as an originary relation which is inherent to the very meaning of what it is ‘to be’ created. Conceiving of the relation between the world and God as an ‘external’ relation between two separate entities ‘results directly from having to deny that we are creatures internally related to a creator’ and, according to Burrell, we should not, therefore, be surprised when this ‘creator alongside the universe’ is seen as otiose and dispensed with – ‘metaphysically, for the sake of parsimony, and ethically to obviate heteronomy’.¹⁴ When Burrell talks of creatures being ‘internally related’ to the Creator, he is making fundamentally the same point as Sokolowski – i.e. we do not exist and ‘then’ (via a specific act of salvation) *become* related to the Creator; we are related by virtue of ‘being’ at all.

The precise nature of the distinction-and-relation between the world and God is unlike any distinction or relation within the world because God must not be thought of as an ‘item’ in a universal inventory or a cosmic catalogue; not being any kind of ‘thing’ at all, God cannot be compared and contrasted to other things with the same logic of difference and sameness that applies in every case within the world. On this, Burrell is in agreement with Sokolowski:

In the distinctions that occur normally within the setting of the world, each term distinguished is what it is precisely by not being that which it is distinguishable from. Its being is established partially by its otherness, and therefore its being depends on its distinction from others. But in the Christian distinction ... God could and would be God even if there were no world.¹⁵

Aquinas was making this very point when he stated that ‘things not in the same genus are not comparable; as, sweetness is not properly greater or less than a line’.¹⁶ The reason this sort of logic cannot apply in the case of God, however, is not just that ‘[t]hings not of the same genus are in no way comparable to each other’, and that ‘we say that God is not in the same genus with other good things’, but that, more fundamentally, God is not in *any* genus: ‘He is outside genus, and is the principle of every genus’.¹⁷ In other words, there is no common background or genus within which we can situate God because God, as Creator, is the *source* and the ontological *ground* of all that exists, so there cannot possibly be any antecedent category to which God belongs as one particular instance.¹⁸ As such,

¹³Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, pp. 32–3.

¹⁴Burrell, ‘Creation, Metaphysics, and Ethics’, *Faith and Philosophy* 18/2 (2001), p. 210.

¹⁵Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, pp. 32–3.

¹⁶ST 1.6.2. See also ST 1.3 on the simplicity of God, esp. art. 5. ‘Whether God is composed of genus and difference?’

¹⁷ST 1.6.2.

¹⁸This is one reason why Aquinas is not an ‘onto-theologian’, because there is not even a common category of ‘being’ to which both God and creatures belong. For Thomas God is Being (*esse*) itself (or even, as

even talking of a 'distinction' or 'relation' between the world and God is, Burrell admits, something of a "philosophical conceit" because there is no domain of comparison between the world and God within which distinctions and relations can be situated.¹⁹

It is for these reasons that Burrell insists on what Kathryn Tanner calls a 'non-contrastive' mode of discourse when it comes to speaking about God and, in particular, when it comes to how we conceive of the nature of the 'distinction' between creation and Creator.²⁰ In *God and Creation in Christian Theology* Tanner is concerned with how to reconcile traditional accounts of God's omnipotence as Creator with creaturely freedom, but in the background of this problematic is the broader one of how to speak coherently about the distinction-and-relation between the world and God in the first place.²¹ The body of rules she lays out is adopted by Burrell to make sense of how to speak of creature and Creator. Their governing principle for Christian discourse is that '[a] God who genuinely transcends the world must not be characterized ... by a direct contrast with it', because there is no logical common background against which such a contrast could be made.²² The result of forgetting this key rule of theology is that:

Divinity characterized in terms of a direct contrast with certain sorts of being or with the world of non-divine being as a whole is brought down to the level of the world and the beings within it in virtue of that very opposition: God becomes one being among others within a single order.²³

In other words, while Christian theology has historically been wary of *diminishing* the distinction between the world and God lest it end in pantheism or some sort of idolatry, a certain type of naïve emphasis on *exalting* this distinction can have almost the same consequence, albeit from the other end of the conceptual spectrum, of *finitising* God. Tanner's first rule for coherent Christian theology, therefore, is to 'avoid both a simple univocal attribution of predicates to God and world and a simple contrast of divine and non-divine predicates'.²⁴ In this way, Christian theologians can navigate, she argues, between collapsing divine transcendence into *identity* with the world, on the one hand, and *opposing* it contrastively with the non-divine, on the other.

Before we too quickly assume, however, that the reason it is difficult to spell out the precise nature of the distinction between the world and God is because the qualitative difference is too big, we must remind ourselves of the conceptual infelicities we are here trying to avoid. It is not that there is a big, or even infinite, difference between creatures

he suggests in other places, such as his commentary on the Neoplatonic *Liber de Causis*, 'beyond Being', as the Cause of Being), whereas a particular being (*ens*) has being (from God).

¹⁹Burrell, 'The Challenge to Medieval Christian Philosophy: Relating Creator to Creatures', in John Inglis (ed.), *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), p. 204.

²⁰Other than Sokolowski, Tanner is the contemporary theologian to whom Burrell adverts most frequently in his work on 'the distinction' (see, for example, *Original Peace*, p. 72). He mentions her in the majority of the books, chapters and articles I have so far discussed. The main work he has in mind is Tanner's *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

²¹Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 12.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 46.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 47.

and Creator but that there simply is no overarching background against which such a difference could be drawn:

the question of ‘sameness’ and ‘distinction’ can arise only as between creatures. If this is so, then clearly there can be no good sense, but only a misleading one, in any, even casual and metaphorical, calculation of the greater and lesser degrees of ‘distance’ which lie between Creator and creatures as contrasted with that between one creature and another; for it is not on some common scale of difference that these differences differ. Indeed, that is precisely what is meant by saying that nothing can be predicated univocally of both God and creatures.²⁵

In other words, if God’s difference from creatures is categorically incomparable with any creaturely difference, ‘incomparable’ does not mean enumeratively or qualitatively *greater*, or *peerless* against a backdrop of logically possible peers, but radically *incommensurable* because there simply is no common scale.²⁶ ‘[T]his difference [between God and creation]’, Denys Turner insists, in a clear echo of Tanner, ‘cannot be set in any form of contrast with sameness’.²⁷

This insight into the *sui generis* nature of the distinction-and-relation between the world and God finds early and sophisticated expression in one of Thomas’ greatest intellectual influences: Dionysius, the pseudo-Areopagite (ca. fifth–sixth centuries). In the conclusion to his essay on *Mystical Theology*, as the culmination of a series of apophatic denials of what God is, Dionysius insists that the Supreme Cause must be ‘beyond assertion and denial’:

We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its pre-eminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.²⁸

Later thinkers influenced by Dionysius, like John Scotus Eriugena (815–77) and Aquinas himself, develop this distinction ‘beyond sameness and otherness’ into full-blown theologies of creation, and some even creatively exploit the Dionysian hyper-logic of negating (ordinary) negation itself to insist that ‘the distinction’ between the world and God consists precisely in the *indistinction* which sets God ‘apart’ from all else. In other words, we are unable to talk meaningfully of difference and sameness at all when it comes to God – because of the absence of common conceptual background necessary to make such comparisons coherent – and this indistinction is what uniquely distinguishes God from creation, but *not*, of course, in such a way that the one is contrasted with the other. Language cannot cope with this hyper-logical ‘difference’ between God and creatures, other than to mutter the sort of paradoxical statements we find pre-eminently in Aquinas’s near-contemporary, Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) and, later, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) – God is distinct because of God’s unique *indistinctness*:

²⁵Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p. 213.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 214.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*The Mystical Theology* 1048B; in *The Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 141. All references are to this edition.

God is distinct from any creature in this alone, that if any creature is necessarily a distinct being, a *hoc aliquid*, God is not. A creature is, as he [Eckhart] puts it, an *unum distinctum*, distinct from another by means of its difference in respect of some background sameness which they share, whereas God is an *unum indistinctum*, that is to say, is distinct from any creature whatsoever in this, that, unlike any creature, God is not distinct in kind from anything created at all – for there is no background against which a distinction of kind can be set. Therefore, God is distinct because God alone is not distinct. ‘Indistinction’, as he [Eckhart] puts it, ‘belongs to God, distinction to creatures.’²⁹

‘Distinction’, ‘relation’ and ‘creation’ in Aquinas and Burrell

‘Distinction’, ‘relation’ and ‘creation’ coalesce conceptually for Burrell: if we focus on the *distinction* between God and world without also attending to the relation, the risk is that we characterise them as two ‘entities’ (God + world) alongside each other; whereas if we emphasise *relation* and lose sight of the all-important distinction, we veer towards pantheism; therefore, it is the manner in which we explain creation that will crucially shape the distinction-and-relation that results. Uniquely in the case of God, God’s ontological *distinction* from the world is God’s logical *relation* with the world, and vice versa.

Burrell’s contention is that the way we articulate the precise nature of the distinction/relation between creatures and Creator will establish the underlying grammar that governs and shapes the rest of our God-talk. Sokolowski also agrees that creation ‘is not merely one teaching among many in Christian belief, but is *foundational* in opening up the logical and theological space for all other doctrines.’³⁰ Articulating the distinction-and-relation implicates us, for example, in the sorts of ‘grace’ versus ‘nature’ debates which structure so much intramural Christian disagreement.³¹ Protestant voices typically accuse Roman Catholic thinkers of reducing the ‘gap’ (what I have been calling ‘the distinction’) by means of an overarching ontology that includes God and the world; while Roman Catholics tend to reverse the charge and accuse Protestants of emphasising divine sovereignty to the point of nullifying capacities inherent to human nature as a created gift.³²

As we have seen, the challenge can be posed as follows: how to *distinguish* God from the world in such a way as to avoid a pantheistic identification of creature and Creator, on the one hand, and how to *relate* God to the world in order to avoid conceptualising them as two competing realities which exist in parallel, on the other. This challenge can also be parsed the other way around: i.e. of how to articulate the distinction in such a way that it doesn’t become a separation, and how to articulate the relation in such a way that it doesn’t collapse God into the world. This almost palindromic quality of the dilemma serves only to reinforce what I have been arguing throughout this essay – that ‘distinction’ and ‘relation’ are two sides of the same coin. Focusing on the

²⁹Turner, *Faith, Reason and Existence*, pp. 163–4, quoting Eckhart’s *Commentary on Exodus* 20.104, in Bernard McGinn (ed.), *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 79.

³⁰R. Sokolowski, ‘Creation and Christian Understanding’, in David B. Burrell and Bernard McGinn (eds), *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 179.

³¹For a recent guide to these debates, see Edward T. Oakes, *A Theology of Grace in Six Controversies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016).

³²Tanner, *God and Creation*, pp. 2–3.

distinction will tend towards emphasising the *transcendence* of God, while a focus on the *relation* will align with an emphasis on God's *immanence* in creation. The result is that Christian '[t]heologians of creation have all teetered on a thin line between monism [as a result of a one-sided emphasis on immanence/relation] and dualism [as a result of another one-sided emphasis on transcendence/distinction], each leaning towards one or the other of these poles'.³³ At one end of the spectrum is the Scylla of deism, that is, of a monarchical God who is conceived as so utterly transcendent that the 'distinction' between creatures and Creator is turned into an ontological *separation*. This leads to 'the blatantly dualist presentation of Christianity as a redemptive scheme' and of a God as a *deus ex machina* 'out there'.³⁴ We are left with a 'transcendentally transcendent' God who is either entirely unrelated to the world, or who is so terrifyingly powerful that any creaturely freedom is completely swallowed up.³⁵ Ironically, given the motivations behind such theologies to protect the otherness of God, the end result can be exactly the opposite: divine transcendence can become domesticated into a mundane sort of transcendence, where God is spatially contrasted with the universe in such a way that they become two separate objects. At the other end of the spectrum is the Charybdis of pantheism or, in other words, of a complete flattening out of divine transcendence, leading to an 'immanently immanent' God.³⁶ In this case, distinction is dissolved into identity, and creation tends to be pictured as a sort of continuous God-world emanation.

Traditionally, Christian theology has seen both of these extreme positions as erroneous: that is, conceiving of God and world as two separate enumerable entities (God + world), on the one hand, and conceiving of them as one and the same reality (God = world) on the other. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it is often when thinkers – not just in Christianity, but in all three Abrahamic traditions – have struggled to articulate the uniqueness of this distinction/relation between creatures and Creator (and, in particular, when they have ostensibly emphasised 'relation' over 'distinction') that they have tended to come under suspicion in their respective faith communities. Whether we think of an Eriugena or of an Eckhart, history testifies that '[v]ery frequently positions that are judged to be heretical are those that, by implication at least, blur the Christian distinction between God and the world'.³⁷ This further suggests that Sokolowski and Burrell are correct in viewing the distinction/relation as a – perhaps, *the* – foundational issue in philosophical theology. It is not that disputed questions cannot be found in other areas of theology, but even these can invariably be traced back to an initially mistaken way of conceiving this distinction-and-relation. The way we understand this 'creation relation' between creature and Creator will structure everything else in our theology – from our understanding of incarnation and sacraments, to redemption and human freedom.³⁸ Formulating this unique distinction in

³³Langdon Gilkey, 'Creation, Being, and Nonbeing', in Burrell and McGinn, *God and Creation* (1990), p. 229.

³⁴Burrell and Malits, *Original Peace*, p. 74.

³⁵Rocca, 'Creatio ex nihilo', in *Divine Transcendence*, p. 15.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, p. 26. While Sokolowski tends to refer to this as the 'Christian' distinction, Burrell sees it as involving a fundamentally similar set of issues in each of the Abrahamic traditions.

³⁸Burrell, 'Act of Creation with its Theological Consequences', in Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating and John Yocum (eds), *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: T&T

such a way as to respect the reality of both creature and Creator therefore becomes the quintessential theological task which is aptly summarised by Sokolowski:

It is as though the Christian understanding of God and the world provides the setting that lets there be controversies about Christ, the church, and grace. However, it is also the case that various heresies concerning such issues are heretical because they would, by implication, obscure the Christian distinction between the world and God.³⁹

‘Distinction’ as interfaith achievement: legacy and prospects

While we might not be surprised that a Roman Catholic priest and theologian like Burrell chooses to follow Thomist metaphysics in his discussions of creation, his consistent emphasis on the *comparative* theological dimensions of Aquinas’ project is more unusual. By exploring the ways in which Aquinas was drawing on Jewish and Muslim interlocutors like Moses Maimonides and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Burrell aims to show how Thomas’ attempts to conceptualise the distinctive relation between the world and God are influenced by, at times differ from and also converge with, certain ways of thinking through this distinction-and-relation in the other Abrahamic traditions.⁴⁰

Aquinas accepted Avicenna’s key distinction between ‘existence’ and ‘essence’, as well as his argument that this distinction was the characteristic mark of a creature. He also took over Avicenna’s manner of distinguishing God as the only One whose essence simply is ‘to-be’.⁴¹ However, by reintroducing Aristotle’s language of act (*energeia*) and potency (*dunamis*) to understand existence (*esse*) and essence (*essentia*), rather than Avicenna’s necessary/possible hermeneutic, Aquinas was able to creatively combine and transform his Greek-Arabic sources in such a way that they could be used to explain the radical notion of creation *ex nihilo* found in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures.⁴² Rather than substances ‘existing in themselves’, Aquinas argued that, on the contrary, substances are *created*, in the sense that they are composed of essence ‘in potency’ (which does not, *pace* Avicenna, mean the same as ‘possibly existing’ because there *is* no essence without existence) to an act(ivity) of existence (*actus essendi*) – and that pure act(ivity) of existence simply *is* the essence of what we call God (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*).⁴³ By ‘participating’ in this divine pure act of

Clark, 2004), p. 27. For the phrase ‘creational relation’, see Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 48.

³⁹Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, p. 34.

⁴⁰Indeed, it is Burrell’s close attention to the particular faith-traditions in question and their attempts to clarify founding truths of revelation which characterises his work as belonging more properly to *philosophical theology* than to philosophy of religion, insofar as the latter might tend to treat of ‘theism’ in the abstract and without any scriptural moorings. On this, see David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 2.

⁴¹See e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* 7.3.4.

⁴²E.g. 2 Maccabees 7:28: ‘So I urge you, my child, to look at the sky and the earth. Consider everything you see there, and realise that God made it all from nothing, just as he made the human race.’

⁴³Aryeh Kosman, *The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle’s Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. vii–viii and *passim*, presents a convincing argument for translating *energeia* as ‘activity’, rather than the more common ‘act’, in order to underline the ongoing, verbal quality of ‘being’. Burrell makes a similar argument in ‘Distinguishing God from the World’, in Brian Davies (ed.) *Language, Meaning and God: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe, O.P.* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), pp. 75–91 (esp. pp. 78–9).

existence, creatures are most intimately and profoundly related to *esse* (i.e. to God), since this is the creature's very 'be-ing', without which it simply would not *be* at all.

Crucially, then, we can see why Burrell identifies *creation* as the very foundation of the distinction *and* the relation between God and creatures. By the very fact of its existence, every creature shows a *relation* of 'toward-ness' to the Creator who, in turn, is really present 'in' each existing thing by virtue of its ontological constitution (as composed of essence/potency and existence/act) – existence is not something that 'happens to' or befalls a creature but is that to which essence must be related for there to 'be' a creature at all.⁴⁴ In continuously giving each individual thing its sheer existence, God may be said always to be intimately present in the world. At the same time, God is distinct from creatures in virtue of God's simplicity (i.e. God's *not* being composed of essence and existence), which makes the relation an asymmetrical one: creatures are *really* related to God, because they would not 'be' otherwise, but God is not really related to creatures because God would be God even without them.⁴⁵ Creating, therefore, belongs to God alone, because creation simply is the 'emanation of all *esse* from universal being', and God is *esse* itself.⁴⁶ The radical contingency of the world, for Aquinas, does not lie in the fact that it could have been otherwise, but that it is there at all; for creation *ex nihilo* simply means that each thing receives its existence directly from the Creator. Thus, to the famous question later put by Leibniz, 'Why is there some-thing rather than utter nothingness?', Thomas' response in a word would be: 'Creation'.

Given the increasing recognition of the significance of global horizons for Christian theology, we will surely see more Thomist scholars joining Burrell in emphasising Aquinas' openness to interreligious dialogue in the pursuit of 'faith seeking understanding'.⁴⁷ However, one of Burrell's more startling claims seems to have gone largely unnoticed. In speculating in the margins of his work on how these medieval Christian-Jewish-Islamic conversations in philosophical theology could benefit from an engagement with non-Abrahamic traditions, Burrell has suggested (somewhat to his own surprise) that his 'struggles to understand the utter uniqueness of that relation [namely, between creature and Creator] could find expression in a conceptuality at the heart of Hindu thought'.⁴⁸ The 'conceptuality' he is talking about is 'non-dualism' (*advaita*).

Burrell first encountered the tradition of Advaita (literally, 'not-two') via his colleague, Bradley Malkovsky,⁴⁹ but only appreciated the possible significance of this worldview for Christian theology when he read *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*, a largely autobiographical work written by a

⁴⁴Cf. Rudi Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 91: 'Creating does not simply mean the actualization of a possibility; creation denotes the origin of things according to their entire being, *principium totius esse*.'

⁴⁵Here we can clearly see why Burrell insists on divine simplicity as the formal feature which secures 'the distinction'. Cf. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God*, pp. 29–34.

⁴⁶Aquinas, *ST* 1.45.4.1.

⁴⁷Burrell is not, of course, the first Aquinas scholar to have noticed these sorts of historical influences (Étienne Gilson was famously drawing attention to them as early as the 1930s), but a specific focus on the importance of figures like Avicenna for Aquinas is still quite rare in Thomist literature. A recent notable exception would be Jim Fodor and F. C. Bauerschmidt (eds), *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

⁴⁸Burrell and Malits, *Original Peace*, p. 79.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 74, and Burrell, 'The Christian Distinction', p. 206.

Roman Catholic sister of the Sacred Heart congregation, Sara Grant.⁵⁰ Grant claims, somewhat controversially, that the metaphysical ‘non-dualism’ between the world and God which she came across in Advaita Vedānta also lies at the heart of Christianity, and she argues that the language of non-dualism provides a particularly useful way of balancing a number of oppositional tendencies in Christian thinking about creation and of avoiding conceptual errors in Christian talk about God. She thus offers a way of opening up an avenue of *inter*-theological engagement with a non-Abrahamic faith tradition which has the intriguing possibility of informing *intra*-Christian theological reflections as well. Paradoxically, but perhaps unsurprisingly, opening up these intra-Christian conversations to voices which do not necessarily share the same sets of presuppositions may enable us to see new ways of framing questions and disputes which seem intractable from within familiar sets of firmly established paradigms. As Tanner correctly points out: ‘A certain modern framework of discussion is disenchanted of its obviousness when an initially strange discourse is allowed to make a claim on it.’⁵¹

This dialogical exchange brings challenges as well as opportunities, but Burrell’s central argument is that:

Nondualism [advaita] mediates two proclivities: on the one hand, the tendency to treat the relation of the universe to its origin as one between two distinct entities – if not on the same plane at least comparable in ordinary discourse (dualism); on the other hand, considering the universe merely as expression of its originative source, so that there is no *relation* between them (monism).⁵²

In particular, he notes how the work of Sara Grant regarding the ‘non-dual’ Christianity she claims to find in Aquinas could help Christian theologians to ‘think Creator and creature together’.⁵³ An ‘advaitic’ Thomas would be one way of moving beyond the conceptual impasse that often results from seeing the available options as either a dissolving of the difference between the world and God into some sort of pantheistic monism or the maintaining of such a clear enumerative distinction that the two ‘things’ appear to exist in splendid dualistic isolation from each other. Grant’s presentation of non-dualism in an Indian context invites us to a way of thinking this relation which avoids both of the errors outlined above, precisely because it resists contrasting God and world as if they were two enumerable entities. Burrell says that it dawned on him when listening to Malkovsky’s delineation of Vedāntic teaching on the relation of the world to its origin that ‘Nondualism is an attempt to state positively what Kathryn Tanner puts negatively.’⁵⁴ More specifically, ‘pondering the manner in which Aquinas characterizes

⁵⁰Sara Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2002). This was originally delivered by Grant in 1989 at Cambridge as the Teape Lectures and was reprinted in 2002 with a foreword by Malkovsky.

⁵¹Tanner, *God and Creation*, p. 6.

⁵²Burrell and Malits, *Original Peace*, p. 75.

⁵³Martin Ganeri, “‘Thinking the Creator and Creature Together’: How Rāmānuja’s Account of Scriptural Meaning Encourages Unitive Language in Christian Discourse about God and the World”, *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 31 (2018), article 18. Ganeri draws this phrase from his reading of Burrell.

⁵⁴Burrell, *Original Peace*, p. 72. This is a slightly unusual phrase, given that Vedāntic non-dualism is, linguistically, a ‘negative’ description of Reality (namely, that it is ‘not-two’, *a-dvaita*). Burrell perhaps has something like the following in mind: whereas Tanner tells us *not* to contrast God and world, Advaita Vedānta tell us that Reality *is* nondual.

creation in things as a *relation* to their source, she [Grant] observes how malleable is this maverick Aristotelian category of *relation*⁵⁴ and she is able to utilise the Vedāntic concept of *advaita* to stress the ontological dependence of creatures on their Creator, and thus the asymmetric nature of this relation.

Summing up

The connecting thread between figures as diverse in time as Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas and Sara Grant may be found in a certain concept of non-duality (*advaita*) that leads us to picture the distinction-and-relation between the world and God as a non-contrastive one: they are neither separate nor yet the same. The reasons for this statement boil down to there being no common genus within which we can situate God and creatures, such as to be able to spell out the ‘difference’ between them: God is ‘distinct’ precisely in virtue of indistinctness. In Aquinas, this (in)distinction comes to the fore in the doctrine of creation, understood as the free bestowal of existence to all beings which participate in the act of unqualified existence (*esse*) we call God. This in turn shows why we can only talk of a ‘distinction’ between God and what is not God if we also keep in mind the ‘relation’ between them – namely, that the very being of creatures is an *esse-ad-creatorem*.

Burrell emphasises not only the uniqueness of this relation but also its Abrahamic moorings as arising out of concerns common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Let he be accused, however, of evacuating theology in this regard of specifically Christian (i.e. christological) content, it should be noted that Burrell and Sokolowski agree that, with the theological inheritance of centuries of thinking through the ‘micro’ problem of the distinction-and-relation between the human and the divine natures of Christ, Christian theologians have an especially nuanced conceptual framework for addressing the ‘macro’ problem of the distinction-and-relation between the world and God.⁵⁵ Indeed, Burrell also puts it the other way around – that Chalcedonian christology only makes sense in light of a non-contrastive (or *non-dualistic*) understanding of how creatures relate to God. As Turner reminds us:

It is only because of the incommensurability between Creator and creature that the predicates ‘...is human’ and ‘...is God’, do not, and cannot, refer to natures standing in relations of mutual exclusion. For it is just on account of their incommensurability – on account, that is to say, of their not occupying common logical ground – that exclusion cannot come into it.⁵⁶

We can, I think, borrow the ‘microcosmic’ language of Chalcedon to articulate its ‘macrocosmic’ iteration: God is (at least logically) related to the world ‘without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation’ analogously to the way in which divine and creaturely natures are uniquely related in the one divine person of Jesus Christ.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Cf. Burrell, ‘The Christian Distinction’, p. 195; and Burrell in Weinandy, *Aquinas on Doctrine*, 27. For more on the issues at stake at the Council of Chalcedon, and how the metaphysical options at Chalcedon might seem to mirror those we have addressed in this article, see Brian E. Daley, ‘Unpacking the Chalcedonian Formula: From Studied Ambiguity to Saving Mystery’, *The Thomist* 80 (2016), pp. 165–89.

⁵⁶Turner, *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*, p. 217.

⁵⁷I am aware that this might risk undermining the uniqueness of the incarnation by implying that the way human and divine natures are related in the person of Jesus the Christ is an instantiation of an overarching metaphysics which applies *en gros* to the relation between creatures and Creator. I will not address

While a certain concept of ‘non-duality’ is not, therefore, entirely unknown in the Christian tradition, I think that Burrell is right to encourage Christian theologians to explore more deeply Sara Grant’s presentation of Advaita Vedānta in order to rethink old problems in new ways. Specifically, Burrell suggests three key motivations for doing so. First of all, there is the mandate handed down to us by Aquinas himself to work out Christian metaphysics in active conversations with thinkers from outside the tradition, to say nothing of the increasingly global horizons within which theology and philosophy must in any case be carried out. Secondly, by confronting the language of ‘non-duality’, which is uncommon for Christians, we are reminded of the uniqueness of the distinction between creature and Creator, and encouraged to articulate this in ways which avoid picturing God as ‘just another thing’ existing alongside the world. Finally and, perhaps, primarily, the startling possibility of describing creature and Creator as ‘not-two’ (*a-dvaita*) is one way of reasserting the true meaning of divine transcendence in Christian theology – not, as is too often the case, as a spatial metaphor *opposed* to metaphors of closeness and intimacy, but as precisely the unique sort of indistinctness that allows God to be, in the words of St Augustine, *interior intimo meo*.

Burrell’s first allusion to Grant and the possibilities of a ‘non-dual’ understanding of the relation between the world and God goes back more than twenty years. Here, he suggested that ‘the affinities between Sokolowski’s *distinction* and a recent presentation of *nonduality* by a Christian writer [i.e. Grant’s 1989 Teape Lectures] are so startling as to merit at least extensive notice’.⁵⁸ This was followed a year later by Burrell’s most detailed treatment of Grant in his chapter on ‘The Creator and Creation’ in his shared volume with Elena Malits, *Original Peace*. Since then, he has consistently reissued this invitation to Christian theologians to look to Grant and Hindu non-dualism as a way of articulating the God-world relation-distinction in nearly all of his major published articles, chapters and monographs, right up to the present day. The ‘at least extensive notice’ of Grant’s work which Burrell called for in 1996 is surely long overdue.⁵⁹

this here, other than to say that Grant (*Towards an Alternative Theology*, pp. 82–92) does seem to accept this unorthodox position on christology.

⁵⁸Burrell, ‘The Christian Distinction’, p. 196.

⁵⁹Even among scholars who work specifically on Hindu-Christian comparative themes, Sara Grant’s work is not widely discussed. The main notable exceptions would be Bradley Malkovsky and Martin Ganeri: see e.g. Malkovsky’s introduction to Grant’s *Towards an Alternative Theology*; and Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism: The Vedānta of Rāmānuja* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), esp. pp. 30–1. To the best of my knowledge, the only Christian theologian other than Burrell who does not work comparatively with Hinduism but who has explicitly recognised the significance of Grant is Martin Poulson in *The Dialectics of Creation: Creation and the Creator in Edward Schillebeeckx and David Burrell* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), pp. 62–3.

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