

Preface

WHAT ARE THE GREATEST intellectual needs to which Catholic scholars should be attending today? One person with a very distinctive perspective on this question is the remarkable Jesuit philosopher and theologian Fr. Robert Spitzer, who visited the University of St. Thomas this past spring to give a public lecture on how the discoveries of modern science support belief in God based on his book *New Proofs for the Existence of God*.¹ Fr. Spitzer is a kind of one-man Catholic university. With interests in philosophy of science, Christology, Ignatian spirituality, virtue theory, business ethics, management, leadership, and education theory (among many others), he has published ten books and dozens of scholarly articles and book chapters, produced eleven television series for the Catholic television network EWTN, and appeared on secular television programs numerous times, including Larry King Live to discuss science and the notion of a Creator with Stephen Hawking's co-author Leonard Mlodinow and Deepak Chopra.² Fr. Spitzer's productivity tempts the envious academic to think that "Spitzer" is really a collective of Catholic scholars all publishing on different subjects under the same name.

He is indeed a real (and singular) man. I met him through my

wife, Cathy, a philosophy professor here at St. Thomas. She had been his student and teaching assistant as an undergraduate at Seattle University in the mid-nineties. She introduced me when he came to speak at Fordham University during graduate school. A dynamic speaker—especially for an academic—who, because of vision difficulties, memorizes his speeches, he tends to pour forth knowledge and wisdom in torrents of speech both exhilarating and overwhelming. My wife said taking a course from him was the equivalent of trying to drink from an open fire hydrant. While officiating our nuptial Mass, his homily had that open-hydrant feel. A cousin of mine, poet and agnostic, told me later that she was moved by his exhortation to love divine and human; never had she heard Frederick Nietzsche and Edith Stein invoked in a sermon, and certainly not in a wedding sermon.

Fr. Spitzer is not just a talker, but a mover and shaker. He served for ten years as the president of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, and has founded numerous organizations in which Catholics and people of good will can collaborate, gain resources, and be strengthened in the attempt to advance both faith and reason in the academy and the public square, including two pro-life groups and two organizations dedicated to helping create healthy business and non-profit workplace cultures. After retiring from Gonzaga, Fr. Spitzer began the Magis Center for Faith and Reason, which produces educational material to teach people about how faith and science are partners and not enemies. He is able to reach a broad audience with this material through his EWTN show “Father Spitzer’s Universe.”

This joint experience of teaching and building educational institutions of various kinds is why Fr. Spitzer was asked on his trip to St. Thomas to address a smaller group of faculty and administrators on issues of curriculum and Catholic identity at a lunch the day following his lecture. At this talk, at which he encouraged faculty and administrators alike to think about the philosophy and theology that should be at the heart of every Catholic university’s core

curriculum, Fr. Spitzer was asked what he thought were the main challenges that needed to be addressed for today's students. His answer was that there were two crying needs: 1) for more general apologetics for the existence of God and the identity of Christ, and 2) more work on the complementary relation between science and religion. As it so happens, sitting around the table were two St. Thomas faculty members who have recently contributed books in precisely these areas.

Philosopher Michael Rota's *Taking Pascal's Wager* is a three-part work that enunciates an updated form of Pascal's famous argument that making a commitment to God even when one is not completely sure God exists is a fully rational action because there is much to gain and little to lose by doing so.³ Against critics of Pascal's original iteration of this argument, many critics have observed that there is something shady about this proposition—whether because it asks one to believe without certainty, or because it does not take into account the fact that there are many religions and thus “many gods” to decide from, or because there is something deeply perverse about making a decision for God based on what one will get. In part one, Rota addresses these and other objections, noting, first, that he is not asking anybody to believe against their better judgment. The wager is addressed to those who think there is a fifty percent or higher chance that Christianity is true; it asks them not to substitute belief for slightly-better-than-even odds, but instead to make a commitment to God, meaning to inquire further into the evidence, pray, study the Scripture and teachings of Christianity, and to engage in some form of religious community. This is how, Rota notes in many analogies, we ordinarily seek to find certainty about subjects.

To those who object that there are many religions in which to believe, Rota notes that his book is designed for those who think Christianity more likely than not *and* that it is considerably more likely than other religions. And to those who object to selfish calculation concerning eternal things, Rota argues that the very nature

of a relationship with God is bound to give pleasure to God, angels, and other Christians, not to mention bringing with it the possibility that one could help others to find eternal happiness with God through one's own relationship. And Jesus himself is the one who promises happiness both in this life and the life to come. Rota marshals all the most up-to-date evidence from social scientists concerning the material, health, social, and psychological benefits that accompany religious belonging. Even if Christianity's fifty-one percent odds turned out to be false, the benefits to Christian commitment in this life look to outweigh the costs. A longer, healthier, happier life in this world is surely worth it if the post-mortem state is oblivion, right? And, Rota points out, these better this-worldly outcomes serve as additional evidence for the truth of Christianity.

Part two of Rota's book thus moves to the specific evidence for belief in God and belief in the Resurrection of Christ. On belief in God, Rota offers an updated version of the traditional argument for God's existence from contingency and necessity, as well as an argument from the "fine-tuning" in our universe that allowed for life. While the first is a strong philosophical argument, it is the second that will probably grip many people because of its concrete quality. The constants of physics are shown to be within such narrow ranges that they appear to be rigged to enable life. Rota here does some heavy-duty work explaining probability with perhaps a bit too much math for many ordinary readers, but the pay-off is to show that serious mathematical work is on the side of those who think the universe is indeed "rigged." Finally, Rota offers versions of two complementary arguments from the contemporary philosophers Peter Van Inwagen and Eleonore Stump for why even the very large amounts of physical and moral evil in the universe do not constitute good evidence for God's non-existence.

Rota also treats the evidence for Christ's Resurrection, using sophisticated arguments taken from Richard Swinburne and Michael Licona for why the best explanation for the claims of the Resurrection is neither a conspiracy nor a mass delusion on the part of

the disciples—and certainly not a kind of fact-free myth offered by modern liberal Christians. Rota observes that when critics (such as agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman) agree that Jesus’s followers really did believe that they had seen a resurrected man they argue against its facticity on the basis of improbability. But this argument against the Resurrection based on probability does not take into consideration what Rota calls “the background evidence.” While not taking a side in the debate on whether the Incarnation is fitting or actually necessary in God’s plan, Rota makes a number of arguments for why an incarnation makes sense if God exists.

The last section of the book is comprised of three mini-biographies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jean Vanier, and Immaculée Ilibagiza, each of which asks specific questions about the benefits and the costs of discipleship. It is a smart move since, as Pascal and John Henry Newman pointed out, the arguments from the kind of formal philosophical thinking that Rota presents throughout the book really serve more as a check on the real-life thinking one does. In the end, as Joseph Ratzinger observed, the most powerful arguments the Church has in her favor are the art and the saints she produces. If none of the three figures are canonized saints, Rota’s trio function as the kind of material witness to his argument that taking the odds on following Christ produces not drab human cut-outs, but human beings that are flesh and blood, spirit and mind, and above all filled with joy.

Rota’s argument for God’s existence hinges on that rigging of the universe known as fine-tuning. It is an important point since many arguments against Christianity seem to assume that science, particularly since Darwin, is the bitter enemy of Christianity. Philip Rolnick of St. Thomas’s theology department acknowledges that theology must adjust to a new post-Darwinian understanding of the world, but that there is no reason to think evolutionary theory or physics present any insuperable evidence against God or Christ. As he says in his new book, *Origins* (with a generous recommendation on the back from Fr. Spitzer), “If there is a challenge in science’s

understanding of big bang cosmology and the subsequent development of the universe, that challenge is for atheists, not for people of faith.”²⁴ Whereas Rota’s description of fine-tuning is enough to establish an argument, Rolnick’s chapter, “Cosmology and Creation,” gives a guided tour of the development of the universe, explaining in ordinary terms how unlikely it is that our universe would have just the right requirements to result in life. Both Rota and Rolnick observe that the current secular attempt to wriggle out of the implications of fine tuning, the theory of a multiverse, do not actually resolve the problem for atheists. First, the multiverse theory is speculative since we do not (and might not be able to have) any evidence for possible universes outside of our own. Second, Rota uses probability theory and Rolnick appeals to the work of physicist Alexander Vilenkin (who himself believes in a multiverse) to show that a multiverse would still point to a beginning and thus to some sort of Creator.

But Rolnick starts with the hard stuff, the view of God in a Darwinian world. His second chapter, “Four Challenges of Evolution,” takes on the questions of how to understand: 1) divine design in a world in which random selection and extremely long selections of time seem to rule out any need for a God who designs; 2) how a world of natural selection, a dog-eat-dog world of winners and losers, comports with a God of love; 3) how a world in which death and struggle seem baked in at the beginning fits with a God who is good; and 4) how to understand humans as the image of God when there is a common ancestry of all creatures. Rolnick takes on these hard questions in turn, showing that there is, after all, a purposive trend in an evolutionary world that, just like the physical constants in the universe, seems to point to one with purpose, moreover one with a purpose to create creatures like us who can transcend our biological drives, become attached to truth, can learn and love, and ultimately be fit for a life with God.

How science and theology can work together is not a simple question, but it is clear that: both are engaged in a search for truth,

both have to deal with preserving old and integrating new information, and both have capabilities to complement each other. Rolnick's structure is one of ascent. First, he deals with the biological claims, second the more abstract but still physical questions of physics, and finally deals with virtue and the response to divine grace. Our bodies we know up close, the stars through observation and a good bit of mathematical abstraction. Both, one might say, point us in the direction of the Spirit who is behind all of this and who invites us to a deeper life that deals not just in the questions of science—how—but in the deeper questions of theology—why.

Rota's and Rolnick's new books are splendid examples showing what John Paul the Great described as the unity of faith and reason, "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." Rota and Rolnick demonstrate vividly that all truth is one and points to a common source. Pursuing that source will not make us too heavenly minded for earthly good, but, instead, "by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."⁵

The kind of general philosophical apologetic Fr. Spitzer desires is found in **Linda Zagzebski's "A Modern Defense of Religious Authority."** In a world in which many think that the idea of human autonomy rules out the idea of authority altogether, Zagzebski, a member of the *Logos* editorial board and prominent philosopher, here adapts the liberal political philosopher Joseph Raz's argument for why the acceptance of some form of human autonomy not only comports with but is often enlarged by political authority to show that the same arguments apply to moral and indeed religious authority: "A religious community's epistemic authority is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to believe the truth if I believe what we, the community, believe than if I try to figure it out in a way that is independent of the community or the Church."

In certain Catholic and Protestant circles the authority of the

patristic biblical interpretation, and particularly that of Origen (ca. 184–254) has been long dismissed as fanciful and unscientific. **Thomas Harmon** in “**Historicism Versus History and Spirit: Henri de Lubac on What We Can Learn from Studying Origen**” examines the twentieth-century theologian Henri de Lubac’s idea that “studying great thinkers of the past such as Origen without yielding to historicism can purify current ways of thinking without losing hold of genuine advances.” For de Lubac and Harmon, the historical-critical methods of studying Scripture have many advantages but also many disadvantages for one who wishes to read Scripture not simply as an “embalmed corpse” but as a living Word. Harmon contrasts de Lubac’s reading of Origen with those of Raymond Brown and Luke Timothy Johnson to show how to gain from historical methods without being sealed off from the Spirit within them.

The winds of historicism and scientism have blown not just in biblical studies but within the modern university as a whole, leading to universities as places of research concerning facts and figures, and too seldom places that focus on the transmission of wisdom. **Daniel Arndt** in “**Liberal Education in Crisis**” examines how “liberal education was originally grounded in a number of core assumptions—about the nature of truth, tradition, language, the self, and education,” and how changes in the understanding of those assumptions have put the university and education in general in crisis. Arndt describes both the changes in understanding of these truths and how it is that universities, Catholic universities in particular, need to rethink their traditional assumptions in the light of philosophy and scientific advances. As with de Lubac on Origen, Arndt wishes us to not replace the deficiencies of the old for the deficiencies of the new, but to preserve, purify, and develop the Catholic tradition in education not just for our own sake but for all who value liberal education.

William Tate in “**How the Sun Came Shining: Stevens and Wilbur on Waking Up**” presents a close reading of Wallace Stevens’s “The Latest Freed Man” and Richard Wilbur’s “Love Calls Us

to the Things of This World,” two poems in which the sun appears as a source of awakening to life and knowledge. The two poets have radically different notions of how it is we know things and thus equally different notions of what it means for humans to be responsible. Though Stevens was received into the Catholic Church on his deathbed, his work manifests a modern “hermeneutics of suspicion” and a secular emphasis on autonomy that rules out authority and trust. “Wilbur, in contrast, though he recognizes that to believe risks disillusionment and disappointment, nevertheless prefers what we may call a hermeneutics of trust. His poem pictures a human agent who, tempted by the immaterial, eventually chooses not to withdraw from the risk of active living in the world, but finds in the immaterial his motivation for committed participation in the world.”

Bárbara Díaz treats a too-often forgotten twentieth-century historian and theologian of history who navigated the waters of history and historicism, faith and reason, and theology and philosophy in “**Making Sense of History: Henri-Irénée Marrou’s Theological Scope.**” Díaz reveals a historian who refused to set aside the facts of history, his theological convictions, or his personal responsibility in his time and place. Using his most important works, she shows us Marrou the Augustinian whose themes are “responsibility in the building of the *civitas terrena*; the coexistence of good and evil in this world; and the renewal of eschatology.”

James Schall returns to our pages with a reflection on what literature teaches us. “**On the Teaching of Classical Literature**” takes off from a much-discussed article in the journal *Commentary* by Northwestern University literature professor Gary Saul Morson on why literature is so unpopular at universities these days. Schall here, following and partially correcting Morson, is doing the work that Daniel Arndt recommends for Catholic thinkers: re-imagining how literary truth goes with the kind of scientific truth taught in other precincts of the university. Literature makes us ask unsettling questions about political and other human questions without necessarily answering them. Yet it points us toward a philosophy of discontent

and gratitude at the heart of happiness. “This unsettlement constitutes the impetus for what goes on in all we read and in our own souls as we read it. It leads us to suspect that, in the end, we are that gift that somehow lies at the source of our own unique being.”

Peter J. Colosi wraps up this issue with “**Ratzinger, Habermas, and Pera on Public Reason and Religion.**” Colosi shows how contemporary secular European thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and Marcello Pera have acknowledged the practical failure of what some thinkers have called the “second tablet project” in which duty to God can be shucked while keeping human rights, duties, and dignity. In sync with Michael Rota’s updating of Pascal, Colosi presents Joseph Ratzinger’s own challenge to European secularists: since the Enlightenment notion of morality *etsi Deus non daretur*—even though God doesn’t exist—has not panned out as expected, why not try to live *veluti si Deus daretur*—as if God did indeed exist. For Ratzinger, Christian witness in today’s world does two desperately needed things: it “(1) introduce(s) people to new ways to live their lives, morally and socially, and (2) bring(s) people to a living faith.” It may be that the “creative minorities” who have a living faith in the world beyond are the only ones who can make this world more human.

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Notes

1. Robert J. Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions from Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). Ignatius Press has recently released a paperback version of this book.
2. See the footage of this encounter here: <https://vimeo.com/15383112>.
3. Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal’s Wager: Faith, Evidence, and the Abundant Life* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).
4. Philip Rolnick, *Origins: God, Evolution, and the Question of the Cosmos* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 108.
5. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, “Blessing,” http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.