

# What is Classical Theism and Why Should We Hold to It?

## 8 Talking Points

By John DeRosa

Classical Theism refers to the traditional conception of God in Western culture, especially Roman Catholicism. In this understanding of God, the things of the physical universe are related to and dependent on God, who is the metaphysically necessary and ultimate foundation of all reality.<sup>1</sup> Considered in Himself, God is not some kind of material or spiritual thing that *has* being; instead, God is *Subsistent Being Itself*.<sup>2</sup> Everything else we say about the God of classical theism will be consistent with these two points.

In this pdf, we answer two questions through a series of talking points: 1) What is Classical Theism? 2) Why should one hold to this view? Along the way, we will distinguish Classical Theism from other conceptions of God. Talking points (1) through (4) outline several *core tenets* of the position. Talking points (5) through (8) provide *four reasons* one should be a Classical Theist.

### Part 1: What is Classical Theism?

#### 1. God is metaphysically necessary and the ultimate foundation of all reality.

Let's unpack that description. By "metaphysically necessary," we mean that God cannot possibly not exist. He did not begin to exist. He will never go out of existence. He necessarily exists and always will exist. He exists by His very nature.<sup>3</sup> By "ultimate foundation" of reality, we mean that there is no *other* reality responsible for holding God in existence. His existence and action are first in being (not in time) when it comes to any chain of moved movers, contingent beings, contingent explanations, and so forth.

In Classical Theism, the word "God" is used to name *that which is* the answer to why there are any contingent things at all. It also names *that which is* necessary and

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<sup>1</sup> Creatures are really related to God, who they depend on for existence; however, God is not dependent on creatures in any way and therefore God is not really related to creatures. Similarly, a human science such as chemistry is really related to chemicals in the world, which it depends on as an object of study for the science. However, chemicals are not dependent on the human science of chemistry, and therefore are not really related to chemistry. See *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 13, a 7; and I, q. 6, a. 2, ad 1.

<sup>2</sup> "[I]t is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence," *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4. See also *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 4, a 2; q. 11, a. 4, where Thomas describes God as 'Subsistent Being Itself' (*Ipsium Esse Subsistens*).

<sup>3</sup> See [this episode](#) with Dr. Robert A. Delfino for an explanation and defense of the claim that God's essence is not distinct from His existence.

independent of all other realities. As Aquinas argues, “He who is” is the most proper of the names we have for God.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, we don’t think God is some flying spaghetti monster or impressive, invisible superhero.

2. **In addition to being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (perfectly good), God is simple, immutable, and eternal.** Most theists ascribe those omni-attributes to God. Classical theists go further in accepting the whole batch of attributes commonly held by patristic and medieval writers. These famously include absolute divine simplicity, immutability, and eternity.<sup>5</sup>

Absolute divine simplicity refers to the notion that God is *not composed* in any way. He is not composed of parts whether physical or metaphysical. He is an undivided, undifferentiated, absolutely simple reality. This entails that God’s goodness, God’s power, God’s wisdom, and all of His other attributes are truly unified in God himself. Nonetheless, they are still distinct in our finite minds.<sup>6</sup>

Divine immutability refers to the idea that God, in His divine nature, does not change in any way. He does not improve. He cannot get worse. He possesses the plenitude of perfection all at once. Now, many Classical Theists are also Christians who believe Jesus possesses the fullness of divinity.<sup>7</sup> But doesn’t Jesus change, walk around, get hungry and so forth? How can we maintain divine immutability in light of this? A brief answer: When it comes to the Incarnation, all change takes place on the side of Christ’s *human nature* and Christ is immutable with respect to His *divine nature*.<sup>8</sup>

Divine eternity refers to the fact that God exists independently of the created timeline. He is not infinitely old, but rather the creator of space and time itself. Because God exists outside of space and time, He does not grow in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding as He gets older. Indeed, He does not change at all. What we call past, present, and future is known by God in a single eternal moment.

3. **God is not an item in the world, and He is radically different from us.** As mentioned earlier, God is not some kind of material or spiritual thing that *has* being; instead, God is *Subsistent Being Itself*. Many of the categories we use to talk about physical things do not apply at all to God. And some categories only apply to him

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<sup>4</sup> James Rooney explains Aquinas’ claim in [this 2017 paper](#). See also, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 11.

<sup>5</sup> In [this episode](#), Dr. Eleonore Stump provides an explanation of these important attributes.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Brian Carl explains this further in [this episode](#) on the multiplicity of the divine attributes.

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 2:9

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Timothy Pawl discusses this and other related Christological issues in [this episode](#).

*analogously* because God transcends what these categories express when applied to natural things.<sup>9</sup> As such, Classical Theists don't think about all the different kinds of beings and place God at the top of the list, as if God were on the same playing field with them. Instead, God is *radically different* from His creatures. He is the *source of all being of any kind* and all things derive their existence from Him.

4. **The God of classical theism is not built on the model of a human person.** As Dr. Eleonore Stump points out, the term "Classical Theism" is a piece of taxonomy.<sup>10</sup> One way of distinguishing the position from other types of theism is by noting the attributes Classical Theists typically ascribe to God (see points #1 and #2 above). Another way to differentiate the position is by distinguishing *how* theists think about God.

Some theists model God by thinking of Him as similar to a human person. They attempt to strip away human limitations and increase human powers in forming their conception of God. But this is a mistaken approach according to Classical Theism. God is not a very powerful human, or even a super-human being. Instead, as mentioned above, God transcends the categories we apply to natural things, and so it's a mistake to think of God in anthropomorphic ways.

However, just as every effect resembles its cause in some way, humans more than other natural beings resemble God, who is their cause. Humans resemble God more than other natural things because humans are intelligent and free. Although God is not a human person, God is intelligent and free in a higher and perfect way, as compared to humans. As such, it makes sense in Classical Theism to affirm that humans are in the image of God, while also affirming that God radically transcends human nature.

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<sup>9</sup> "Therefore, we hold a doctrine of analogy—viz. that these names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of Him" (*Summa theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 2).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. [this episode](#) of the Classical Theism Podcast.

## Part 2: Why Hold to Classical Theism?

5. **It is the conclusion of various philosophical demonstrations for God's existence.** Arguments from motion, arguments from contingency, and various other theistic arguments arrive at a terminus of motion, explanation and so forth. This *terminus* is what we call God, and from the argumentation we can see that God must be purely actual<sup>11</sup>, metaphysically necessary<sup>12</sup>, and possess the divine attributes<sup>13</sup> previously discussed. So, the God of Classical Theism is not an addendum accepted merely on the basis of Scriptural or Ecclesiastical authority. Rather, this conception of God is the conclusion of rigorous philosophical argumentation worked out over the past 2000 years or so.<sup>14</sup>
6. **Classical theism is enshrined in multiple authoritative councils of the Catholic Church.** Notably, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and First Vatican Council (1870) declared God to be *absolutely simple* and possess the other divine attributes associated with Classical Theism. Moreover, the First Vatican Council describes Him as “ineffably exalted above all things” which echoes our comment that God is *radically different* from all creatures. Of course, the force of this point is limited to those who accept the councils as authoritative. Nonetheless, it's noteworthy that the core tenets of Classical Theism are matters of orthodoxy for Catholic Christians.
7. **It is the best explanation of all the biblical data.** This point is more difficult to argue since it involves exegesis of many Biblical texts where consensus is hard to reach. However, I think the core point is easy to understand. First, the Biblical authors use a wide variety of imagery to describe God. Much of it is anthropomorphic. And, if it is *all* taken literally, the picture of God that one builds will not make sense because the pictures cannot fit together.<sup>15</sup> Second, the Biblical authors also speak of God's *radical otherness* in various ways. Moses learns that God is “I AM WHO I AM,” Isaiah notes that God's thoughts are “higher than our thoughts,” and St. Paul asks rhetorically, “How inscrutable are his ways?”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In [this episode](#), I defend the First Way of Aquinas which arrives at an unactualized actualizer.

<sup>12</sup> In [this episode](#), Dr. Robert A. Delfino defends the Third Way of Aquinas, arriving at a necessary being.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 6 of *Five Proofs for the Existence of God* by Dr. Edward Feser for a full defense of the philosophical arguments for the divine attributes.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 2 of *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* by Fr. Brian Davies for an additional presentation of a contingency argument for the God of Classical Theism.

<sup>15</sup> Davies 2006, pp. 94-95

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 3, Isaiah 55, and Romans 11

So, how do we put together all of this biblical evidence? I contend that the best explanation of these two things, i.e. the varying pictures of God coupled with the transcendent descriptions of God, is that the God of the Bible *is* the God of Classical Theism. Indeed, the Classical Theist tradition through the metaphysical doctrine of analogy has succeeded in preserving God's transcendence with the varied language of scripture.

8. **Classical theism is held by many prominent ancient, medieval, and contemporary philosophers and theologians.** To name some names: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Maimonides, Avicenna, and Averroes all defended aspects of Classical Theism. In our time, Fr. Brian Davies OP, Fr. Herbert McCabe OP (d. 2001), Fr. Thomas Joseph White OP, and Dr. Edward Feser defend the Classical Theistic approach.<sup>17</sup> As far as non-Catholic Christians go, Norm Geisler, a notable evangelical apologist (d. 2019), was a Classical Theist. Among Reformed Christians, Dr. Paul Helm and Dr. James Dolezal reside in the camp of Classical Theism.

So, this reason takes note of the fact that you are in good theological and intellectual company. By reading the work of these philosophers and theologians and pondering their arguments, you may find even more reasons to be a Classical Theist.

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Thanks for reading. This project would be nothing if not for you: my great readers and listeners. May God Bless you and please know that I'm praying for you.

### **Special Thanks!**

I acknowledge Dr. Robert A. Delfino with a special thank you for reading this document thoroughly and providing many helpful suggestions and clarifications.

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<sup>17</sup> There are many more thinkers, but I chose these 4 that directly inspire the [Classical Theism Podcast](#).