

Brian Welter

Dieu existe-t-il? Les preuves de l'existence de Dieu
by Frère Pierre Marie*

A steady stream of books by Catholic writers attempts to counter the errors of modern philosophy. Few of them strike at the heart of the matter and succeed at keeping focused on the essentials as well as *Dieu existe-t-il?* The assertive, critical, and corrective tone supports the book's aim of speaking against the modernist post-conciliar Church. Dominican author, Frère Pierre Marie, who resides at the traditionalist abbey at Avrille, France, discusses the shortcomings of modern philosophy from the vantage of Thomist philosopher Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. (1877–1964). The latter's many books and articles include summaries and commentaries on the works of Thomas Aquinas. Frère Pierre Marie argues that Garrigou-Lagrange, Pope John Paul's doctoral supervisor in the 1940s in Rome, defended the Church against modernism. The strongest part of *Dieu existe-t-il?*, the analysis of modernist philosophies, examines these philosophies' shared underlying foundation. In addition to readers curious about theology and philosophy, *Dieu Existe-t-il?* offers a must-read analysis for apologists of the faith, particularly because of the pithy summaries of the basics behind this philosophical issue.

Brian Welter — Taipei, Taiwan

e-mail: brianteachertaiwan@gmail.com • ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6796-6561>

* Frère Pierre Marie, O.P., *Dieu existe-t-il? Les preuves de l'existence de Dieu* (Editions du Sel, 2020), 94 pages. ISBN: 9782361430795.

The chapters which describe the shortcomings of modern philosophies provide clear definitions and analysis. The author identifies the basic problem: “Modern philosophy is *agnostic*” in that “it believes that human reason is incapable of saying anything with certitude about God.”¹ This one grave fault led to another, and affected even Christian thinkers, many of whom strove thereafter to create a novel path for belief out of human existence rather than from the philosophy of being. Pope Pius X termed the core faults *agnosticism* and *immanentism*, the latter of which aims to “reach God through inner experience.”² Judging this defective, Garrigou-Lagrange asserted, according to the author, that, through his intelligence, “man can know God with *certitude*.”³ Rejecting the possibility of this certitude leads to all sorts of philosophical shortcomings.

Only someone who, for whatever reason, cannot think well adopts agnosticism or atheism. These two viewpoints not only err, but also cause harm and sin. They stem from a lack of sound reasoning and good faith:⁴

Atheism is always a sin, or at least the consequences of sin. Perhaps the atheist has put himself into an intellectual state that no longer permits the comprehension of the demonstration for the existence of God. But he could not have gotten into such a position without being partly at fault. No one can admit an invincible ignorance regarding the existence of God.⁵

Such people must take responsibility for their personal theological failings. In fact, the author suspects that some self-declared atheists actually fail to tell the truth about their beliefs. At first glance, this may not

¹ Pierre Marie, *Dieu existe-t-il?*, 5. Translations are those of the reviewer; italics are always from the original text.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

seem “pastoral” or sensitive to the realities of the atheist or agnostic. However, such confidence and assertiveness in both Garrigou-Lagrange and Frère Pierre Marie add to the credibility of this simple and short book.

The basics are well-presented. Immanentism, represented by Maurice Blondel and Lucien Laberthonnière, rejects certitude about God’s existence through reason alone. Supposing our minds’ insufficiency, the expounders of immanentism turned towards life experience instead of towards “the real.” The opposite error, ontologism, asserts the sufficiency of human intelligence to know God without reason-based demonstration or sensory data. Frère Pierre Marie corrects this, noting that because only God is pure act, we cannot know Him directly.⁶ This implies that we can know God through analogy, which the author defines in a footnote as “a procedure that allows us to know one reality based on another reality which has some resemblance to the first.”⁷ A more detailed discussion on analogy would have greatly aided readers by distinguishing the correct use of analogy, which points to God’s existence, from an incorrect application, which would cast doubt on God’s existence. Interestingly, Frère Pierre Marie adds that St. Thomas rejected St. Anselm’s ontological argument from the *Proslogion*, which demonstrates that even great theologians like St. Anselm struggled to prove that God exists.

The author’s overviews of modern thought reiterate the shared roots for the many schools of philosophy. The rejection of “the philosophy of being which leads to the existence of God”⁸ lies at the heart of modern philosophy. Frère Pierre Marie traces the two potential directions this rejection has led: on the one hand, empiricism and idealism. Idealism, represented by Kant, asserts that “man is not capable of know-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

ing reality with certainty. He only knows appearances or phenomena.”⁹ On the other hand, the philosophy of becoming, represented by Bergson, replaces being with becoming.

As with much of this book, the chapter on phenomenology strongly challenges those who have assumed the potential coexistence of Catholic philosophy and theology with elements of modern philosophy. Frère Pierre Marie calls for a total and complete rejection of modern thought, regardless of its variations, due to its roots in the rejection of the philosophy of being. Likely aware of most theologians’ tendencies to cherry-pick modern thought, the author notes, “In order to demonstrate the existence of God, the Thomistic proof starts from the being of the real in the world that is exterior to man.”¹⁰ The author links phenomenology to modern philosophy’s core rejection: Phenomenologists wrongly assert that “we cannot know being itself, but only the phenomenon.”¹¹ His enumeration of the erroneous teachings of a range of writers shows the ancient lineage of this line of thought: the Epicureans, Sextus Empiricus, William of Ockham, Hobbes, Berkeley, and, above all, Kant and Hume, whose writings he examines more closely. Mindful of the core rejection of being, the author sees phenomenology as not “a return to the real world, but strictly an analysis of the experience of the phenomena emanating from thought.”¹² Husserl’s method does not lead to greater understanding of the essences because the method does not deal with being. Even John Paul II’s personalist project fails. While these conclusions may disappoint many readers, the author’s consistent rejection of modern thought, regardless of its representatives, makes this forceful and coherent reading.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

The rejection of being leads to the collapse of causality, which the author covers well. The author's appeal to common sense highlights the absurdity of idealism: "idealism, in claiming that the laws [of nature] originate in the fact that phenomena find a place under 'categories of our understanding' . . . does not explain why such phenomena always fall under the same category."¹³ Ultimately, the author sees all of modern philosophy as leading to absurdity. But the author does not leave us bereft of an answer. He shows how St. Thomas's discussion of quality and species shows how the intellect can know the exterior world.

The author treats the philosophy of becoming as tenaciously as he does the other troublesome versions of modern philosophy, particularly because of its influence on several Catholic writers including Blondel, Maritain, and Péguy. Frère Pierre Marie implies that the shortcomings of one branch of modern philosophy engenders more troublesome branches because modern thinkers refuse to go back to the source problem. He characterizes Bergson's philosophy as "a reaction against the narrow scientism and positivism of the end of the nineteenth century: there is something else . . . besides matter and its laws."¹⁴ Bergson likewise reacted against the Kantian rejection of philosophical discussion of God and the spiritual.¹⁵

The author makes clear that Bergson's thought amounts to the same old modernist rebellion against the philosophy of being, in his case by replacing being with *pure becoming*. He cites Garrigou-Legrange's identification of the outcome: God becomes a God of becoming, rather than a God of being. This rejects the Biblical *I am Who I am* God of Moses. This world of becoming necessitates a philosophical invention, intuition, which searches for understanding of the higher things. Frère

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Pierre Marie implies the absurdity of this line of thinking. The philosophers of becoming set out their arguments, according to Frère Pierre Marie, as if being and non-being exist simultaneously, which violates the principle of noncontradiction. The author follows Garrigou-Lagrange's reflection on Aristotle regarding the outcome of this violation. The outcome echoes the moral relativism in which we now live: words lose their meaning; things lose their essences; truth comes under relentless attack; and, ironically, in the end the notion of becoming fails. This rings powerfully and convincingly true for the contemporary western reader. The author links the historical appearances of the philosophy of becoming with historical periods suffering from a "crisis of intelligence"¹⁶—much like our own—though the author does not go off track to address current cultural or political issues despite their relevance to his argument. He lets readers make their own connections. His discussion of the Aristotelian philosophy of act and potency clarifies much of the problem.

The author addresses two common reasons to deny God: evil and the perceived lack of a need for a creator. The author bases this part on the Vatican II schema's discussion on the deposit of the faith, which outlines St. Thomas's proof for the existence of God. Much of the discussion turns on the issue of cause, which briefly brings the author back to Kant: "For the philosopher of Königsberg, I see that one event follows another, but it is my spirit that classifies the two events in such a way that the first event is the cause and the second the effect. Causality [for Kant] is a 'category' of my spirit,"¹⁷ and nothing more. Such references to previously-discussed philosophy not only add cohesion but reinforce the argument by juxtaposing bad thinking with good.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

Alternative philosophies are, frankly, absurd for this author and call for a review of basic Thomistic proofs for God's existence. The introduction through the Vatican II schema provides a novel perspective. These basics provide powerful proofs for God's existence, such as the following:

If we admit that movement is the passage from potency to act, we can see that nothing can give itself movement. For to suppose that would be to suppose that we could give to ourselves a perfection, which is to say an act, that we do not possess because we are in the state of potency.¹⁸

However, readers curious for a deeper analysis of act and potency or other causality-related issues will have to go elsewhere, given such a short, to-the-point book.

By the end, readers have a very clear idea of why modern philosophy leads to the rejection of God, and how we can fix this error—by refuting modern philosophy and its rejection of being. The slim size of this book eases readers' understanding of the argument by presenting the most significant points, which will help them better discern the many faults of modern thought and provide more convincing counter-arguments. It is a challenging introduction to the basics of Thomistic thought and also a powerful apologetic resource for well-versed Thomists.



¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

Dieu existe-t-il? Les preuves de l'existence de Dieu
by Frère Pierre Marie

SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Frère Pierre Marie, O.P., *Dieu existe-t-il? Les preuves de l'existence de Dieu* (Editions du Sel, 2020). The author highlights that Frère Pierre Marie's book (1) describes the shortcomings of modern philosophies, and (2) can serve as both a challenging introduction to the basics of Thomistic thought and a powerful apologetic resource for well-versed Thomists.

KEYWORDS

God, modern philosophy, atheism, agnosticism, immanentism, phenomenology, idealism, philosophy of becoming, philosophy of being, Thomism.

REFERENCES

Frère Pierre Marie, O.P. *Dieu existe-t-il? Les preuves de l'existence de Dieu*. Editions du Sel, 2020.