

# The Harmony of Faith and Reason

## Thomas Aquinas

Born in Italy, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) was a Dominican friar who taught theology at the University of Paris. Along with St. Augustine, he is considered one of the most prominent thinkers of the Medieval period. His two most important works are *The Summa Theologica* and the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. His main goal was to show the harmony between faith and reason through a Christian interpretation of the philosophy of Aristotle.

### How we Know Truths About God

There are two different ways in which truths about God are known. Some truths about God are beyond the limits of human reason—for example, the triune (three-in-one) nature of God. But there are some truths about God that even human reason can come to know, such as the existence and unity of God, which philosophers have been able to prove conclusively, using the light of natural reason.

That are certain truths about God that are altogether beyond the scope of human reason seems absolutely to be the case . . . Human understanding [for example] by its own natural power is not able to grasp [the divine] substance. Since in the present life . . . our understanding depends upon the senses, those things beyond the senses cannot be grasped by the human understanding unless knowledge of them is grasped through the senses. But things of sense cannot lead our understanding to grasp [the divine essence] inasmuch as they are effects falling short of the power that caused them.

Nevertheless, beginning with sensible things, our understanding can be led to some knowledge of God—namely, that he exists and other attributes that must necessarily be attributed to the First Cause. There are, therefore, some truths about God accessible to human reason, while others completely transcend the power of human reason . . .

### The Disadvantages of Knowing God Solely Through Reason

If [truths concerning God's] nature were left to the sole domain of reason,

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three disadvantages would follow.

One is that the knowledge of God would be confined to few. The discovery of truth is the fruit of studious inquiry. From this very many are hindered. Some are hindered by a constitutional unfitnes, their natures being ill-disposed to the acquisition of knowledge. They could never arrive by study to the highest grade of human knowledge, which consists in the knowledge of God. Others are hindered by the needs of business and the ties of the management of property. There must be in human society some men devoted to temporal affairs. These could not possibly spend time enough in the learned lessons of speculative inquiry to arrive at the highest point of human inquiry, the knowledge of God. Some again are hindered by sloth. The knowledge of the truths that reason can investigate concerning God presupposes much previous knowledge. Indeed, almost the entire study of philosophy is directed to the knowledge of God. Hence, of all parts of philosophy, that part stands over to be learnt last, which consists of metaphysics dealing with points of Divinity. Thus, only with great labor of study is it possible to arrive at the searching out of the aforesaid truth; and this labor few are willing to undergo for sheer love of knowledge.

Another disadvantage is that those who did arrive at the knowledge or discovery of the aforesaid truth would take a long time to reach it. This is so for several reasons. There is the profundity of such truth, and the many prerequisites to the study. Then there is the fact that in youth and early adulthood, the soul, tossed here and there on the waves of passion, is not fit for the study of such high truth. Only in settled age does the soul become prudent and scientific, as the Philosopher says. Thus, if the only way open to the knowledge of God were the way of reason, the human race would dwell long in thick darkness of ignorance. For then the knowledge of God, which is the best instrument for making men perfect and good, would be possessed only by a few, and to those few after a great deal of time.

A third disadvantage is that, because of the weaknesses of our intellect and the disturbing force of imagination, there is some amount of error in most of the investigations of human reason. This would be a reason to many for continuing to doubt even of the most accurate demonstrations . . . Besides, there is sometimes an element of error mixed within those truths that are asserted through some plausible, yet [dubious] arguments that are taken for proper demonstration. And therefore it was necessary for the real truth concerning divine things to be presented to men with fixed certainty by way of faith.

It was beneficial, therefore, that divine mercy instructed us to hold by faith even those things that reason is able to investigate. In this way, all might come to knowledge of God without doubt and error.

## **That Truths Beyond Reason Are Fittingly Proposed to Human Beings for Belief**

Some may think that man should not be asked to believe what he is not able to investigate [through use of his own reason], since Divine Wisdom provides for every being according to the measure of its nature. therefore we must show that it is necessary for man to receive from God for his belief even objects that transcend his reason.

One proof is this. No one strives with any earnestness of desire after anything, unless it is known to him already. But as we shall show later in this work, Divine Providence directs men to a higher good than human frailty can experience in the present life. Therefore it is necessary that the mental faculties be called to something higher than our reason can attain at present, so that it might learn something that can be reached here and now. And such is the special function of the Christian religion, which stands alone in its promise of spiritual and eternal goods. The Old Law, on the other hand, carrying temporal promises, contained very few tenets that transcended the enquiry of human reason. . . .

Another advantage derived from this is the curbing of presumption, which is the mother of error. For there are some so presumptuous of their own genius as to think that they can measure with their understanding the whole nature of the Godhead. They believe all that to be true which seems true to them and all to be false which does not seem true to them. In order then that the human mind might be delivered from this presumption and attain to a modest style of inquiry after truth, it was necessary for certain things to be proposed to man from God that altogether exceeded his understanding.

There is also another evident advantage in this, that any knowledge, however imperfect, of the noblest objects confers a very high perfection on the soul. And therefore, though human reason cannot fully grasp truths above reason, nevertheless it is much perfected by holding such truths after some fashion at least by faith.

## **It is Not Foolish to Give Assent to Truths of Faith, Even Though They are Above Reason**

The Divine Wisdom, that knows all things most fully, has deigned to reveal these her secrets to men. In proof of them it has displayed works beyond the competence of all natural powers—in the wonderful cure of diseases, in the raising of the dead. And it has shown itself more wonderfully still in such inspiration of human minds as that simple and ignorant persons,

filled with the gift of the Holy Ghost, have gained in an instant the height of wisdom and eloquence.

By the force of such a proof as this, without violence of arms, without promise of pleasures, and, most wonderful thing of all, in the midst of the violence of persecutors, a countless multitude, not only of the uneducated but of the wisest men, flocked to the Christian faith. In this faith, doctrines are preached that transcend all human understanding, pleasures of sense are restrained, and a contempt is taught of all worldly possessions. That mortal minds should assent to such teaching is the greatest of miracles, and a manifest work of divine inspiration leading men to despise the visible and desire only invisible goods. Nor did this happen suddenly nor by chance, but by a divine disposition, as is evident from the fact that God foretold by many oracles of his prophets that he intended to do this. The books of those prophets are still venerated amongst us, as bearing testimony to our faith . . .

This wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian faith is a clear witness of signs given in the past, and they need no further reiteration, since they appear evidently in their effects. It would be more wonderful than all other miracles, if without miraculous signs the world had been induced by simple and low-born men to believe truths so lofty, to do works so difficult, to hope for reward so high. And yet even in our times God ceases not through his saints to work miracles for the confirmation of the faith.

### **That the Truth of Reason is not Contrary to the Truth of the Christian Faith**

Although the truths of the Christian faith, as we have seen, surpasses the power of reason, that truth [attained by] human reason cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith . . .

Whatever is put into the disciple's mind by the teacher is contained in the knowledge of the teacher, unless the teacher is teaching dishonestly, which would be a wicked thing to say of God. But the knowledge of principles naturally known is put into us by God, seeing that God Himself is the author of our nature. Therefore these principles also are contained in the Divine Wisdom. Whatever therefore is contrary to these principles is contrary to Divine Wisdom and cannot be of God.

Again, in the presence of contrary arguments our intellect is chained, so that it cannot proceed to the knowledge of the truth. If therefore contrary arguments were sent to us by God, our intellect would be hindered from knowledge of the truth. But such hindrance cannot come from God.

What is natural cannot be changed while nature remains. But contrary opinions cannot be in the same mind at the same time: therefore no opinion

or belief is sent to man from God contrary to natural knowledge . . .

Hence the conclusion is evident, that any arguments brought forth against the teachings of faith do not proceed logically from first principles of nature . . . Such conclusions do not carry with them the force of demonstration and are either probable reasons or sophistical. And so there exists the possibility of refuting them.