

Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*

Chapter 101 - Of Miracles

Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* is one of the most well-known treatises ever written. It is also one of the most authoritative apologetic works in the Western Church; it has formed and outlined philosophical and theological exploration for hundreds of years. *Summa Contra Gentiles* strives to demonstrate the truth of the Christian religion by putting forward a defence of Christian beliefs from the viewpoint of faith and reason. By doing this, Aquinas aids in establishing the approach, purpose and grounding for philosophy and theology. The work was also known as the 'Book on the truth of the Catholic faith against the errors of the unbelievers'.

Thomas Aquinas, the author, was an Italian Priest, theologian and prominent philosopher. He was born in 1225 in Sicily and died March 7, 1274, in Fossanova, Papal States. His parents were Landolph, count of Aquino, and Theodora, countess of Teano. Aquinas was the youngest of eight children, and his family were regarded as lower nobility. From the age of 13 to 18, he lived at a Benedictine house in Naples to complete his primary education. During this time, he developed a keen interest in modern monastic orders, especially those that highlighted a life of spiritual service.¹

He was the father of a school of thought called Thomism. He greatly supported Aristotle's ideas and endeavoured to incorporate Aristotelianism with the ideology of Christianity. The Catholic church made him a Doctor of the Church, and is regarded as one of the Catholic Church's most eminent philosophers and theologians. Along with *Summa Contra Gentiles*, his most well-known works include *Summa Theologica*, commentaries on Catholic scripture, and his eucharistic hymns.²

Aquinas would create around 130,000 pages of manuscripts in his lifetime, commenting on various subjects such as theology, philosophy, the justice system, and life science. Many scholars argue that *Summa Contra Gentiles* is the best example of Aquinas' work.

¹ Biography, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (2021) <<https://www.biography.com/religious-figure/saint-thomas-aquinas>> [accessed 28th April 2023]

² Nathan Huffine, *World History Encyclopaedia* (2021) <https://www.worldhistory.org/Thomas_Aquinas/> [accessed 26th April 2023]

Aquinas wrote *Summa Contra Gentiles* in Italy starting in 1258 and concluding in 1264. He wrote it at the wishes of St Raymond of Pennafort. While this treatise was composed in Italy, it is believed that:
‘The substance of it was got together during the Saint’s second residence at Paris, and formed the staple of his lectures in the university.’³

Summa Contra Gentiles is separated into four books. In the first three books, Aquinas sets out a defence of the Christian religion from the viewpoint of natural theology. This was the common ground for Christians and atheists. These three books incorporate arguments supporting the existence of God, views of morals and ethics, and other assertions on God and the world which can be derived from the power of reason. Each component details and defends God’s omniscient knowledge, power in creation, and the reason and contentment of all things in God.

This book is in a very rare situation as it is a classic where the manuscript still survives today. The manuscript is housed in the Vatican Library, one of the oldest libraries in the world. The manuscript comprises of long pieces of parchment of varied colouring, held within a decrepit parchment covering, in which it was initially stitched. The writing layout is double columns ‘minute and difficult to decipher, abounding in abbreviations, often passing into a kind of shorthand.’⁴ Many portions of the manuscript are crossed out; in an attempt to erase sections of the writing. However, these sections are still clear and readable, appearing as footnotes in the propaganda press version.⁵

The work intended to persuade atheists of catholicism’s intrinsic logical and rational nature.

‘First are set forth those truths than can be discovered by reason alone, then higher truths, beginning with morality, and finally the great mysteries, which though not provable by reason are shown to be consistent with reason and remarkably intelligible.’⁶

³ Joseph Rickaby, *Of God and his Creatures of the Summa Contra Gentiles of ST. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005) p.5.

⁴ Joseph Rickaby, *Of God and his Creatures*. p.6.

⁵ Joseph Rickaby, *Of God and his Creatures*. p.6.

⁶ Catholic Culture, *Catholic Dictionary* (2023) <<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=36701>> [accessed 26th April 2023]

It aimed to explain and defend God's presence and essence without citing the Bible's authority. The audience for this treatise was not other Christians but rather atheists, Jews, Muslims, and heretics.

In this extract, Aquinas explains what a miracle is and why people believe in miracles. He deems miracles as something completely extraordinary happening, which the cause of it being completely hidden. Aquinas asserts that miracles must involve God as that is the only cause that is completely hidden and that God will always be hidden as no one can mentally comprehend the essence of God. He puts forward that people call things miracles when they are just something they do not know about or understand. The example Aquinas uses is of an average person looking at the sky and seeing something miraculous, while an astronomer would see the same thing in the sky and know it was an eclipse. It is the lack of knowing that makes people consider it a miracle.⁷

Aquinas lays out his belief that there are ranks of miracles. The first and highest rank are acts done by God that nature is incapable of. The second rank is the acts God and nature can achieve; however, not in that sequence. An animal that breathes, walks, and sees is a miracle of nature; however, an animal that lives after death, regains sight after blindness and walks after going lame is a miracle that only God can perform. The third rank is acts done by God that would usually be done by nature, such as a person being cured of a fever by the power of God.⁸

Summa Contra Gentiles is a lot more philosophical than *Summa Theologica*, as Aquinas intended, and more likely to be interesting to atheists and people of other religions. *Summa Contra Gentiles* is less well-known than his later work, *Summa Theologica*, written between 1265 to 1273. It is thought this is because *Summa Theologica* is more broadly utilised in church dogmatics. *Summa Contra Gentiles* is structurally simpler, and due to that, the work is more readable. This work is less doctrinal regarding style and does not construct his arguments on a preceding acceptance of scripture as authoritative.

⁷ Joseph Rickaby, *Of God and his Creatures*. p.476.

⁸ Joseph Rickaby, *Of God and his Creatures*. p.476.

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