

UNIT 2

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: REVEALED AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

1. The Problem of Knowing God

We know different things in different ways. I know this computer by seeing and touching it, and also by learning how to use it. I know 'justice' in a far more complicated way, namely by learning from my parents, culture and religion about the kinds of actions or communities which are just rather than corrupt or persecutory.

At the most general level, we learn from particular things (*this* computer, *that* person, *this* event) about things in general, or what philosophers call 'universals' (computers in general, or people, or certain kinds of event). We do this by a process which medieval theologians called 'abstraction'. When presented with a particular thing (*this* computer), we 'abstract' certain qualities or characteristics (it has a screen and a keyboard) and apply these things generally to arrive at a *general* idea of what kind of thing a computer might be – an object with a screen and a keyboard which one can use to write modules in theology. Thus I know the computer because I can classify it within the general category 'computer' – I know it as a certain kind of thing. Similarly, I know the blackbird on the lawn outside because I can abstract from it particular qualities (it has wings and eats worms) and apply these generally to arrive at the species 'bird' within the genus 'animal'.

Crucially, knowing things in this way requires them to be **composed** of different qualities, characteristics or parts. For example, people are composed of arms, legs, a head, a mind, their experiences and knowledge, an ability to speak, and so on. We can take these elements from any particular person and apply them to people in general, and so arrive at a knowledge of 'people'. But none of these characteristics wholly constitutes a person. Someone might lack one or more of these qualities and still be a person. For example, I might lose a leg, but I would still be a person. So having legs is not essential to being a person, even though the vast majority of people have legs. I might even suffer from amnesia and lose my memory, but any reasonable society would still regard me as a person.

Philosophers and theologians have expressed these ideas by saying that all created things are composed of parts. They are thus **complex**. According to Thomas Aquinas and many of his contemporaries and successors, at a very fundamental level *all* created things are composed of **essence** (what they are in themselves) and **existence** (that they exist). I have an essence (what makes me fundamentally who I am – my body, experiences and knowledge, for example),

and in addition to this I have my existence. My existence is **not** part of my essence, because it is not one of my essential or defining characteristics to exist – I might not exist. Nothing about me is enough to ensure my existence. This is why, in order to explain my existence, it is necessary to search for something fully and necessarily existent, namely God. In fact, it is not of the essence of anything created that it exists.

According to Aquinas (and his view is more detailed and tightly argued than my presentation), God is wholly different to creation because he is *not* composed of essence and existence. In fact, God is not composed of anything at all because God, being perfect, is wholly **simple**. It is of God's essence to exist, so God's essence and existence are one and the same thing. The Latin phrase for this view of God which you may often see quoted is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*: self-subsistent being, or being itself.

Let's think a little bit more about what it means for God to be simple. When we talk of God's goodness, mercy or truth, these are not separate things in God which are, as it were, 'bolted on to him'. They are not characteristics or skills he has acquired or with which he could dispense. There is nothing superfluous or inessential in God: he is, in this respect, replete and perfect. So God's goodness, mercy and truth *are* God; they are his essence. When we talk of these things separately, we only do so *from our point of view*. Within God himself, all these things – God's mercy, truth and goodness – are one. God, therefore, is one.

This difference between finite, created things and God is what theologians sometimes call 'the ontological difference'. 'Ontology' is the study of 'being', namely, of what things ultimately are. By claiming that there is an 'ontological difference' between God and creation, theologians such as Aquinas are claiming that God's being is different to our being. Whereas some theologians have taught that God's being is essentially the same as ours, only infinitely greater, Aquinas teaches that there is a fundamental *difference* between creation and its creator. That difference is, at its most fundamental level, as follows: it is God's essence to exist (essence and existence are one in God), whereas it is not of the essence of anything created that it exists (created things might not exist). Whereas our being is complex (fundamentally a mixture of essence and existence), God is wholly simple.¹

This is what Aquinas says on the matter:

¹ Note that it is not quite accurate to talk of 'God's being' or 'God's existence', as if his being or existence were something he possessed. God *IS* being.

Some things are of a nature that cannot exist except as instantiated in individual matter – all bodies are of this kind. This is one way of being. There are other things whose natures are instantiated by themselves and not by being in matter. These have existence simply by being the natures they are: yet existence is still something they have, it is not what they are – the incorporeal beings we call angels are of this kind. Finally, there is the way of being that belongs to God alone, for his existence is what he is. (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, question 12, article 4)

A further very well known expression of the doctrine of divine simplicity comes from Augustine of Hippo:

The reason why a nature is called simple is that it cannot lose any attribute it possesses, that there is no difference between what it is and what it has, as there is, for example, between a vessel and the liquid it contains, a body and its colour, the atmosphere and its light or heat, the soul and its wisdom. None of these is what it contains; the vessel is not the liquid, nor the body the colour, not the atmosphere the light or heat; nor is the soul the same as wisdom...Further, the soul itself, even though it may be always wise – as it will be, when it is set free for all eternity – will be wise through participation in the changeless Wisdom, which is other than itself. For even if the atmosphere were never bereft of the light which is shed on it, there would still be the difference between its being and the light by which it is illuminated...Accordingly, the epithet 'simple' applies to things which are in the fullest and truest sense divine, because in them there is not difference between substance and quality.'

(St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, XI.10)

The 'ontological difference' between God and creation means that we cannot know God in the same way that we know created things or concepts. Why not? Remember that we know created things by classifying them into groups (genus and species) because they are 'types of thing'. For example, I know this desk as a particular type of desk and, more generally, as a type of office furniture. We classify particular things into these groups by abstracting and generalising their qualities. But God is *not* a type of thing. He belongs to no general class and has no qualities which we might abstract from his essence, because God does not have qualities 'bolted on to him': God *is* his qualities. So, however we might know God, we cannot know God in the same way that we know finite created things. Yet our minds are orientated towards knowing about finite created things because our minds are themselves finite and created. We find it easier to know finite created things because they are like us in being created. But God is not like us. In other words, God is not an infinitely great version of a human being. So how can we know anything about God?

2. God as Known in Creation

Many theologians, particularly the medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327/8) and Julian of Norwich (c.1342-after 1416), believed that God is beyond our knowledge and is not encountered positively, but only encountered as wholly other than us. This theology is known as 'negative theology' or 'apophatic theology' (from the Greek word '*apophatikos*' meaning 'negative'). It is known as 'negative theology' because such an approach claims that God can only be known negatively – namely as *not* like anything created. For example, such an approach would claim that God is *unknowable*. Thomas Aquinas has certain sympathies with this view. He is often described as 'agnostic' concerning God, meaning not that he wavers concerning God's existence, but rather that he believes that we cannot fully know 'God in himself'.

However, Aquinas does believe that there are ways in which we can come to know something of God, even if that knowledge is mediated through other things. In particular, Aquinas believes that, because effects resemble their causes, we can know something about God. What does this mean?

We all know that cows are born from cows and human beings produce other human beings. We also know that children often look like their parents. Parents are, in a sense, the cause of their children. Children, the effect, resemble their parents, the cause. But Aquinas also claims that paintings resemble painters, and bread resembles a baker. How? Surely this is not simply a resemblance based on appearance. After all, paintings do not generally *look* like painters! What Aquinas has in mind is that paintings resemble painters because paintings show the skill and desire to paint which is inherent within the painter. Similarly, bread resembles a baker because bread shows the baker's tendency and skill to bake.

Likewise, creation (the effect) resembles God (the cause). How? At a basic level, creation reveals God's creative power. From the very fact that there is a contingent universe at all, we know that God is creator. So, already, based on the general principle that effects resemble their causes, we know something about God: he creates.

However, a word of caution. We might be tempted to think that God belongs within the category of creative things. In other words, we might think that God creates things in rather the same way that we create things, and that we might therefore know God in this fashion. We will discuss the notion of God as creator in a later Unit, but for the moment we should note that the Christian tradition is clear that God is not a creator in the same way that we are creators. For example, God creates out of nothing, whereas we create out of pre-existent material. There

is no 'before and after' to God's creation (for he creates time itself), whereas there is a distinct 'before and after' to human creations.

All these differences between God the creator and human creators must make us wary concerning what we can truly know of God in himself. God's creative power is mysterious. We are creators only 'after a fashion' or 'so-to-speak' because we participate in God's primal creative power. After all, in anything we make or create, we always use material which God first created from nothing.

The knowledge of God which we gain in this way – i.e. from our observation of created or natural things and the deployment of natural categories – is sometimes called **natural theology**. Natural theology is usually defined as that knowledge of God which can be obtained without reference to his revelation. It is knowledge of God obtained by reference to natural categories which we deploy by human reason. Natural theology is therefore usually identified with the use of reason as a tool of theological enquiry. By contrast, some theologians refer to **revealed theology**, by which they mean that knowledge of God which he reveals to us and which we are not capable of attaining by our own power. An example of revealed theology would be the doctrine of the Trinity. Revealed theology is usually associated with faith. So the distinction between natural theology and revealed theology mirrors a supposed distinction between reason (natural theology) and faith (revealed theology).

Many objections have been made to natural theology. However, in what follows we will challenge not natural theology itself, but rather the very basis of the distinction between natural and revealed theology.

3. Natural and Revealed Theology: a legitimate distinction?

The distinction between natural theology (knowledge of God gleaned from nature or creation by human reason) and revealed theology (knowledge of God given in revelation) is very recent, originating around the eighteenth century.

Thomas Aquinas is often thought to maintain a distinction between natural and revealed theology, and a number of theologians freely refer to Aquinas's 'natural theology'. However, if Aquinas is to have a distinct natural theology, that is, a theology which is separate from God's self-revelation, then does this not imply that there is also a distinct set of knowledge called revelation which is wholly separate from our knowledge of God which comes from reasoning about creation?

Aquinas, and many pre-modern theologians, do not think of revelation in quite this way. Of all the many and various theological and philosophical themes which

Aquinas addresses in his writings, he never writes a treatise entitled *De Revelatione* ('On Revelation').² Why not? Because he does not think of revelation as a specific and clearly delineated set of information which God delivers. In the same way, Aquinas does not write a treatise *De Homine* ('On Humankind') because this is too broad and amorphous an area for single consideration. The topic of 'mankind' is treated within and through other more clearly delineated themes. So too with revelation.

Within modernity, revelation tends to be thought of as bits of data (or 'cognitive propositions', to use Lindbeck's phrase) which God gives to us. As well as receiving these bits of data, we might apparently seek God by our own intellectual endeavours by examining his handiwork in nature (natural theology). Yet Aquinas tacitly suggests a different way of thinking about revelation. Rather than thinking of revelation as bits of data, let us think of revelation as a way of seeing things. On this view, all things, because they are created by God, *in some way* reveal God. The tree outside declares its creator. So nature is a network of signs which point us to God. Rather than simply considering the tree in itself, we might look beyond the tree in its beauty to 'see' the creative power and beauty which brought the tree to existence. Now, some of these 'signs' which point to God are more transparent than others. According to the Christian tradition, the most transparent of all signs is Jesus Christ, because in Jesus the sign and the signified are one: Jesus Christ *is* both fully human and God incarnate, and therefore the clearest and most transparent revelation of God in himself. In the light of the revelation in Christ, we learn to 'see' all things rather differently. In particular, we see things as orientated towards a final end which, without the light of divine illumination, we would not be able to perceive.

So how might a thinker like Aquinas understand the relationship between revealed knowledge of God (faith) and natural knowledge of God (reason)? This is a very complex question, but here is some sense of a reply. In the thirteenth century University of Paris, where Aquinas spent a good deal of his working life, a debate raged about the appropriateness of utilising the philosophy contained within the newly translated works of Aristotle in explaining Christian doctrine. One might describe some of Aristotle's work as a form of natural theology when he is considering God as the first cause of all things. Some believed that Aristotle, being a pagan, could not be the vessel of truth, for truth lies only within the Christian revelation. Moreover, it was known that some of Aristotle's views, particularly his claim that the world lacks a beginning, contradicted the scriptures. For Aquinas, God illuminates to some degree all human minds.

² This observation and its implications are outlined in John Montag, 'Revelation: The False Legacy of Suarez' in J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (eds) (1999), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge), pp.38-63.

Illumination occurs most brilliantly and salvifically through the life of Christ, and this is contained within the Church's holy teaching (*sacra doctrina*). But this is not to say that divine truth is not present in some measure, however dim, in all human intellectual enterprise to the extent that it participates in God's own knowledge. Aquinas recognises a measure of divine truth in both Aristotle and Plato. He therefore puts this pagan philosophy to the service of holy teaching (*sacra doctrina*) and revelation contained therein, not because there is something deficient in the Church's holy teaching, but because philosophy, having its origins within our finitude, can help our clouded minds 'see' more clearly the knowledge of God.³ Meanwhile, it is always important to remember that as God reveals himself a veil is not lifted from God; the veil is lifted from human eyes.

Perhaps the central key point is that, for Aquinas, there is no threshold to which we can point and say 'that is where reason ends and revelation begins'. There is a revelation, but it is not defined by the *absence* of reason. Likewise, there is a legitimate human reason, but it is not defined by the *absence* of God's salvific self-declaration. Faith and reason are always, to some degree, intertwined within Christian theology.

Therefore, the distinction between knowledge of God which comes by revelation and knowledge of God which comes by nature or reason might not be quite as hard and fast as some textbooks assume. To some degree, all created things reveal their creator and, at least for theologians who follow the proposals latent in Aquinas's work, revelation is not a discrete set of self-contained knowledge which is independent or simply attached to the knowledge of God we attain by looking at creation. After all, the revelation of God in Christ, because Christ is incarnate as a human being, will use *natural* categories (i.e. refer to the crucifixion of a human body, the sharing of bread and wine, the healing of the sick, and so on).

One modern opponent of natural theology is Karl Barth (note: pronounced 'Bart', as in 'Simpson'), the great twentieth century German Protestant systematic theologian. Barth's position is outlined in the reading suggested for this Unit, and some notes commenting on the reading can also be found in this Unit.

You will encounter many 'models' of revelation as you work through the further reading at the end of this unit.

³ Colin Gunton (p.16) claims that, for Aquinas, the existence of God 'had to be established prior to the specific faith of the church, as part of a common structure of human belief in God.' This implies that Aquinas thought that the existence of God needs to be established before reference can be made to faith or revelation. Some would suggest that Gunton's comment is highly contestable.