

THE PROBLEM OF THOMISTIC FOUNDATIONS FOR APOLOGETICS

Classical? OR

Classically *Reformed*?

THOMAS AQUINAS

Now in those things which we hold about God there is truth in two ways (*duplex veritatis modus*). For certain things that are true about God wholly surpass the capability of human reason, for instance that God is three and one: while there are certain things to which even natural reason can attain, for instance that God is, that God is one, and others like these, which even the philosophers proved demonstratively of God, being guided by the light of natural reason.

"WHETHER GOD CAN BE KNOWN IN THIS LIFE BY NATURAL REASON?"

It is written (Rom. 1:19), *That which is known of God, namely, what can be known of God by natural reason, is manifest in them.*

Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God; because the sensible effects of God do not equal the power of God as their cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God *whether He exists*, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him.

Three things lead us to believe in Christ. First of all, natural reason: "Since the creation of the world the invisible things of God are clearly known by the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20)...

The intellect which is given in us for our direction, and which is called natural reason, is said here to be a light given us by God.

However, if we bear in mind these distinctions and take “world” from the standpoint of its creation, and “enlighten” as referring to the light of natural reason, the statement of the Evangelist is beyond reproach. For all men coming into this visible world are enlightened by the light of natural knowledge through participating in this true light, which is the source of all the light of natural knowledge participated in by men.

THIRD CATEGORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Now there is a threefold knowledge of God. One knowledge is that by which he is known only in his effects, as if, insofar as someone knows being or something created, he has some sort of knowledge of God the creator and his creation of it, [namely an implicit knowledge]; and this knowledge is in all men naturally and from the beginning. Another knowledge is that by which God is considered in himself yet nevertheless is known through his effects, insofar as someone proceeds from the knowledge of his effects to the knowledge of God himself. And this can be had through the inquiry of natural reason, although not immediately. And it was thus that the philosophers and other wise men arrived at knowledge of God, to the extent that it is possible to attain it. The third knowledge is that by which he is known in himself and in those things that exceed all proportion to his effects. And this knowledge is neither naturally in men, nor had through the inquiry of natural reason, but had through an infused supernatural light.

For man knows God naturally in the same way as he desires Him naturally. Now man desires Him naturally in so far as he naturally desires happiness, which is a likeness of the divine goodness. *Hence it does not follow that God considered in Himself is naturally known to man*, but that His likeness is. Wherefore man must needs come by reasoning to know God in the likenesses to Him which he discovers in God's effects.

THREE “KINDS” OF KNOWLEDGE

- (1).The first is obscure and indirect.
- (2).The second, more prominent, mode of creaturely knowledge is that which is gained through demonstration by way of our "natural reason."
- (3).Third, there is knowledge that comes by revelation.

THE PROBLEM OF SELF-EVIDENCE

"Whether the Existence of God is Self-Evident?"

I answer that, A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways; on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject, as "Man is an animal," for animal is contained in the essence of man. *If, therefore the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all (per se nota), the proposition will be self-evident to all;* as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and such like. If, however, there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and subject is unknown, the proposition will be self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition. Therefore, it happens, as Boëthius says (*Hebdom.*, the title of which is: "Whether all that is, is good"), "that there are some mental concepts self-evident only to the learned, as that incorporeal substances are not in space." Therefore I say that this proposition, "God exists," of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject; because God is His own existence as will be hereafter shown (Q. III., A. 4). Now because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature—namely, by effects.

SELF-EVIDENCE (CONT.)

For it is simply self-evident that God is, because the selfsame thing which God is, is His existence. But since we are unable to conceive mentally the selfsame thing which is God, that thing remains unknown in regard to us.

...man desires Him naturally in so far as he naturally desires happiness, which is a likeness of the divine goodness. Hence it does not follow that God considered in Himself is naturally known to man, but that His likeness is. Wherefore man must needs come by reasoning to know God in the likenesses to Him which he discovers in God's effects.

THE “LIGHT OF REASON”? (JOHN 1:9)

However, if we bear in mind these distinctions and take “world” from the standpoint of its creation, and “enlighten” as referring to the light of natural reason, the statement of the Evangelist is beyond reproach. For all men coming into this visible world are enlightened by the light of natural knowledge through participating in this true light, which is the source of all the light of natural knowledge participated in by men.

HOW SHALL WE UNDERSTAND THE RELATIVE CLAUSE IN VERSE 9 (I.E., "...WHICH ENLIGHTENS EVERYONE...")

As the "true light," Jesus is here presented as the source of (spiritual) light. That light enlightens every person. ...The present verse does not suggest universalism — the ultimate salvation of every person — for John does not speak of internal illumination in the sense of general revelation..., but of external illumination in the sense of objective revelation requiring a response. (Köstenberger)

Because of [Jesus'] uniqueness, it is also true of this light that it "enlightens every person" (cf. vs. 4b). This statement describes the light in its fullness and universality. It does not say that every individual is in fact enlightened by the light (cf. vss. 5, 10f.) but that by its coming into the world the light is *for every human being* that by which alone he or she can live. (Ridderbos)

VOS

"...clearly passes beyond the sphere of objective potentiality into that of subjective effectuation."

"In other words, the purpose of the relative clause may well be to *identify* the redemptive light with the cosmical light."

If it be objected that such a specific reference to the φωτίζειν [enlightens] to natural revelation would have to be indicated in some way in order to be understood, we answer, that it is sufficiently indicated by the object πάντα ἄνθρωπον [everyone]. A light of which it is said that it enlightens every man, is thereby clearly enough characterized as the general light which is common to the world as such.

"Here the Logos-revelation is actually mediated through the subjective life which man in dependence on the Logos possesses. The life here naturally produces the light. The meaning here is...that the life which man receives carries in itself and of itself kindles in him, *the light of the knowledge of God.*"

THOMAS ON JOHN OF DAMASCUS

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God is self-evident. Now those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which is naturally implanted in us, as we can see in regard to first principles. But as Damascene says (*De Fid. Orth.* i. 1, 3), *the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all.* Therefore the existence of God is self-evident.

Reply Obj. 1. To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for many there are who imagine that man's perfect good which is happiness, consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.