

The Roman Catholic Church ranks Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) as the greatest of all theologians. Even though 13th century opponents viewed Aquinas as a dangerous innovator, the 16th century Church relied upon his works to draft decrees for the highly important Council of Trent, and a 19th century pope declared Thomism (Aquinas's theology) to be eternally valid. Like other scholastic theologians, Aquinas used human reason, or philosophy, to explore questions of religious faith, or theology. Aquinas took the position that right thinking never conflicts with true religion, and in his magnum opus, *Summa Theologiae*, he created what many consider a compelling synthesis between reason and faith. In order to achieve this synthesis, Aquinas combined Catholic Church teachings with the ideas and methods of the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle.

The best-known part of the *Summa* does not pertain specifically to Christianity but rather to the more general question of whether "God" exists. Aquinas held that virtually any person, no matter where he or she is living, could perceive the truth that God exists. In other words, the truth that God exists is a "philosophical truth," because reason alone can ascertain it. The doctrine of the Trinity, by contrast, would be an example of a "theological truth." No one can know merely by reasoning that the one God exists in three distinct persons (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit)—this "theological truth" requires special messaging in the form of divine revelation, which would be the Bible.

Aquinas saw philosophical and theological truth as distinct but also as entirely compatible and complementary. Moreover, he believed that philosophical questions and answers prepared the way for theological questions and answers. Following an introduction on the nature and scope of Christian theology, the *Summa* proceeds immediately to the pivotal philosophical question of whether there is a "God." In the excerpt below Aquinas responds definitively to this question, giving his famous "five ways" or "five proofs" for the existence of God.

"Is There a God?"

(*Summa Theologiae*, by Thomas Aquinas, Volume I, *The Existence of God*, Question 2, Article 3: "Is There a God?", General Editor Thomas Gilby, English translation from Blackfriars edition, Image Books, 1969, pages 67-70.)

It seems that there is no God. For if, of two mutually exclusive things, one were to exist without limit, the other would cease to exist. But by the word 'God' is implied some limitless good. If God then existed, nobody would ever encounter evil. But evil is encountered in the world. God therefore does not exist.

Moreover, if a few causes fully account for some effect, one does not seek more. Now it seems everything we observe in this world can be fully accounted for by other causes, without assuming a God. Thus natural effects are explained by natural causes, and contrived effects by human reasoning and will. There is therefore no need to suppose that a God exists.

On the other hand, ...there are five ways in which one can prove that there is a God.

The first and most obvious way is based on change. Some things in the world are certainly in process of change: this we plainly see. Now anything in process of change is being changed by something else. This is so because it is characteristic of things in process of change that they do not yet have the perfection towards which they move, though able to have it; whereas it is characteristic of something causing change to have that perfection already. For to cause change is to bring into being what was previously only able to be, and this can only be done by something that already is: thus fire, which is actually hot, causes wood, which is able to be hot, to become actually hot, and in this way causes change in the wood. Now the same thing cannot at the same time be both actually x and potentially x, though it can be actually x and potentially y: the actually hot cannot at the same time be potentially hot, though it can be potentially cold. Consequently, a thing in process of change cannot itself cause that same change; it cannot change itself. Of necessity therefore anything in process of change is being changed by something else. Moreover, this something else, if in process of change, is itself being changed by yet another thing; and this last by another. Now we must stop somewhere, otherwise there will be no first cause of the change, and, as a result, no subsequent causes. For it is only when acted upon by the first cause that the intermediate cause will produce the change: if the hand does not move the stick, the stick will not move anything else. Hence one is bound to arrive at some first cause of change not itself being changed by anything, and this is what everybody understands by God.

The second way is based on the nature of causation. In the observable world causes are found to be ordered in series; we never observe, nor ever could, something causing itself, for this would mean it preceded itself, and this is not possible. Such a series of causes must however stop somewhere; for in it an earlier member causes an intermediate and the intermediate a last (whether the intermediate be one or many). Now if you eliminate a cause you also eliminate its effects, so that you cannot have a last cause, nor an intermediate one, unless you have a first. Given therefore no stop in the series of causes, and hence no first cause, there would be no intermediate causes either, and no last effect, and this would be an open mistake. One is therefore forced to suppose some first cause, to which everyone gives the name 'God.'

The third way is based on what need not be and on what must be, and runs as follows. Some of the things we come across can be but need not be, for we find them springing up and dying away, thus sometimes in being and sometimes not. Now everything cannot be like this, for a thing that need not be, once was not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing. But if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only be brought into being by something already existing. So that if nothing was in being nothing could be brought into being, and nothing would be in being now, which contradicts observation. Not everything is the sort of thing that need not be; there has got to be something that must be. Now a thing that must be, may or may not owe this necessity to something else. But just as we must stop somewhere in a series of causes, so also in the series of things which must be and owe this to other things. One is forced therefore to suppose something which must be, and owes this to no other thing than itself; indeed it itself is the cause that other things must be.

The fourth way is based on the gradation observed in things. Some things are found to be more good, more true, more noble, and so on, and other things less. But such comparative terms describe varying degrees of approximation to a superlative; for example, things are hotter and hotter the nearer they approach what is hottest. Something, therefore, is the truest and best and most noble of things, and hence the most fully in being; for Aristotle says that the truest things are the things most fully in being. Now when many things possess some property in common, the one most fully possessing it causes it in the others: fire, to use Aristotle's example, the hottest of all things, causes all other things to be hot. There is something therefore which causes in all other things their being, their goodness, and whatever other perfection they have. And this we call 'God.'

The fifth way is based on the guidedness of nature. As orderedness of actions to an end is observed in all bodies obeying natural laws, even when they lack awareness. For their behavior hardly ever varies, and will practically always turn out well; which shows that they truly tend to a goal, and do not merely hit it by accident. Nothing however that lacks awareness tends to a goal, except under the direction of someone with awareness and with understanding; the arrow, for example, requires an archer. Everything in nature, therefore, is directed to its goal by someone with intelligence, and this we call 'God.'

Hence: As Augustine says, "Since God is supremely good, he would not permit any evil at all in his works, unless he were sufficiently almighty and good to bring good even from evil." It is therefore a mark of the limitless goodness of God that he permits evils to exist, and draws from them good.

Natural causes act for definite purposes under the direction of some higher cause, so that their effects must also be referred to God as the first of all causes. In the same manner contrived effects must likewise be referred back to a higher cause than human reasoning and will, for these are changeable and can cease to be, and, as we have seen, all changeable things and things that can cease to be require some first cause which cannot change and of itself must be.