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**AS-LEVEL RELIGOUS STUDIES**

**Unit 2 – INVESTIGATIONS**

**OPTION B : Question 3 –**

**A study of 1 or more philosophers of religion**

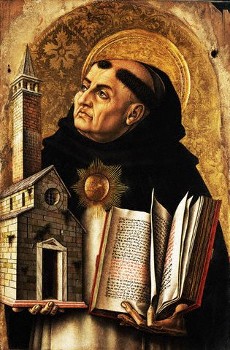
**PHILOSOPHER = ST. THOMAS AQUINAS**



**St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274): An introduction**

**Information:** This article is a critical introduction to the life and work of Thomas Aquinas. The article considers Aquinas' life and legacy, as well looking at his principle work the *Summa Theologica*, and two of his most well known contributions to theological discourse; the use of analogy in religious language and his five proofs of God's existence. A version of this article was originally published on the website www.faithnet.org.uk.

**Introduction**

St. Thomas Aquinas is considered by many to be the greatest scholastic theologian of the middle ages. He was born into a wealthy family in Aquino, Italy, and according to one source for this article was, 'a fat slow pious boy'. At the age of five he was sent to the abbey of Monte Cassino, and at the age of fourteen he went to the University of Naples. Having become impressed by the example of his Dominican teacher, he decided to enter that order and left to study in Paris (much to the dismay of his family, who tried various underhand ways to get his to change his mind). Nicknamed the 'Dumb Ox' because of his build, he impressed his fellow academics with his brilliance in public disputation.

'This dumb ox will fill the earth with his bellowing.' (Albert the Great, Aquinas' Parisian professor)

Aquinas was well travelled, and taught and conducted church business in many European cities. On one occasion even travelled to London for a meeting of the Dominican Order. Aquinas died in Italy in 1274 (whilst once again travelling on Church business), and was canonised (made a Saint) in 1323 by Pope John XXII.

**Writings**

For most of his life Aquinas was a prolific writer. He wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible and Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, discussed thirteen works of Aristotle and wrote various other sermons (homilies) and disputations. His most famous (and studied) works are the *Summa Theologica*, and (to a lesser extent) *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

It is thought that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was intended by Aquinas to be a textbook for missionaries (probably to Muslims). The *Summa Theologica* on the other hand has become a touchstone for orthodoxy in the Roman Catholic Church.

**The Summa Theologica**

The *Summa Theologica* is divided up into various questions, which are then subdivided into various articles. Each article begins with a statement of possible objections to a point Aquinas wishes to make, and then a statement of authority on which he will base his case from which he makes his reply (concluding with a number of smaller points to deal with minor objections).

For example:

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| --- |
| **Whether the existence of God is self-evident**  (The following is a paraphrase of Aquinas's text)  **Objection 1:** If knowledge of God is naturally implanted in us (or innate), then the existence of God is going to be self-evident.  **Objection 2:** If we understand the notion (or idea) of 'God', then God must exist. Also, something *actually* existing is greater than that which exists only in the mind.  **Objection 3:** There is such a thing as truth (for the statement, "There is no truth" is still true). God is truth itself. Therefore God exists.  **On the contrary:** It is clearly not self-evident to those who deny the existence of God, that God exists. Therefore, the existence of God cannot be self-evident.  **I answer that:** Something can be self-evident in different ways. It can be self-evident to itself but not to others, or it can be both. Now if the essence of something is known then we can speak about it, but if not then we cannot (even if it is self-evident). Now I agree that God's existence is self-evident, but only when we get to the next life. In terms of this life, we do not know the essence of God, so to say that "God exists" is not a self-evident truth at the present time. Therefore, it requires us to demonstrate (or set out proofs) for God's existence, and this we do based on things whose essences are known; things in the world around us.  **Reply to objection 1:** I agree that we have an innate sense that there is a God, but this knowledge does not tell us anything specifically about God.  **Reply to objection 2:** I agree that the thought of God existing would include God necessarily existing, but this does not mean God exists. For this very 'fact' is denied by those who do not believe that God exists.  **Reply to objection 3:** I do not deny the existence of truth, the question is whether there is such a thing as an Ultimate (or first cause of) Truth. |

The *Summa Theologica* was influenced by the philosophical writings of Aristotle, whose work had recently come to Europe at the time Aquinas lived via Muslims living in Spain. In the *Summa* Aquinas refers to Aristotle as The Philosopher.

Although we might regard the *Summa Theologica* as Aquinas' greatest work, he never completed it. This is because after attending Mass on the 6th December 1273, he became disillusioned with his work, and in particular felt that his writings fell way short of the true nature of what he had just experienced:

'All that I have written seems like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me.'

Some believe Aquinas had a mystical experience, others that he had a nervous breakdown. Whatever the reason one thing is known for sure, Aquinas wrote nothing else from that time onwards.

**Natural theology and five proofs of God's existence**

Following Aristotle, Aquinas argued that certain knowledge could be grounded in data which is available to everyone. Aristotle had argued that this data was the basis of scientific/philosophical knowledge, whereas Aquinas regarded it as a point of departure for our knowledge of God. Aquinas also believed that our knowledge of God's creation (the physical world) should not contradict what we know of God. As such Aquinas famously set out five proofs for the existence of God, which both utilised and sought to show how aspects of Aristotelian philosophy could lead us to knowledge of God's existence:

* **Motion:** Utilising Aristotle's belief in an Unmoved Mover, Aquinas argued that things move from a state of potentiality to actuality, and that to avoid an infinite regress God needed to be the first 'mover' of all things.
* **Causation:** Based on Aristotle's notion of efficient and final causes, Aquinas argued that without God (as the first cause of everything) the world could not have come into existence.
* **Contingency:** Also based on Aristotle's theory of causation (and one might also suggest his theory of Forms - see below), Aquinas argued that the world and everything in it are contingent things, and as such required the presence of a necessarily existing thing (God) to bring them into existence.
* **The Form of Goodness:** Although Aristotle departed from his teacher's (Plato) understanding of the Forms, he set out a revised understanding of them in his understanding of the nature of things in the world. In his fourth way, Aquinas utilised the idea of things having a Form (or fixed essence) to suggest that without some ultimate essence of Goodness (i.e. God), we would not know what good was.
* **Design/teleology:** Aquinas' last way again takes up the theme of purpose (*telos*), which is inherent in Aristotle's theory of efficient and final causes and his theory of Forms (each of these suggesting that things act for some end). Aquinas' argument here is that inanimate matter (such as planets) appears to exhibit a tremendous amount of order and regularity. However, inanimate matter lacks intelligence and could not have arranged itself in this way. Therefore, it required the presence of something with the will, ability and intelligence to do this, which for Aquinas was God.

In Christian theology, the idea that there is knowledge of God's existence available to everyone is known as *natural theology* (or general revelation). This is often contrasted with *special revelation*, which is knowledge of God that has been specifically revealed to someone or some group of people by God (e.g. The Ten Commandments were revealed to Moses by G-d; the Israelites were told by G-d that they were G-d's Chosen People).

Although sometimes it sometimes appears as though Aquinas is seeking to downplay the role of revelation and faith, this is not the case. In fact, Aquinas was actually attempting to draw together the human ability to reason truth and God's communication of truth to us, by laying foundations for the Christian faith via the recognition that rational enquiry can only get one so far. Although he was convinced that we could understand something of God's truth using our own thought processes, he also believed we needed God to give us the complete and full picture of who God is, and how God wants us to live.

Aquinas believed there was nothing in God's revelation that would contradict our knowledge of things in the world. Although in the modern era science, philosophy and theology are often seen to be at odds with each other, Aquinas believed this should not be the case and that each presented different facets of the same truth.

**The use of analogy in religious language**

Aside from his Five Proofs, Aquinas is also most well known (amongst religious studies students anyway) for his contribution to the Philosophy of Language (notably religious language). The particular problem Aquinas sought to address was how we could speak about God, particularly as God is (traditionally) said to reside beyond the empirical realm (or beyond the range of our senses). His solution was to suggest that we need to use analogies to do so.

Aquinas identified three modes of language (or three different ways we can use language), which can use to evaluate how we might talk about God:

* **Univocal:** This is the idea that the language we use should be taken literally (or put another way we might say that language and its referent (God) have the same meaning). For example, to talk about the 'hand of God' would imply that God *literally* had a hand.
* **Equivocal:** This is the direct opposite of the univocal use of language, and suggests that God and the words we use to speak about God have no relationship to each other whatsoever. So we might say that God dwells outside our world, beyond the physical realm, or beyond our senses and as such we have no way of saying anything meaningful about God (thus our words have no capacity to explain anything to do with the nature of God). This means we would have no idea what the phrase the 'hand of God' meant, when referring to God.
* **Analogical:** The univocal and equivocal forms of language do not allow us to say anything meaningful about God. Instead, we need a middle way between them; something which acknowledges God's 'other-worldliness', yet something which also acknowledges God's know-ability. Aquinas suggested that religious language should be understood as analogies to 'bridge the gap'. For example, to meaningfully talk about the 'hand of God' we would think about how people around us might 'give us a hand', or use their hands to help us, and then apply this concept to God (but in a much greater sense) to talk about God supporting and helping us.

'When we speak about God, we are not speaking the literal truth. Our language cannot be other than figurative and analogical. For God is no mere object in time and space. [God] breaks into our world: but... is above it. Nevertheless, Christian experience testifies to the fact that God reveals himself in a way that is comprehensible to men. Even though, in the nature of the case, divine truth has to be refracted and expressed in terms of human words and finite images, nevertheless it can be expressed in meaningful terms.'[(Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, IVP (1974) [Bracket mine])](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0877847126/curdeushomowhygo)

Of course, the problem remains that if God is beyond the physical (sensory) realm, then we cannot verify our analogical statements (or to check to see if our language is meaningful in any way). This is made even more problematic as Aquinas insists that no-one in this life will ever see the true nature (or essence) of God:

'God cannot be seen in His essence by a mere human being, except he be separated from this mortal life' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 12, 10)

Aquinas further complicates the matter by stating that one can only know things within one's realm of existence - i.e. finite creatures can only attain knowledge of finite things, because they are in the same realm of experience, but not anything else. Of course, this makes it rather difficult for finite creatures (humans) to know anything about (and speak meaningfully of) infinite realities (e.g. God), as Aquinas himself admits:

'It is impossible for any created intellect to see the essence of God by its own natural power. For knowledge is regulated according as the thing known is in the knower. But the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. Hence the knowledge of every knower is ruled according to its own nature. If therefore the mode of anything's being exceeds the mode of the knower, it must result that the knowledge of the object is above the nature of the knower.' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 12, 4)

**Influence and legacy**

Aquinas' thought has had a tremendous influence in Christian theology, moral theory and the philosophy of religion. His five proofs have been debated ever since, and his use of analogy in religious language widely embraced (despite the problems associated with doing so). Yet although many place tremendous value on his insights, Aquinas' natural theology was actually condemned by the University of Paris in 1277, and scholars such as Duns Scotus (1266-1308) and William of Ockham (1288-1348) felt that he overlooked the fact that sometimes reason and revelation contradicted each other.

However, despite falling out of favour both in and out of the Catholic Church, Aquinas's work gained prominence during the Council of Trent (1545-63), when Catholic Reformers used it to draft their decrees.

Aquinas' work became so influential in the Catholic faith that in 1879 Pope Leo XIII declared Thomism (Aquinas' theology) to be eternally valid.

Yet for all the good he is perceived to have done, we should not forget that Aquinas was also a man of his time. He lived in a world which believed the sun went round the earth, that the earth was at the centre of the universe and had been created by God in six days, that the 'Great chain of Being' began with God and moved down through the angels to the lowest forms of life (with humans as the mid-point between the mortal and the divine) and that the universe possessed a fixed order grounded in Mathematics. Aquinas' work may be eternally valid, but that does not mean it has to be regarded as eternally true!

**PAST QUESTIONS**

**January 2009**

3. Examine and comment on how far a philosophical understanding of a theme or topic within the Philosophy of Religion has been helped or hindered by the ideas of one or more philosophers you have investigated.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**June 2009**

**3.** Examine and comment on the distinctive contribution to the philosophy of religion made by one or more philosophers you have investigated.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**January 2010**

**3** Examine and comment on how far a philosophical understanding of a theme or topic within the philosophy of Religion has been helped or hindered by the ideas of one or more philosophers ou have investigated.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**June 2010**

**3** Examine and comment on the contribution to the philosophy of religion made by the key teachings/ideas of the area **and/or** person(s) you have investigated and how far this may have influenced philosophical thought.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**January 2011**

**3** With reference to the topic you have investigated, examine and comment on the claim that studying and assessing the work of a philosopher or philosophers poses significant challenges.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**June 2011**

**3** ‘The study of philosophy of religion provides valuable insight into religion **and/or** God.‘

Examine and comment on this claim, with reference to the topic you have investigated.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**January 2012**

**3** ‘The philosophy of religion is associated with one or more scholars who provide an essential insight into religion and/or God.’

Examine and comment on this claim, with reference to the topic you have investigated.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**June 2012**

3. ‘The work of scholars within the philosophy of religion provokes considerable debate’.  
Examine and comment on this claim, with reference to the topic you have investigated.

**(Total for Question 3 = 50 marks)**

**GOOD WEBSITES TO HELP WITH YOUR RESEARCH**

* <http://theologicalstudies.org/resource-library/philosophy-dictionary/181-thomas-aquinas>
* <http://www.netplaces.com/philosophy-book/the-medieval-mind/thomas-aquinas.htm>
* http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=aquinas'%20major%20contributions%20to%20philosophy&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&ved=0CDYQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fplato.stanford.edu%2Fentries%2Faquinas%2F&ei=Wmd9UIWAB-ij0QWo04GQBQ&usg=AFQjCNFi9g1FSDFqk6xB8TOVKIHoYZ1APg
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