

## SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES

by Thomas Aquinas

*(selections)*

### **I, 3 That the Truths which we confess concerning God fall under two Modes or Categories**

BECAUSE not every truth admits of the same mode of manifestation, and "a well-educated man will expect exactness in every class of subject, according as the nature of the thing admits," as is very well remarked by the Philosopher (Eth. Nicom. I, 1094b), we must first show what mode of proof is possible for the truth that we have now before us. The truths that we confess concerning God fall under two modes. Some things true of God are beyond all the competence of human reason, as that God is Three and One. Other things there are to which even human reason can attain, as the existence and unity of God, which philosophers have proved to a demonstration under the guidance of the light of natural reason. That there are points of absolute intelligibility in God altogether beyond the compass of human reason, most manifestly appears. For since the leading principle of all knowledge of any given subject-matter is an understanding of the thing's innermost being, or substance -- according to the doctrine of the Philosopher, that the essence is the principle of demonstration -- it follows that the mode of our knowledge of the substance must be the mode of knowledge of whatever we know about the substance. Hence if the human understanding comprehends the substance of anything, as of a stone or triangle, none of the points of intelligibility about that thing will exceed the capacity of human reason. But this is not our case with regard to God. The human un-

derstanding cannot go so far of its natural power as to grasp His substance, since under the conditions of the present life the knowledge of our understanding commences with sense; and therefore objects beyond sense cannot be grasped by human understanding except so far as knowledge is gathered of them through the senses. But things of sense cannot lead our understanding to read in them the essence of the Divine Substance, inasmuch as they are effects inadequate to the power that caused them. Nevertheless our understanding is thereby led to some knowledge of God, namely, of His existence and of other attributes that must necessarily be attributed to the First Cause. There are, therefore, some points of intelligibility in God, accessible to human reason, and other points that altogether transcend the power of human reason.

The same thing may be understood from consideration of degrees of intelligibility. Of two minds, one of which has a keener insight into truth than the other, the higher mind understands much that the other cannot grasp at all, as is clear in the 'plain man' (in rustico), who can in no way grasp the subtle theories of philosophy. Now the intellect of an angel excels that of a man more than the intellect of the ablest philosopher excels that of the plainest of plain men (rudissimi idiotae). The angel has a higher standpoint in creation than man as a basis of his knowledge of God, inasmuch as the substance of the angel, whereby he is led to know God by a process of natural knowledge, is nobler and more excellent than the things of sense, and even than the soul itself, whereby the human mind rises to the knowledge of God. But the Divine Mind exceeds the angelic much more than the angelic the human. For the Divine Mind of its own comprehensiveness covers the whole extent of its substance, and therefore perfectly understands its own essence, and knows

all that is knowable about itself; but an angel of his natural knowledge does not know the essence of God, because the angel's own substance, whereby it is led to a knowledge of God, is an effect inadequate to the power of the cause that created it. Hence not all things that God understands in Himself can be grasped by the natural knowledge of an angel; nor is human reason competent to take in all that an angel understands of his own natural ability. As therefore it would be the height of madness in a 'plain man' to declare a philosopher's propositions false, because he could not understand them, so and much more would a man show exceeding folly if he suspected of falsehood a divine revelation given by the ministry of angels, on the mere ground that it was beyond the investigation of reason.

The same thing manifestly appears from the incapacity which we daily experience in the observation of nature. We are ignorant of very many properties of the things of sense; and of the properties that our senses do apprehend, in most cases we cannot perfectly discover the reason. Much more is it beyond the competence of human reason to investigate all the points of intelligibility in that supreme excellent and transcendent substance of God. Consonant with this is the saying of the Philosopher, that "as the eyes of bats are to the light of the sun, so is the intelligence of our soul to the things most manifest by nature" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, min. i). To this truth Holy Scripture also bears testimony. For it is said: Perchance thou wilt seize upon the traces of God, and fully discover the Almighty (Job xi, 7). And, Lo, God is great, and surpassing our knowledge (Job xxxvi, 26). And, We know in part (I Cor. xiii, 9). Not everything, therefore, that is said of God, even though it be beyond the power of reason to investigate, is at once to be rejected as false.

**I, 4: That it is an advantage for the Truths of God, known by Natural Reason, to be proposed to men to be believed on faith**

If a truth of this nature were left to the sole enquiry of reason, three disadvantages would follow. One is that the knowledge of God would be confined to few. The discovery of truth is the fruit of studious enquiry. From this very many are hindered. Some are hindered by a constitutional unfitness, their natures being ill-disposed to the acquisition of knowledge. They could never arrive by study to the highest grade of human knowledge, which consists in the knowledge of God. Others are hindered by the needs of business and the ties of the management of property. There must be in human society some men devoted to temporal affairs. These could not possibly spend time enough in the learned lessons of speculative enquiry to arrive at the highest point of human enquiry, the knowledge of God. Some again are hindered by sloth. The knowledge of the truths that reason can investigate concerning God presupposes much previous knowledge. Indeed almost the entire study of philosophy is directed to the knowledge of God. Hence, of all parts of philosophy, that part stands over to be learnt last, which consists of metaphysics dealing with points of Divinity. Thus, only with great labour of study is it possible to arrive at the searching out of the aforesaid truth; and this labour few are willing to undergo for sheer love of knowledge. Another disadvantage is that such as did arrive at the knowledge or discovery of the aforesaid truth would take a long time over it, on account of the profundity of such truth, and the many prerequisites to the study, and also because in youth and early manhood, the soul, tossed to and fro on the waves of

passion, is not fit for the study of such high truth: only in settled age does the soul become prudent and scientific, as the Philosopher says. Thus, if the only way open to the knowledge of God were the way of reason, the human race would dwell long in thick darkness of ignorance: as the knowledge of God, the best instrument for making men perfect and good, would accrue only to a few, and to those few after a considerable lapse of time.

A third disadvantage is that, owing to the infirmity of our judgement and the perturbing force of imagination, there is some admixture of error in most of the investigations of human reason. This would be a reason to many for continuing to doubt even of the most accurate demonstrations, not perceiving the force of the demonstration, and seeing the divers judgements of divers persons who have the name of being wise men. Besides, in the midst of much demonstrated truth there is sometimes an element of error, not demonstrated but asserted on the strength of some plausible and sophistic reasoning that is taken for a demonstration. And therefore it was necessary for the real truth concerning divine things to be presented to men with fixed certainty by way of faith. Wholesome therefore is the arrangement of divine clemency, whereby things even that reason can investigate are commanded to be held on faith, so that all might easily be partakers of the knowledge of God, and that without doubt and error. Hence it is said: Now ye walk not as the Gentiles walk in the vanity of their own notions, having the understanding darkened (Eph. iv, 17, 18); and, I will make all thy sons taught of the Lord (Isa. liv, 1, 5).

### **I, 7: That the Truth of reason is not contrary to the Truth of Christian Faith**

THE natural dictates of reason must certainly be quite true: it is impossible to think of their being otherwise. Nor again is it permissible to believe that the tenets of faith are false, being so evidently confirmed by God. Since therefore falsehood alone is contrary to truth, it is impossible for the truth of faith to be contrary to principles known by natural reason.

2. Whatever is put into the disciple's mind by the teacher is contained in the knowledge of the teacher, unless the teacher is teaching dishonestly, which would be a wicked thing to say of God. But the knowledge of principles naturally known is put into us by God, seeing that God Himself is the author of our nature. Therefore these principles also are contained in the Divine Wisdom. Whatever therefore is contrary to these principles is contrary to Divine Wisdom, and cannot be of God.

3. Contrary reasons fetter our intellect fast, so that it cannot proceed to the knowledge of the truth. If therefore contrary informations were sent us by God, our intellect would be thereby hindered from knowledge of the truth: but such hindrance cannot be of God.

4. What is natural cannot be changed while nature remains. But contrary opinions cannot be in the same mind at the same time: therefore no opinion or belief is sent to man from God contrary to natural knowledge. And therefore the Apostle says: The word is near in thy heart and in thy mouth, that is, the word of faith which we preach (Rom. x, 8). But because it surpasses reason it is counted by some as contrary to reason, which cannot be. To the same effect is the authority of Augustine (Gen. ad litt. ii, 18) : " What truth reveals can nowise be contrary to the holy books either of the Old or of the New Testament." Hence the conclusion is evi-

dent, that any arguments alleged against the teachings of faith do not proceed logically from first principles of nature, principles of themselves known, and so do not amount to a demonstration; but are either probable reasons or sophistical; hence room is left for refuting them.

**I, 8: Of the Relation of Human Reason to the first Truth of Faith**

THE things of sense, from whence human reason takes its beginning of knowledge, retain in themselves some trace of imitation of God, inasmuch as they are, and are good; yet so imperfect is this trace that it proves wholly insufficient to declare the substance of God Himself. Since every agent acts to the producing of its own likeness, effects in their several ways bear some likeness to their causes: nevertheless the effect does not always attain to the perfect likeness of the agent that produces it. In regard then to knowledge of the truth of faith, which can only be thoroughly known to those who behold the substance of God, human reason stands so conditioned as to be able to argue some true likenesses to it: which likenesses however are not sufficient for any sort of demonstrative or intuitive comprehension of the aforesaid truth. Still it is useful for the human mind to exercise itself in such reasonings, however feeble, provided there be no presumptuous hope of perfect comprehension or demonstration. With this view the authority of Hilary agrees, who says (*De Trinitate*, ii, 10), speaking of such truth : "In this belief start, run, persist; and though I know that you will not reach the goal, still I shall congratulate you as I see you making progress. But intrude not into that sanctuary, and plunge not into the mystery of infinite truth; entertain no presumptuous hope of comprehending the height of intelligence, but understand that it is incomprehensible."