

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series  
*The Mystery of Israel and the Church*

Fall 2013 – Series 12

*Introduction to Theology:  
Faith Seeking Understanding*

Talk #1

*Two Orders of Knowledge About God*



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Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk.  
It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by  
The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church".  
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# Two Orders of Knowledge About God

What is theology? The word itself means the science or study of God, and in this broad sense, it can indicate two disciplines. It can either be the philosophical study of God as He can be known by *reason alone*, or it can be the study of God as known through *Revelation*, with faith and reason working together in harmony. The second of the two is a higher and greater form of theology, for God's Revelation allows our knowledge of Him to penetrate to His intimate life and to His gratuitous acts in salvation history. In this second sense, theology can also be defined as "faith seeking understanding." The two senses of theology are often distinguished by referring to the philosophical study as *natural theology*, and that based on Revelation as *sacred theology*.<sup>1</sup> Normally the word "theology," unless the context indicates otherwise, is taken in this second and higher sense, and it is in this sense that it is used in this book. It is a science that presupposes faith and illuminates the content of faith using reason and the analogy that exists between revealed and natural truths.

We shall explore the nature of theology by following the classic text on the science of theology, which is the first question of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*.<sup>2</sup>

## Should Theology Exist? Rationalist and Agnostic Objections

The first question that St. Thomas poses in his *Summa of Theology* is whether there should exist a discipline such as sacred theology, and why. Aristotle and Aquinas speak about four fundamental questions that one must ask in every inquiry.<sup>3</sup> First, does something exist? Secondly, if it

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1 In question 1 of the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas refers to Catholic theology based on Revelation as *sacra doctrina*, which can be translated as sacred doctrine, sacred science, sacred theology, or simply Catholic theology.

2 The *Summa theologiae* (the summary or height of theology, abbreviated *ST*) was written between 1265 and 1274, and is the classical masterpiece of Catholic theology. This manual for "beginners" (as St. Thomas describes it in the prologue to his work) explores the themes of God, man, Revelation, the world, virtue, vice, and all the main points of doctrine in a systematic and well-reasoned manner. Each question begins with several objections against St. Thomas' thesis, followed by an argument from authority in favor of his view (*sed contra*). He then demonstrates his position in the body of the article (*corpus*), followed by a response to each objection (ad 1; ad 2; etc.). St. Thomas' *Summa* will be our main guide through the foundational points of Catholic theology in this work. Translations from the *Summa* are my own.

3 Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* book 2, ch. 2, 89b36–90a4. See Aquinas' *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics*, book 2, lecture 1, trans. Richard Berquist (Notre Dame, IN: dumb Ox Books, 2007), 231, in which he summarizes: "There are four things which we seek to know: *that it is so, why it is so, whether it is, and what it is*. Everything that is askable or knowable can be reduced to these four." In Latin the four questions are, respectively: *quia, propter quid, si est, and quid est*.

does exist, what is it? And then two other kinds of question follow: What are its properties and attributes, and why does it have those properties and attributes? But it would be pointless to investigate the essence and properties of something that perhaps does not even exist! Thus with regard to theology, we should first ascertain that it exists before we investigate its nature, properties, and methods.

To show that a field of study exists, one must show that its object exists, and that we have some access to that object. In the case of theology, the object is God who reveals Himself, and our access to Him is through reason enlightened by faith in His Revelation. Therefore, in order to show that theology exists, one must show not only that God exists, but that He has revealed Himself to mankind and that this Revelation is accessible to man through faith. This will be done in a later talk (7), in the examination of the motives of credibility for the Catholic faith. For the moment, we shall assume the existence of Revelation as evident through faith, and limit ourselves to the question of *fittingness*.<sup>4</sup> Is it reasonable for God to reveal Himself and make possible a discipline such as sacred theology? Why is it fitting that there be a body of knowledge of God based on Revelation and faith? Wouldn't philosophy and empirical science be enough for man, as contemporary society affirms?

Aquinas therefore begins the *Summa theologiae* by asking whether there is any need for "sacred doctrine" distinct from philosophy or the natural sciences. He offers two very modern objections. One objection states that the empirical sciences and philosophy treat of all reality, including the first principles of things. Thus it would seem that there cannot exist any field of study above the empirical and philosophical sciences, or if it did, it would be superfluous.<sup>5</sup>

The philosophical position that underlies this kind of objection is known as "rationalism." No science higher than the empirical sciences and philosophy is necessary, because they sufficiently attain to all of reality. Using this reasoning, today adherents of the "new Atheism" vigorously and derisively deny the existence of theology.<sup>6</sup>

4 See chapter 3 below for a discussion of arguments of fittingness.

5 St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1, obj. 2: "Furthermore, every science must be about being, for nothing can be known except what is true, and truth is convertible with being. But the philosophical sciences treat of all being, including even God. Thus a certain part of philosophy is referred to as theology, or the divine science, as is clear from the Philosopher in book 6 of the *Metaphysics*. Therefore it seems superfluous to have any other discipline than the philosophical sciences." St. Thomas does not distinguish here between the empirical and the philosophical sciences, as we would today. By "philosophical sciences" presumably he intends to include all human sciences that rely on unaided reason.

6 Some of the most important figures of the so-called "New Atheism" are Richard Dawkins, Professor of Zoology at Oxford, Christo-

Stephen Hawking's idea that physics could come up with a "theory of everything" is a good example of a rationalist rejection of theology as a field of study that transcends the empirical sciences.<sup>7</sup>

All forms of complete materialism would share this rejection of the existence of sacred theology. If all that exists is material, then the empirical sciences will in principle be sufficient to explain all of reality. Since Marxism is dialectical materialism, it too vehemently—and violently—rejects the possibility of sacred theology.

The weakness of the rationalist objection to theology is that it presupposes a quite inflated view of the power of unaided human reason. One may easily reply to the rationalist objection that it is very unreasonable to think that unaided reason could ever arrive at a sufficient "theory of everything," which, in philosophical terms, would mean a sufficient theory of the first causes of things. Although it is true that philosophy can speak about God as First Cause and demonstrate His existence and attributes, it does not sufficiently treat of Him because He always remains more unknown to human reason than known. Thus there is room for a higher doctrine about God that exceeds the limits of natural reason.

Rationalists, however, are not the only ones who reject the possibility of theology. It is possible to reject theology from a philosophical position that is much less confident about the power of unaided human reason. St. Thomas has therefore posed another objection against the existence of

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pher Hitchens, an Anglo-American journalist; Sam Harris, doctor of neuroscience and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation for spreading scientific knowledge and secular values; Daniel Dennet, Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University, and Victor Stenger, Professor of Physics at the University of Hawaii. They have gained attention with a series of best-selling books: *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins; *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens; *Breaking the Spell: Religion As a Natural Phenomenon* by Daniel Dennett; *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* by Sam Harris; and *God: The Failed Hypothesis. How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* by Victor Stenger. For good critiques of the New Atheism, see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), and "Believe It or Not," *First Things* (May 2010).

7 See Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), p. 30: "Given the state of the universe at one time, a complete set of laws fully determines both the future and the past. That would exclude the possibility of miracles or an active role for God." However, in a paper of July 20, 2002, "Gödel and the End of Physics," Hawking recognizes that Gödel's theorem excludes the possibility of a theory of everything. He writes: "Some people will be very disappointed if there is not an ultimate theory, that can be formulated as a finite number of principles. I used to belong to that camp, but I have changed my mind" (available online at <http://www.hawking.org.uk/godel-and-the-end-of-physics.html>).

sacred theology, quoting Sirach 3:23: "Seek not the things that are too high for you." This objection says that, even if there are realities above the bounds of our reason, we do not need a doctrine or science about such things, for the natural order should be sufficient for the aspirations of man. It seems that "man should not seek to know what is above reason,"<sup>8</sup> for what is above reason will be above human knowledge, language, action, and interest. How can there be a study of that which exceeds the limits of reason?

The philosophical position that lies behind this kind of objection is known as "agnosticism."<sup>9</sup> An agnostic position would say that one should not seek a science higher than the empirical sciences and philosophy, because even though there may be many realities that transcend the limitations of such sciences, such realities simply cannot be known by man, for there are intrinsic limits to human speculative reason that cannot be overcome. Man simply cannot know whatever reality there is that lies beyond the bounds of the power of unaided human reason. For many, this would be the case for all "religious truths" or truths about God. In other words, an agnostic would deny that there can be any true knowledge by way of faith in God's historical Revelation. This kind of position was formulated most famously by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793).<sup>10</sup>

Another form of agnosticism is given by logical positivists, such as Wittgenstein in the Preface to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts."<sup>11</sup> The book ends by saying: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical. . . ."

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8 ST I, q. 1, a. 1, obj. 1: "It seems that it is not necessary for there to be any other science besides the philosophical sciences. For man should not seek those things that are above reason, according to Sirach 3 [23]: 'Seek not things that are too high for you.' But what is accessible to reason is sufficiently treated in the philosophical sciences. Therefore it seems superfluous to have any other discipline than the philosophical sciences."

9 "Agnosticism" comes from the Greek for "to not know."

10 See, for example, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 114 (part 3, ch. 5): "Thus, 'not they who say Lord! Lord! But they who do the will of God,' those, therefore, who seek to become well-pleasing to him, not through loud praises of him (or of his envoy, as a being of divine origin) according to revealed concepts which not every human being can have, but through a good life conduct, regarding which everyone knows his will—these will be the ones who offer to him the true veneration that he desires."

11 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Brubner & Co., 1922), Preface, p. 23 (Project Gutenberg ebook edition).

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”<sup>12</sup> According to this kind of logical positivism,<sup>13</sup> sacred theology—and even metaphysics<sup>14</sup>—is a matter about which “one must be silent.” For Wittgenstein, one could perhaps think some kind of “mystical” (theological or metaphysical) thoughts and have some kind of religious faith, but not formulate such thoughts in a coherent doctrine.

The agnostic position can also be formulated in a more practical form. Instead of directly rejecting the possibility of knowing truths beyond the limits of reason, many simply have no interest in such knowledge. This lack of interest in the supernatural that dominates much of the contemporary world can be referred to as a kind of practical “naturalism.” Such a position is presented as virtuous, for it seems at once humble and pragmatic.

### Why Is It Fitting That God Reveal Himself to Man?

St. Thomas gives two reasons for the necessity of a divinely revealed teaching about God. First, only such teaching can reveal the supernatural mysteries that surpass the limits of reason, especially knowledge that we have been ordered by God to an end that exceeds our comprehension. Secondly, such a teaching is necessary to give man secure knowledge also of the truths of natural theology and of the natural moral law, truths that reason could know but which in practice are generally known principally by faith:

It was necessary for human salvation that there be some doctrine based on divine revelation distinct from the philosophical sciences that are studied by human reason. First, because man is ordered to God as to an end that transcends reason’s grasp, according to Isaiah [64:4]: “Eye has not seen, O God, besides you, what you have prepared for those who love you.” But men must know their end in advance, so as to order their intentions and actions to this end. Therefore it was necessary for the salvation of men that some things that exceed the power of human reason be made known to them by divine revelation.

Even with regard to those things that human reason can investigate, it was necessary for mankind to be instructed by divine revelation. This is because the truth about God that can be grasped by reason would come to mankind only

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12 Ibid., propositions 6.522 and 7: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.”

13 Positivism is the philosophical position that only knowledge that can be empirically verified is warranted or meaningful. Of course, that statement is a philosophical statement and cannot be empirically verified!

14 It should be noted that Wittgenstein’s agnosticism does not only apply to theology, but also to all metaphysics. See *ibid.*, proposition 6.53: “The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.”

through a few, after a long time, and with many errors mixed in. But man’s entire salvation, which lies in God, depends on the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, so that salvation may come to men in a more fitting and certain way, it was necessary that they be instructed in divine things by divine revelation. It was thus necessary that there should be a sacred doctrine based on revelation in addition to the philosophical sciences that are studied by reason.<sup>15</sup>

We need a revealed doctrine because God has willed to elevate us to a supernatural end, an intimate, face-to-face union with Him in heaven known as the beatific vision. We could never know this true end of man if God did not reveal it to us. And if our end is supernatural and mysterious, so must be the means to get there. If God did not reveal to us these supernatural means, we could never direct our lives to attain our final end.

The Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 2, stresses that God’s revelation centers on man’s supernatural end, which is participation in the Trinitarian life of God:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.

Thus man’s elevation to share in intimate filial friendship in the life of the Blessed Trinity is the principal reason for divine Revelation.<sup>16</sup>

It is also very fitting, however, that God reveal truths that natural reason could discover, such as the existence, goodness, omnipotence, and oneness of God,<sup>17</sup> and the natural moral law. Natural theology (the truths about God that belong to the natural order) is the culmination of philosophy, and the most difficult part. If God did not reveal such truths, as St. Thomas says, they would “come to mankind only through a few, after a long time, and with many errors mixed in.” But the truths about God, including those accessible to reason, need to be known by man from the beginning of his moral life (that is, from the age of reason) so as to be the guiding principles of his action. God thus mercifully reveals to humanity both natural and

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15 *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1.

16 See also CCC 52: “God, who ‘dwells in unapproachable light’ [1 Tim 6:16], wants to communicate his own divine life to the men he freely created, in order to adopt them as his sons in his only-begotten Son. By revealing himself God wishes to make them capable of responding to him, and of knowing him, and of loving him far beyond their own natural capacity.”

17 See, for example, Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God is one God.”

supernatural truths about Himself, about man and the moral law, and about the path of salvation. Therefore sacred theology does not limit itself solely to supernatural mysteries that can only be known if God reveals them, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, and the beatific vision, but also examines what St. Thomas calls the “preambles of faith” — those truths about God which reason can discover without the aid of Revelation, and which help dispose a person to recognize Revelation.<sup>18</sup>

The position of St. Thomas on the fittingness of Revelation in the first article of the *Summa of Theology* was solemnly confirmed by the Magisterium of the Church in Vatican I:

It is to be ascribed to this divine revelation that such truths among things divine that of themselves are not beyond human reason can, even in the present condition of mankind, be known by everyone with facility, with firm certainty, and with no admixture of error. It is, however, not for this reason that revelation is to be called absolutely necessary, but because God in His infinite goodness has ordained man to a supernatural end, viz., to share in the good things of God that utterly exceed the intelligence of the human mind, for “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him” [1 Cor 2:9].<sup>19</sup>

Vatican II, in *Dei Verbum* 6, also reaffirmed this doctrine:

Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind.

As a sacred synod has affirmed,<sup>20</sup> God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (see Rom. 1:20); but teaches that it is through His revelation that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error, even in this present state of the human race.<sup>21</sup>

18 For the notion of “preambles of faith,” see Bl. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* 67.

19 Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 2, DS 3005.

20 *Ibid.*

21 See also Pius XII, encyclical *Humani generis* 2–3 (August 12, 1950): “For though, absolutely speaking, human reason by its own natural force and light can arrive at a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, Who by His providence watches over and governs the world, and also of the natural law, which the Creator has written in our hearts, still there are not a few obstacles to prevent reason from making efficient and fruitful use of its natural ability. The truths that have to do with God and the relations between God and men, completely surpass the sensible order and demand self-surrender and self-abnegation in order to be put into practice and to influence practical life. Now the human intellect, in gaining the knowledge of such truths is hampered both by the activity of the senses and the imagination, and by evil passions arising from original sin. Hence men easily persuade themselves in such matters that what they do not wish to believe is false or at least doubtful.”

The last step of St. Thomas’ argument reasons that since Revelation is necessary, it is also fitting that there be a discipline that treats of the higher knowledge of God received through Revelation, and this discipline is sacred theology.

### Reply to the Rationalist and Agnostic Objections

At this point it is easy to answer the objections posed at the beginning. If there are two sources of knowledge about God—reason and divine Revelation—it is fitting that there be two disciplines that study God: one through the light of reason alone and the other through the light of Revelation and reason. St. Thomas lays down the principle that “sciences are differentiated according to the different ways in which things are known.”<sup>22</sup> Sacred theology is not superfluous, even though it studies the same First Cause that is the object of natural theology, because sacred theology studies Him through a higher source of knowledge: God’s own Revelation of Himself. Therefore sacred theology “differs in kind from that theology which is a part of philosophy.”<sup>23</sup> The rationalist objection would only be valid if it could be proven both that God cannot reveal Himself, and that reason can perfectly know the first causes of all things.

The other objection posed by St. Thomas concedes that reason has limits, but charges sacred theology with presumption in seeking to pass beyond them. St. Thomas answers this by conceding that it would certainly be presumptuous and absurd for reason to seek to go beyond its own limits, if God had not revealed Himself. If reason is all that we had, then we would have to be content with its limits. But since He has in fact deigned to reveal Himself (as will be shown below and which is conceded by all believers), it would be an attitude of false humility for reason to close itself off from that higher knowledge and restrict itself to what it can achieve on its own unaided powers. The truly humble attitude of reason is to open itself to faith and seek to understand as much as possible what has been received through Revelation. It is both more reasonable and more humble to listen to God speak about Himself and try to understand what He has said, than to dismiss

“It is for this reason that divine revelation must be considered morally necessary so that those religious and moral truths which are not of their nature beyond the reach of reason in the present condition of the human race, may be known by all men readily with a firm certainty and with freedom from all error.”

22 *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2.

23 *Ibid.*: “Sciences are differentiated according to different ways in which things are known. For the astronomer and the physicist can demonstrate the same conclusion, as, for example, that the earth is round. However, the astronomer demonstrates this by means of mathematics (abstracting from matter), whereas the physicist demonstrates it using a material means. Thus there is no reason why the same things, which are treated by philosophy insofar as they are knowable by the light of natural reason, cannot also be treated by another science insofar as they are known by divine revelation. Therefore that theology which pertains to sacred doctrine differs in kind from that theology which is a part of philosophy.”

it for being above our unaided powers. True humility is the ability to receive a gift graciously. St. Thomas writes:

Although those things that are above man's knowledge ought not to be sought through reason, they are to be received by faith if God reveals them. Thus the sacred text [Sirach 3:23] continues: "You have been shown many things above the understanding of men." And sacred science consists in these things.<sup>24</sup>

### Natural and Supernatural Knowledge of God

As we have seen, the distinction between sacred theology and natural theology depends on the distinction between two kinds of knowledge about God. The highest field of philosophy can investigate God, but only as He can be known by reason as the First Cause of the universe. This field of philosophy is called metaphysics or natural theology. It is very important to distinguish *natural theology*, which does not presuppose faith or Revelation, from *sacred theology*, which is the science of God based on faith in His Revelation to man. Sacred theology investigates God as He is in Himself, insofar as He has revealed Himself to man. Sacred theology is not accessible without faith, for it is based on God's Revelation that came to mankind first through Israel, and culminated in the Incarnation and Paschal mystery of Christ, as revealed in the New Testament and the Apostolic Tradition. Natural theology, since it is based on reason, was accessible to ancient philosophers without access to Revelation, such as Plato and Aristotle, and to all men in a rudimentary way. St. Paul affirms reason's access to God through creation in Romans 1:18-23:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those men who in wickedness hold back the truth of God, seeing that what may be known about God is manifest to them. For God has manifested it to them. For *since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen—his everlasting power also and divinity—being understood through the things that are made.* And so they are without excuse, seeing that, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but became vain in their reasoning.

Notice that not only does St. Paul affirm the ability of natural reason to know God's existence "through the things that are made," but also His "invisible attributes," and His "everlasting power." This is consequence of the fact, affirmed, for example, in Psalm 19:1, that "the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

The First Vatican Council (1870) infallibly defined the capacity of natural reason to know God's existence with certainty through creation, and also the distinction of natural and sacred theology:

The same Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with

certainty from the things that were created through the natural light of human reason, for "ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature . . . has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" [Rom 1:20]; but it pleased His wisdom and goodness to reveal Himself and the eternal decrees of His will to the human race in another and supernatural way, as the Apostle says: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" [Heb.1:1–2]. Natural theology for Plato and Aristotle is the highest part of the most noble philosophical science, for it is the culmination of metaphysics. Metaphysics, which is the science of being as such (being *qua* being), investigates the properties and first causes of being. However, it cannot have God directly as its object precisely because it only employs natural reason, and God always remains naturally unseen by the mind because He infinitely transcends all His creatures. He can thus only be known as the transcendent First Cause and Final End of being. God is known as the *hidden first principle*, but not as the "protagonist" of the science of metaphysics.

Because of its elevation and difficulty, Plato and Aristotle assigned metaphysics the last place in the pedagogical order of the sciences. Since the mind attains to what is unseen on the basis of what is seen, and since God is understood only as the first cause of creatures, we must study the creature before we can ascend to the First Principle. In fact, it was the opinion of Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas that metaphysics is a science for the mature man.<sup>25</sup>

In the natural order of knowledge, God is the *last* subject to be studied. Philosophical reason can grasp, in a rigorous way, that He is the cause of being and its final end only at the end of the long road of philosophy.<sup>26</sup> And in this way, as St. Thomas points out, God is known by few, very imperfectly, at the end of a lifetime, and often with the admixture of great errors. In the supernatural order of Revelation, on the contrary, God is the *first* known, for the first thing that God reveals is Himself, as when He spoke to Moses in the burning bush. He makes Himself known as a personal God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as He who *is*. God Himself is the "protagonist" of sacred theology.

It follows that there are two orders of knowledge about God, one natural and the other revealed. Philosophical knowledge of God only attains to Him as First Cause. Sacred theology, on the other hand, enables men to have access to God as He is in Himself, in His personal reality, inner Trinitarian life, and free actions in history. Blaise

<sup>25</sup> See Plato, *Republic* 7.539–540; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.8.1142a15–20; St. Thomas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, lectio 12 (Marietti nos. 1210–1211), trans. C. J. Litzinger (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 384.

<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, natural reason can rather easily grasp the existence of God as first cause in a *spontaneous and non-rigorous fashion*, which would be in line with what St. Paul says in Romans 1:20–21 about men being without excuse for not knowing of the existence of God and His attributes.

<sup>24</sup> ST I, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1.

Pascal gave a famous description of the distinction of the two orders of knowledge about God in his “Memorial,” a short text which he wore constantly above his heart: “Fire. ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,’ not of philosophers and scholars.”<sup>27</sup>

These two orders of knowledge about God follow two opposing itineraries. Philosophy starts with the world and with man, in order to end up with a consideration of God as First Cause, insofar as He can be known through creation. Sacred theology, on the contrary, begins with God’s revelation of Himself as Trinity, and then, in the light of the Triune God and His revelation, proceeds to investigate His creation, and man in particular, who is ordered to return back to the Father in filial friendship with Him through Christ in the Holy Spirit. A good example of this theological order is the structure of St. Thomas’ *Summa theologiae*, which begins by studying God in Himself, then proceeds to look at creation, and concludes with the return of the rational creature to his Trinitarian source through grace and the moral life, the Incarnation, and the Church and her sacraments.

The distinction of the two orders of knowledge about God has been solemnly taught by the Church in the First Vatican Council:

The perpetual common belief of the Catholic Church has held and holds also this: there is a *twofold order of knowledge*, distinct not only in its principle but also in its object; in its *principle*, because in the one we know by natural reason, in the other by divine faith; in its *object*, because apart from what natural reason can attain, there are proposed to our belief mysteries that are hidden in God that can never be known unless they are revealed by God.<sup>28</sup>

Natural truths are those that can be attained through the natural light of reason. Supernatural truths are those which elude the grasp of reason alone, and can only be known through Revelation and the light of faith. These truths are called mysteries. A mystery, in the strict sense of the word, is a truth which cannot be known if God does not reveal it, and which, even after it has been revealed, cannot be properly and fully comprehended by the human mind except through the beatific vision.<sup>29</sup> St. Paul explains the sense of “mystery” in 1 Corinthians 2:7–11:

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; . . . But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,” God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

27 Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Classics, 1966), p. 285.

28 Dogmatic Constitution on the Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 4, DS 3015 (my italics).

29 For a classic exposition of the notion of mystery in Catholic theology, see Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946).

For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

This fundamental text of St. Paul contains a number of points. First, the mysteries of faith absolutely exceed the understanding of unaided reason, intuition or natural inclination, and for this reason are said to be “hidden.” Secondly, God has graciously revealed these mysteries through the Spirit. Third, the mysteries center on man’s supernatural end—“what God has prepared for those who love him.” Fourth, even after being revealed, the mysteries are comprehended only by God and His Spirit. Fifth, the gifts of the Spirit enable the spiritual man to attain a certain penetration into the mysteries, for “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). Sixth, the unspiritual man, although he can know revealed propositions, cannot enter into their meaning, “for they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14).

In its discussion of supernatural truths, the First Vatican Council cites this text of St. Paul to explain the limits of our understanding of supernatural mysteries:

Nevertheless, if reason illumined by faith inquires in an earnest, pious, and sober manner, it attains by God’s grace a certain understanding of the mysteries, which is most fruitful, both from the analogy with the objects of its natural knowledge and from the connection of these mysteries with one another and with man’s ultimate end. But it never becomes capable of understanding them in the way it does truths that constitute its proper object. For divine mysteries by their very nature so exceed the created intellect that, even when they have been communicated in revelation and received by faith, they remain covered by the veil of faith itself and shrouded, as it were, in darkness as long as in this mortal life “we are away from the Lord; for we walk by faith, not by sight” [2 Cor 5:6f].<sup>30</sup>

God reveals the mysteries so that they can be understood in some manner, both through the activity of sacred theology and the gifts of the Spirit. However, the mysteries, except in the light of glory, can never be understood in the same way that the mind can grasp natural truths accessible to unaided reason.

Examples of mysteries include the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, Redemption, sanctifying grace, the election of Israel and the Catholic Church, original justice and original sin, the seven sacraments, heaven, the resurrection of the body, the eternity of hell, the divine maternity of Mary, and the vision of God as man’s final end.

Of course, as stated above, the Revelation of God is not limited to supernatural mysteries, for He can also reveal truths of the natural order that are accessible to reason.

30 Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 4, DS 3016.

These truths include God's existence,<sup>31</sup> His unity,<sup>32</sup> His omnipotence<sup>33</sup> and perfect goodness,<sup>34</sup> His omniscience,<sup>35</sup> His freedom and providence,<sup>36</sup> His justice and mercy,<sup>37</sup> the spiritual nature and immortality of the soul,<sup>38</sup> man's free will,<sup>39</sup> and the Ten Commandments<sup>40</sup> and other precepts of the natural moral law,<sup>41</sup> and God's judgment of man's works<sup>42</sup> followed by reward and punishment in the hereafter.<sup>43</sup>

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31 See Exodus 3:14: "God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."

32 See Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD."

33 See Wisdom 11:17: "Thy all-powerful hand, which created the world out of formless matter..."

34 See Exodus 33:19: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

35 See Psalm 139:1–16; Wisdom 15:18–19: "For great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything; his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every deed of man."

36 See Matthew 6:25–33.

37 See Exodus 34:6–7: "The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"; Wisdom 15:1: "But thou, our God, art kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy"; Ephesians 2:4–5: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

38 See Wisdom 3:4: "For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality"; Matthew 22:31–32: "And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

39 See Genesis 4:6–8: "The LORD said to Cain, . . . 'sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it'; Wisdom 15:14–17: "It was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination. If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water: stretch out your hand for whichever you wish. Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him."

40 See Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

41 See, for example, Leviticus 19.

42 See 1 Samuel 2:10: "The LORD will judge the ends of the earth"; Psalm 96:10: "He will judge the peoples with equity"; Matthew 25; Acts 17:31; 2 Timothy 4:1.

43 See Daniel 12:3–4: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."