

## 2. How is Philosophy Different from Theology?

It must be stated at the beginning that philosophy is distinct from theology. Thomas Aquinas would want you to understand this at the outset. Philosophy means, "love of wisdom" and theology means, "study of God." Many people assume theology and philosophy are the same thing or philosophy is the study of world religions. This is not quite right. Philosophy regards natural knowledge and theology regards supernatural knowledge. We might also say that philosophy pertains only to what we can know by raw reason, whereas theology pertains to truths known through prophecy or divine revelation. When the Greek philosopher Plato discussed whether the human soul existed after death, he was engaged in philosophy - a reasoned argument. However, when Moses spoke of the will of the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," he was engaged in revealing divine truths. This accords with theology. Philosophy does not appeal to prophecies or divinely revealed information - theology does. Philosophy is the body of knowledge that we can know by reason. Theology is the body of knowledge that we can know by divine revelation.

**Contemporary Philosophers Don't Accept This:** Contemporary philosophers and contemporary theologians operate with implicit assumption that they are absolutely different from one another and entirely unrelated. Thomas Aquinas did not see it this way. Thomas held the two disciplines as distinct, but not divided and certainly not contradictory. For Thomas, philosophy was the "handmaiden" of theology. This means that the power of reason and the truths known by reason are able to aid and assist men in theology. The key is to understanding Thomas Aquinas is seeing philosophy and theology as distinct but not unrelated.

For example, Thomas holds that a pagan living on an island in the middle of nowhere can know the truth that God exists. This is something that unaided reason can lead a person to know. It is a philosophical truth that does not require religion. There have been plenty of people in history who believed in one God without the help of the Bible. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero are examples of pagan thinkers who postulated a highest God who reigned over all. Other philosophical truths include the fact that God is different from creation, that humans are different from other animals, that humans have a soul, and that there are moral laws. "Thou shalt not kill" is a philosophical truth that can be known by reason. Even these moral norms can be known without recourse to religion or the Bible.

**Thomas as Philosopher:** Thomas Aquinas identifies these as philosophical truths and expects that a person using right reason can come to know them. Now, Thomas also holds that there are truths that can never be known by reason, but are

nevertheless true. For example, Thomas believes "God is the Blessed Trinity" is a revealed truth. He grants that the Trinity cannot be known by reason alone. It is revealed by God and held by faith. Similarly, "baptism is a sacrament" or "Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead," are theological truths known by revelation and apprehended by faith. Here's a table illustrating the distinction:

### **Philosophical Truths Known by Reason**

- God exists
- God is one
- Humans have immortal souls
- Do not steal

### **Theological Truths Known by Divine Revelation**

- Jesus is the Son of God
- Heaven and Hell
- Baptism is a sacrament
- Jesus shall judge the living and the dead

The examples on the left are the philosophical truths known by reason. The examples on the right are theological truths known through divine revelation. Thomas Aquinas denotes philosophical truths as "preambles of faith" (*praeambula fidei*). The word *praeambula* comes from the Latin *prae-* meaning "before" and *ambulare* meaning "to walk." Thus, the "preambles of faith" are those things that "walk or go before faith."

**What Can a Pagan Know?** A pagan can know there is a God and know that he has an immortal soul long before he becomes a Christian. For Thomas Aquinas, the theological truths like those in the right column answer the "so what" questions occasioned in the left column. For example, "If there is a God and I have a soul, then what do I do about it?" The philosophical question leads to a theological question.

Recall from the life of Thomas Aquinas how certain philosophers in Paris, the Averroists, had claimed philosophical truths contradicted theological truths. The Averroists either claimed philosophy was correct and theology was wrong, or they claimed there could somehow be truths that contradicted each other. For Thomas, this could not be true since God is the author of both columns - philosophical truths and theological truths. Both are true and both complement one another. The philosophical truths find fulfillment in the theological truths. As Thomas says

elsewhere, "grace perfects nature." Thomas might have also said, "theology perfects philosophy."

Recall also how certain pious Christians, when feeling threatened by the philosophical Averroists, wanted to throw out the left-hand column of philosophical truths. They wanted only theological or religious truths. They even speculated that all truths were granted by a direct and divine illumination so that God had to particularly give grace to the mind even to know things such as "two plus two equals four." Thomas Aquinas also resists this religious error to reduce all truth to divine revelation. Instead, Thomas Aquinas holds that the realms of nature and grace, philosophy and theology, reason and faith are distinct but complementary. He repeatedly uses the term "twofold" to express their relationship to one another.

### **What You Should Know about Philosophy and Theology**

In summary then, we have established the following teachings of Thomas Aquinas:

- Philosophy and theology, like reason and faith, are complementary because God is the author of both.
- Philosophy pertains to reason alone. Theology pertains to divine revelation.
- It is the error of the Averroists to privilege philosophy against theology.
- It is also an error to deny philosophical truths for the sake of defending theology.