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0521821401 - Summa Theologiae: Questions on God

Edited by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow

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Question 1

The nature and scope of sacred doctrine

In order to confine the scope of my inquiry, I must first investigate the nature and range of sacred doctrine,¹ on which I have ten questions to raise:

1. Is there any need for this teaching?
2. Is it a science?²
3. Is it one science or many?
4. Is it theoretical or practical?
5. How does it compare with other sciences?
6. Is it wisdom?
7. What is its subject?
8. Does it employ arguments?
9. Does it rightly employ metaphorical or figurative language?
10. Can we interpret its sacred writings in different senses?

Article 1: Is any teaching needed apart from what philosophy provides?

1. It seems that we need no teaching beyond that of philosophy. For we should not seek to know what lies beyond our reason. As Ecclesiasticus

¹ I.e. Christian theology, the setting forth of what the Christian faith teaches about various matters.

² Aquinas uses 'science' to describe bodies of truths, not a method of discovering truths. Aquinas thinks of sciences as deductive systems; the conclusions of a science deduce conclusions from its primary assertions or 'first principles' and so unfold their contents. To know a proposition by grasping its deduction from a science's 'first principles' is to know it 'scientifically' within that science; the 'first principles' are either self-evident or accepted from another science. To know a proposition which is not self-evident 'scientifically' is to know it in the best possible way.

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says, ‘Do not seek after things above you.’³ But philosophy deals well enough with what lies within the range of reason. So, additional teaching seems unnecessary.

2. Moreover, we can only be taught about some being or other. For we only know the true, and the true and being are convertible.⁴ But the philosophical sciences⁵ deal with all beings, even God. So we call a part of philosophy ‘theology’, or ‘the science of God’, as the Philosopher makes clear in his *Metaphysics*.⁶ So, there is no need for teaching other than what philosophy can provide.

On the contrary, 2 Timothy says, ‘All divinely inspired scripture is useful for teaching, reproving, correcting, and instructing in righteousness.’⁷ But divinely inspired Scripture does not belong to the branches of philosophy which come from human reasoning. So it is useful to have a divinely inspired science over and above philosophical ones.

Reply: It was necessary for human salvation that there should be instruction by divine revelation in addition to the philosophical sciences pursued by human reasoning – chiefly because we are ordered to God as an end beyond the grasp of reason. As Isaiah says, ‘Without you, God, no eye has seen what you have prepared for those who love you.’⁸ But we have to know about an end before we can direct our intentions and actions towards it. So, it was necessary for the salvation of human beings that truths surpassing reason should be made known to us through divine revelation.

We also stood in need of being instructed by divine revelation even in matters to do with God which human reason is able to investigate. For the truth about God that reason investigates would have occurred only to few, and only after a long time, and only with many mistakes mixed in. But our salvation, which lies in God, depends on us knowing the truth about him. So, in order that our salvation might be effected more suitably and surely, we needed to be instructed by divine revelation concerning God. We had, therefore, to have sacred doctrine by revelation – teaching over and above that given to us by philosophical sciences.

³ Ecclesiasticus 3:22.

⁴ I.e. whatever is true is something that exists, and whatever exists is something that is true.

⁵ The disciplines of philosophy, particularly metaphysics. ‘Sciences’ indicates the grade of knowledge Aquinas thinks they provide.

⁶ Aristotle (384–322 BC), *Metaphysics* 6.1, 1026a19; 1.2, 983a10. Also, possibly not authentic, 11.7, 1062b2 and 12.6–7, 1071b3–1073a12.

⁷ 2 Timothy 3:16. ⁸ Isaiah 64:4.

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Hence:

1. Human reason should indeed not pry into things above human knowledge. But we should welcome them in faith when God reveals them to us. As the passage in Ecclesiasticus continues, ‘You are shown many things that are above the understanding of human beings.’⁹ And sacred doctrine contains such things.
2. When there is more than one aspect under which a given item can be known, there will be more than one science concerning it. After all, both an astronomer and a natural scientist might demonstrate the same conclusion – that the earth is round, for instance. The former, however, employs a middle term that is mathematical (i.e. one that prescind from matter), whereas the latter employs a middle term that takes matter into account. So, there is nothing to stop what is treated by philosophical sciences (in so far as it can be known by natural reason) from also being dealt with by another science (in so far as it is known by the light of divine revelation). The theology that belongs to sacred doctrine therefore differs in kind from the theology ranked as a part of philosophy.

Article 2: Is sacred doctrine a science?

1. It seems that sacred doctrine is not a science. For every science advances from self-evident first principles.¹⁰ But sacred doctrine advances from articles of faith,¹¹ which are not self-evident since not everybody grants them. As 2 Thessalonians says, ‘not all have faith’.¹² So, sacred doctrine is not a science.
2. Again, a science is not concerned with individual things. But sacred doctrine deals with individual events and people (the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and so on). So, sacred doctrine is not a science.

On the other hand, Augustine says that ‘this science alone is credited with begetting, nourishing, protecting, and strengthening the most saving faith’.¹³ These functions belong only to the science of sacred doctrine. So, sacred doctrine is a science.

⁹ Ecclesiasticus 3:23. ¹⁰ The primary premises from which conclusions in a science are deduced.

¹¹ The assertions of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. ¹² 2 Thessalonians 3:2.

¹³ St Augustine (354–430), *On the Trinity* 14.7. *PL* 42.1037.

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Reply: Sacred doctrine is a science. Yet bear in mind sciences differ from each other. Some work from first principles known by the natural light of the intellect – such as arithmetic, geometry, and the like. Others, however, work from principles known by the light of a higher science. Optics, for instance, begins from geometrical principles, and music proceeds from arithmetical ones.

Sacred doctrine is a science in the second sense here, for it proceeds from principles made known by a higher science – that of God and the blessed. So, just as music relies on principles taken from arithmetic, sacred doctrine relies on principles revealed by God.

Hence:

1. The first principles of any science are either self-evident in themselves or can be traced back to what a higher science recognizes. Such are the principles of sacred doctrine, as I have noted.
2. Sacred doctrine deals with individual things not because it is primarily concerned with them but to introduce examples for our lives (as in moral sciences), and to make clear the authority of the people through whom divine revelation (on which sacred Scripture or teaching is based) has come down to us.

Article 3: Is sacred doctrine a single science?

1. It seems that sacred doctrine is not a single science. For, according to Aristotle, ‘one science has one kind of subject’.¹⁴ But the creator and creature, both treated of in sacred doctrine, are not contained in one kind of subject. So, sacred doctrine is not a single science.
2. Moreover, sacred doctrine treats of angels, bodily creatures, and human conduct – all of which belong to different philosophical sciences. So, sacred doctrine is not a single science.

On the contrary, sacred Scripture refers to it as a single science: ‘He gave him the science of sacred things.’¹⁵

Reply: Sacred doctrine is a single science. For we gauge the unity of a faculty¹⁶ or habit¹⁷ by its object, considered not with regard to matter,¹⁸

¹⁴ *Posterior Analytics* 1.28, 87a38. ¹⁵ Wisdom 10:10.

¹⁶ A power, e.g. the powers to think or sense.

¹⁷ A disposition to use a power in a particular way, e.g. the habit of doing arithmetic correctly.

¹⁸ The particular things a power or disposition deals with.

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but with respect to some formal characteristic.¹⁹ Thus, for example, people, donkeys and stones all share one formal characteristic, that of being coloured, and colour is the object of sight. Now since, as I have already noted,²⁰ sacred Scripture looks at things with respect to them being divinely revealed, all divinely revealed things share in the one formal aspect which is the object of this science. They are, therefore, included under sacred doctrine as under a single science.

Hence:

1. Sacred doctrine does not draw conclusions about God and creatures equally. It is chiefly concerned with God, and it turns to creatures considered as being in relation to him, their origin and end. So, its unity as a science is not compromised.
2. Nothing prevents lower faculties or habits from being diversified by different subject matters that all fall under one higher power or habit, for the higher is related to its object under a more universal formality. Take, for instance, the common sense.²¹ Both visual and audible phenomena (perceptible to the senses) are included in its object. Yet, while gathering in all the objects of the five external senses, it remains a single faculty. Likewise, different classes of object separately treated by different philosophical sciences can be treated by sacred doctrine that retains its unity in so far as all of them are brought into the same focus, namely, in so far as they are divinely revealed. In effect, therefore, sacred doctrine is like an imprint of God's own knowledge, which is a single and simple knowledge of everything.

Article 4: Is sacred doctrine a practical science?

1. It seems that sacred doctrine is a practical science. For Aristotle says that 'a practical science has action as its end'.²² But according to the letter of James, sacred doctrine is directed to action: 'Be doers of the word and not only hearers.'²³ So, sacred doctrine is a practical science.

¹⁹ The trait in virtue of which particular things become the 'objects' of a power or disposition. It is because they are coloured that people, etc. are objects of sight, i.e. things that can be seen.

²⁰ 1a 1.2.

²¹ That which integrates the inputs of the five particular senses into a single sensory picture of the world.

²² *Metaphysics* 2.1, 993b21. ²³ James 1:22.

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2. Moreover, sacred doctrine is divided into the Old Law and the New Law. But law relates to moral science, which is practical. So, sacred doctrine is a practical science.

On the contrary, every practical science is concerned with what people can do. Thus ethics is concerned with human acts, and architecture is concerned with buildings. Sacred doctrine, however, is chiefly about God, whose first and foremost work is people. So, it is a theoretical science rather than a practical one.

Reply: As I have already said,²⁴ sacred doctrine, while remaining single, nevertheless extends to things belonging to different philosophical sciences because of the common formal factor that it considers in all things, namely, their knowability by illumination from God. While some philosophical sciences are theoretical and others are practical, sacred doctrine is both – in this being like the single science by which God knows himself and the things that he makes.

All the same, it is more theoretical than practical. For it is more concerned with divine things than with what people do. It deals with human acts only in so far as they prepare us for the perfect knowledge of God in which our eternal bliss consists.

This makes it clear how the objections noted above should be answered.

Article 5: Is sacred doctrine more noble than
any other science?

1. It seems that sacred doctrine is not more noble than any other science. For certainty is part of a science's value. But the other sciences (whose first principles are indubitable) look more assured and certain than sacred doctrine, whose first principles (the articles of faith) are open to doubt. So, these other sciences seem more noble.
2. Again, a lower science draws on a higher, as, for example, music draws on arithmetic. But sacred doctrine draws on philosophical learning. Jerome says that 'the ancient writers so filled their books with the theories and verdicts of philosophers that at first you are at a loss which to admire more: their secular erudition or their knowledge'²⁵ of

²⁴ 1a 1.3. ²⁵ The Latin here is 'scientia', translated 'science' elsewhere.

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the Scriptures'.²⁶ So, sacred doctrine has a lower standing than other sciences.

On the contrary, Proverbs describes the other sciences as its maid-servants: 'Wisdom has sent her maidservants to extend an invitation to the tower.'²⁷

Reply: Since the science of sacred doctrine is partly theoretical and partly practical, it ranks above any other science, whether theoretical or practical.

We reckon one theoretical science to be more noble than another first because of the certitude it brings, and then because of the dignity of its subject matter. The science of sacred doctrine surpasses the others on both counts. As to certainty, because theirs comes from the natural light of human reason, which can make mistakes, whereas sacred doctrine is held in the light of God's knowledge which cannot be mistaken. As to nobility of subject matter, because their business is only with things that reason can grasp, whereas sacred science leads to heights to which reason cannot climb.

And the practical science that is ordered to a further purpose is more noble than other practical sciences. Hence, for example, the science of governing is nobler than military science since the good of the military is directed to the good of the state. Now, in so far as sacred doctrine is a practical science, its aim is eternal happiness, and this is the final end to which all the ends of other practical sciences are ordered.

Hence it is clear that from every standpoint sacred doctrine is nobler than all other sciences.

Hence:

1. There is nothing to stop something more certain as to its nature from being less certain in relation to us because of the weakness of our intellect (which, as Aristotle notes, 'blinks at the most evident natural things like owls in the sunshine').²⁸ So, doubt about the articles of faith, which falls to the lot of some, is not because the reality they talk about is at all uncertain, but because human understanding is feeble. Nevertheless, as Aristotle also points out, the smallest grasp we can form of the highest things is more desirable than even a thorough grasp of the lowest ones.²⁹

²⁶ St Jerome (c. 345–420), Letter 70. *PL* 22.668. ²⁷ Proverbs 9:3.

²⁸ *Metaphysics* 2.1, 993b10. ²⁹ *On the Parts of Animals* 1.5, 644b31.

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2. Sacred doctrine can borrow from philosophical disciplines, not from any need to beg from them, but in order to make itself clearer. For it takes its first principles directly from God through revelation, not from other sciences, and it therefore does not rely on them as though they were its superior. Their role is subsidiary and ancillary, as is that of a tradesman to an architect or a soldier to a statesman. And that it turns to them accordingly is not from any lack or insufficiency within itself, but because of a lack in our intellect, which is more easily led to what lies beyond reason (and is set forth in sacred doctrine) by things known through natural reason (from which the other sciences begin).

Article 6: Is this teaching wisdom?

1. It seems that this teaching is not wisdom. For no teaching which takes its principles from elsewhere deserves the name of wisdom. As Aristotle remarks, ‘the office of the wise is to govern others, not to be governed by them’.³⁰ But sacred doctrine takes its first principles from elsewhere, as I said earlier.³¹ So, it is not wisdom.
2. Moreover, it is wisdom’s job to prove the principles of the other sciences, which is why we call it ‘the chief of the sciences’,³² as Aristotle makes clear. But sacred doctrine does not prove the first principles of the other sciences. So, it is not wisdom.
3. Again, this teaching is acquired from study. Wisdom, however, is acquired by infusion,³³ and is therefore numbered among the seven Gifts³⁴ of the Holy Spirit (as is clear from Isaiah).³⁵ So, this teaching is not wisdom.

On the contrary, at the beginning of the Torah Deuteronomy says, ‘This is our wisdom and understanding in the sight of the peoples.’³⁶

Reply: Among all human wisdom, this body of doctrine especially is wisdom, not only in some particular respect but unconditionally.

³⁰ *Metaphysics* 1.2, 982a18. ³¹ 1a 1.2. ³² *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7, 1141a16.

³³ Direct divine bestowal.

³⁴ Unearned benefits that God confers to aid the Christian life, including courage, piety, fear, counsel, understanding, knowledge, wisdom.

³⁵ Isaiah 11:2. ³⁶ Deuteronomy 4:6.

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It belongs to the wise person to regulate and judge, and one judges lesser matters in the light of a higher cause. So people are wise in some area of inquiry if they consider the highest cause in that area. Take, for example, architecture. We apply the terms ‘wise’ and ‘expert builders’ to the artists who plan the form of a house, not to their employees who cut the stones and mix the mortar. Hence the reference in 1 Corinthians: ‘Like a wise architect, I have laid the foundation.’³⁷ Then again, when it comes to human living in general we call prudent people wise because they direct human acts to their due end. Thus Proverbs says ‘Prudence in a person is a form of wisdom.’³⁸ So, we say that one who considers without qualification the highest cause of the entire universe (God), is supremely wise, which is why we say that wisdom consists in knowledge of divine things, as is clear from what Augustine writes.³⁹

Now, sacred doctrine most properly treats of God in so far as he is the highest cause – not only because of what is knowable about him from creatures, which philosophers have recognized (cf. Romans: ‘What was known of God is manifest in them’),⁴⁰ but also because of what he alone knows about himself and communicates to others by revelation. So, sacred doctrine is called wisdom in the highest degree.

Hence:

1. Sacred doctrine takes its first principles from no human science, but from God’s own knowledge,⁴¹ by which, as by supreme wisdom, all our knowledge is governed.
2. The first principles of other sciences are either self-evident⁴² (in which case they cannot be proved) or are proved in some other science through natural reason. What is distinctive to the knowledge of the science of sacred doctrine is that it comes through revelation, not through natural reasoning. For this reason, its function is not to establish the first principles of the other sciences but to judge them. For whatever we encounter in the other sciences which is incompatible with its truth we condemn as false. Hence 2 Corinthians alludes to ‘destroying counsels and every height that rears itself against the knowledge of God’.⁴³
3. Since wisdom’s role is to judge, there are two kinds of wisdom according to the two ways of passing judgement. It happens that

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:10. ³⁸ Proverbs 10:23. ³⁹ *On the Trinity* 12.14. PL 42.1009.

⁴⁰ Romans 1:19. ⁴¹ ‘Scientia’ or science. ⁴² See q. 2, a. 1c. ⁴³ 2 Corinthians 10:4–5.