

ESSAY
BA course year 2 no. 7
"The Trinity I. (De Deo Uno)"

How does the idea of God in the Old Testament develop into the God of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, without losing the oneness of God? How does the God revealed by natural reason harmonise with that revealed in scripture?

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1. Preface

Please notice that the whole essay is based on German literature (mainly on books and notes from the universities of Freiburg, Heidelberg and Mannheim). So it might happen that I had problems with the translation into English, then I used the German original word in brackets “()”. In most cases I've tried to translate it into English.

2. God in the Old Testament

In Deuteronomy 6,4 we find the irrefutable persuasion of the Old Testament that Yahweh is one and only (*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”*). The Old Testament doesn't show any “real” Trinitarian structure of God, it shows more a jealous God, who does not accept any other gods beside of him (Ex 20,5; Dtn 5,7). But this view is only one-sided, as we find in other passages of the Old Testament important basics for the later Trinitarian believe. They can be found e.g. in fundamental statements about God as a living God (Psalm 42,3; 83,3; Dan 6,27 etc.). God is for the Old Testament in His unity and uniqueness at the same time fullness of life.

Remarkable in the OT are the personifications of the divine Word (Psalm 119,89; Wisdom 16,12) and of the divine Spirit (Jes 63,10; Wisdom 1,7). Alfons Deissler says “This personifications show the richness of Yahweh's life and are obviously the first tentative anticipations of the new-covenant development of the multi-personal being of the one nature of God.” That's where the New Testament could continue.

The personal knowledge of God in the Old Testament has to lead to the question, who is the corresponding person opposite of God. There can't be an I without a You. The Old Testament can't find a real answer, as its picture of the living God isn't finished here, it's left open for the final revelation of God.

3. God in the New Testament

The New Testament gives us a clear answer to the open question of the Old Testament concerning the person opposite of God: Jesus Christ, den Son of God, the eternal You of the Father. In the Holy Spirit we get into community of the love of Father and Son.

The basic of the revelation of the New Testament is the fact that Jesus doesn't only reveal through word and deed but also with his whole life and in his person God as Father. Jesus reveals God in a unique way as his father, while we get sons and daughters of this father through him. In the eschatological character of this revelation we can see that God is from eternity God and Father of Jesus Christ, so to say that Jesus belongs as the Son of God to the eternal nature of God.

In the New Testament we can find much more Trinitarian aspects, pictures of the Trinity, than in the Old Testament:

One example is the baptism of Jesus by John (Mk 1,9-11; Mt 3,13-17; Lk 3,21f.). Here a voice from heaven reveals Jesus as the beloved son, while the Spirit floats down as a dove from heaven (Mk 1,10f).

An important Trinitarian witness is also the order to baptise in Mt 28,19: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you." In this passage we find the three "persons" Father, Son and Holy Spirit "with equal rights" side by side. But important is to see that the New Testament keeps the view of the one God of the old tradition, as we see in 1 John 5,7f: "So there are three witnesses, the Spirit, water and blood; and the three of them coincide."

Another important picture of God in the view of Jesus is "God is love" (1 John 4,8). First this means that God did reveal himself through Jesus Christ as love. But this revelation does not only show the community of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but additionally the disciples and the whole mankind together in their community. This revelation-message of "God is love" is not only a message of being but also a message of salvation.

The Old Testament calls God "Father" to express His Lordship over and care for creation and Israel. The Fatherhood within God is only revealed at the same time as the Sonship within God. That would explain why the New Testament calls God "Father" so many more times than the Old, and why a new dimension of tenderness in the divine Fatherhood is revealed by Jesus' addressing the Father as "Abba". Crying "Abba" with his human voice and obeying His Father with his human will Jesus shows his Human side; at the same time this form was taken in time of an eternal communion between the Word (Jesus) and His Father. So Jesus can be seen as "Son" on two levels, as a man and as God.

Chapters 14 to 16 in John's Gospel for example present the Holy Spirit as personal. Here we find him as a third in relationship to the Father and the Son. The Spirit is sent by the Father because he proceeds from Him (John 15,26) and he is also sent by the Son and through the mediation of the incarnate Son's redeeming work (e.g. John 14,26).

4. Jesus' roots in the Old Testament

"Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one, only Lord..." (Mk 12,29f.: compare with Dtn 6,4).

That's how Jesus answered, according to the tradition by Mark, when he was asked by a scholar about the first commandment. With this sentence and the following one concerning the love to God he quotes the text of the book of Deuteronomy, which is spoken as a creed by the Jews twice a day. In this way Jesus is shown as someone who is deeply rooted in the Jewish relation to God, and this roots can be found again and again in the gospels (e.g. he has been to feasts in the temple of Jerusalem, he has been praying in the synagogue – see Luke chapter 2 and 4).

Like the Pharisees Jesus interpreted the written torah (see Mark 12,26) and took part in many discussions of his time – e.g. the Sabbath-commandment or question on the greatest commandment.

5. God revealed by natural reason and God revealed by Scripture

Thomas Aquinas has been thinking about this question, how God revealed by natural reason (“Natural Theology”) can harmonise with God revealed by Scripture. In the following I'd like to explain this Thomist' thinking.

Natural Theology is the study of what can be known about God apart from revelation. It tries to show that certain truths about God (e.g. that God exists, that there is only one God, that He is Good) are demonstrable by reason. In a sense, the things even belonging to Natural Theology are contained in Scripture insofar as Scripture speaks of many things which could be discovered by humans without God revealing them.

Sacred doctrine essentially treats of God viewed as the highest cause, for it treats of Him not only so far as He can be known through creatures just as philosophers knew Him -- "That which is known of God is manifest in them" (Rom. I. 19)-- but also so far as He is known to Himself alone and revealed to others. (Summa Theologiae Ia question 1, article 6)

Thus, for Aquinas, on the one hand, there are things that God has revealed about Himself which could be known by reason alone (Natural Theology), and on the other hand, there are things that He Himself alone knows about Himself, which He reveals to others, and which are, and must always be in this life, objects of religious belief (Sacred Doctrine). The light of reason can provide the warrant for holding the former as true; only the authority of God provides the warrant for believing the latter. Implicit in this distinction is the understanding that the same thing cannot be the object of knowledge and belief at the same time. If one knows, i.e. has discovered by the use of natural reason, that God exist, then one cannot at the same time believe this truth as something that God has revealed. Aquinas calls what reason can know about God, i.e. the object of Natural Theology, preambles to faith:

The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature and perfection the perfectible. (S.T. Ia, q. 2, a. 2)

Aquinas' notion of preambles to the faith, however, does not mean that believers first prove that there is a God and that He is one, etc., and then come to assent to things which He has revealed about himself. Believers generally don't distinguish between the sorts of theology to which the truths contained in Scripture belong to. Especially among those who had their faith taught to them from infancy, believers generally accept that there is a God, and that He is One, for instance, precisely because it is part of the faith that they have had all of their lives, which faith also tells them that the Son of God became man. Knowledge of the preambles, then, are not necessary for one to be a believer. Nor are they sufficient.

...when natural theology is successful it does not provide any grounds for faith in any strict sense of grounds. That is, if natural theology succeeds in its initial task, to prove the existence of God, no "de fide" truth follows from this as a consequence. If it did, the "de fide" truth would be transformed into a known truth ... (Ralph McInerney, "On Behalf of Natural Theology," in *Being and Predication* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986))

The notion of preambles to faith assumes that there are some truths which can only be known as a result of God's revelation, which no amount of human reasoning could ever begin to penetrate. To claim that there are preambles to faith, i.e. things about God which human reasoning can penetrate, does not change this basic assumption. Thus, the notion of preambles to faith precludes even the possibility that one can prove the truth of, e.g. the Catholic Faith. It also precludes the possibility that a non-believer must (by logical necessity), on the basis of Natural Theology, become a believer. "The fact is that no one became a believer as the result of an argument. Of course God could use the occasion of philosophising to give one the grace of faith, but then He can use any occasion He wishes." ("On Behalf of Natural Theology,") But the contention that there are preambles to the faith does mean that something that has been revealed could in principle be proved and thus known.

On the other hand, it may appear that one who has religious faith that God exists and has revealed Himself to humankind must either (temporarily) abandon that faith in order to engage in Natural Theology, or do so insincerely, as though already assured of the conclusions of her proofs. That is, the possibility of engaging in Natural Theology, e.g. of proving the existence of God, does not seem to be open to a believer since, being a believer, she already holds as true what a proof is supposed to allow one to conclude, i.e. "that God

exists." Since a proof is a sort of discovery, it seems that in order to sincerely engage in a proof, one cannot already hold that the conclusion is true.

...(I)t seems to follow that any believer who sets about formulating a proof for the existence of God is in a position of having to say, "I don't know whether God exists." But that seems to amount to a denial of the existence of God or at least a denial of the truth of the proposition "God exists." Fortunately, this is not the case. To believe that God exists is not to know that God exists. The believer can ask himself if the proposition which he holds to be true on God's say-so could be held on some other basis, say that of a proof. While he is pursuing this possibility, he does not cease to hold that the proposition "God exists" is true, though his warrant for its truth is authority, revelation. The denial of "I know God to exist" is not equivalent to a denial of "God exists." The truth of the proposition must be held in some way or other, by faith or knowledge. While one cannot hold it by faith and knowledge at the same time, one need never stop holding it to be true (by faith) while one looks to see if it can be known to be true (by a proof).("On Behalf of Natural Theology,")

Consequently, for a Christian to engage in Natural Theology, thereby claiming that it is possible to prove that God exists and is one, does not diminish the fact that it is still necessary to believe (with religious faith) in Christ, the Trinity, the Resurrection, and the Forgiveness of Sins. By the same token, the acceptance of the conclusions of Natural Theology does not entail or necessitate religious faith.

In fact, Aquinas generally believed that the prospects were pretty poor for unaided human reason to achieve very much success even in its own sphere of Natural Theology.

For truth about God, such as reason can know it, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. (S.T. Ia, q. 1, a. 1)

The pursuit of Natural Theology, while not directly leading to religious faith, nevertheless is of benefit to believers in their faith. First of all, it gives one better insight into nature of revelation, for it shows to what extent the things contained in Scripture could have been discovered by human reason. For the Christian this really shows how little knowledge about God can be gained apart from His self-disclosure, and how much grace is given as an utter mystery. The Christian can, thus, marvel at how much more God reveals (that He is Three Persons, that the Son became Man to save us from our sins, that He gives us the promise of the Resurrection) than we would ever have suspected had He not told us.

Ultimately, however, the fact that natural theology is possible is itself a matter of belief. Thomas, like most medievals, was fond of noting the fact that God has revealed through St. Paul that "The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood from the creation of

the world through things that are made, both his eternal power and divinity" (Romans I, 20). Thus, it appears, God believes that there are things about Himself which can be known by unaided human reason. "And yet, involved in our faith is the tenet that, apart from faith, the God who has revealed himself to man, though not as he has revealed himself, can be known by man." (McInerny, "Philosophizing in Faith," in *Being and Predication*). Thus, the believer might engage in Natural Theology in order to do what Scripture says can be done.

If Natural Theology gives any help to supporting the truth of faith, and does not simply benefit from the wider and deeper perspective of Sacred Theology, it is that Natural Theology can remove impediments to the faith. For if it can show that the reasoning of those who oppose the faith are false, then it can at least show that the Christian is not unreasonable in believing the things that God has revealed. This indirect aid of Natural Theology to the believer serves to remind her that the things she believes with religious faith are concerned with the truth, and could be falsified if the unbeliever proved God did not exist.

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