



In St. Paul's letter to the Romans, we read: "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20). Here St. Paul sums up several passages of Old Testament wisdom literature (Wis 13:1-9, Ps 19:1-4, Sir 42:15-43:33). The wisdom literature affirmed that the existence of God can be known not only by the divine revelation to the chosen people, but also by human reason contemplating the world of nature all around us.

When this teaching was received by the Church, the early Christians observed that indeed there is a general consensus of the nations to the existence of some supreme Deity, and that some of the philosophers had offered arguments for the existence of God. As time passed, Christian theologian-philosophers then further developed those arguments for the existence of God and his attributes.

All of this has led the Catholic Church to teach definitively that "God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 36). In a world of much skepticism, this teaching can seem simply incredible. The purpose of this three-part essay is first to make several points about the nature and extent of the natural knowledge of God, then to offer a philosophical argument for the existence of God important for understanding the doctrine of creation and the meaning of evolution.

What, according to the Church, is the nature and extent of the natural knowledge of God?

The teaching on the natural knowledge of God is open to common misinterpretations. When the Church teaches that God can be known by the light of natural reason, she is not affirming that it is so obvious as to be undeniable to all people everywhere and at all times, that God exists. She

is not teaching that the existence of God can be verified by the methods of modern sciences. She is not affirming that there is one special philosophical proof or argument out there that will convince all people everywhere to know that God exists. What, therefore, is the Church saying?

The Church is presupposing our earlier account of reason. Human reason is open to reality as a whole in all of its aspects, seeks something beyond all the scientific facts, seeks to know the *meaning* of all things, and is capable of such

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knowledge to some extent. Reason is wisdom seeking. The Church also understands that, like all natural or human forms of knowledge, the knowledge of God *gradually develops* both in the lives of individuals and in societies, and consequently there are higher and lower forms and degrees of the natural knowledge of God depending on the conditions in which human beings live and develop. And the Church understands that there are many obstacles to the development of the highest forms of the natural knowledge of God. For these reasons, widespread disbelief in the existence of God is consistent with the teaching that God can be known by the natural light of reason alone. For the natural light of reason, and especially the natural knowledge of God, can falter in adverse conditions of life.

What are some of the conditions that favorably or adversely affect the natural knowledge of God? Where there is intellectual aptitude, interest, time for contemplation, a tradition of inquiring into the existence of God, and a will



to worship God once known, such as in some of the ancient philosophical schools, the natural knowledge of God grows stronger and develops in its higher degrees and forms. Where these conditions are lacking, the natural knowledge of God—at least in its higher forms—flounders or is even opposed. Furthermore, the Church acknowledges that because of the fallen condition of the human race, the natural knowledge of God faces special obstacles in its development:

Though human reason is, strictly speaking, truly capable by its own natural power and light of attaining to a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, who watches over and controls the world by his providence, and of the natural law written in our hearts by the Creator; yet there are many obstacles which prevent reason from the effective and fruitful use of this inborn faculty. For the truths that concern the relations between God and man wholly transcend the visible order of things, and, if they are translated into human action and influence it, they call for self-surrender and abnegation. The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are

the consequences of original sin. So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful. (CCC, no. 37).

One could add that where skepticism about God, skepticism of metaphysics or scientific thinking dominate the atmosphere, where the practice of cultivating natural knowledge of God has been rejected, where the tradition of learning it has been lost over the generations, or where a tradition of opposing it has been institutionalized and disseminated, widespread development of the higher forms of the natural knowledge of God is further impeded. For all of these reasons, one can say with St. Thomas Aquinas that if the human race were left to itself, without any special revelation from God, only a few people, after a long period of time, and still with an admixture of error, would develop the natural knowledge of God in its higher forms (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, ch. 5). His statement illuminates our contemporary experience of the widespread cultural dominance of atheistic naturalism or physicalism.

In the next two parts of this essay, we will consider how human beings come to know the existence of God with the use of their reason. T☉E

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