

Finding God and Being Found by God

This unit begins by focusing on the question “How can I know God?” In any age this is an important and relevant question because it is directly related to the question “How do I know there is a God?” If there is no way to know God, then there is no way that I can know if there is a God.

Students (and teachers!) today are steeped in a post-modern worldview that at its core believes there is no way to know objective truth; there is only the truth that I personally observe and believe. This worldview presents an obstacle to accepting that there is objective truth that has been revealed by God (which we call dogma). But there is also an opportunity with post-moderns to make a reasonable case, employing various arguments that have been part of the Church’s intellectual tradition through the centuries, that there are many ways by which God can be personally known. These arguments take us into the areas of theological anthropology and natural revelation. Because some of these arguments appeal to our experience, they are very compatible with a post-modern worldview.

Theological Anthropology

Anthropology is the study of what it means to be human and has many subfields in modern science: biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, archaeology, and linguistic anthropology, to name some. Theological, or Christian, anthropology seeks to understand what it means to be human in relation to the divine. We might pursue this from two different directions. First, we can ask, “What does our human nature reveal to us about God?” Second, we can ask, “What does our understanding of God reveal to us about our human nature?” Following the lead of the great patristic fathers and scholastic theologians, we seek to answer the first question without resorting to Divine Revelation.

What Does Our Human Nature Reveal to Us about God?

(See also *Catechism*, 27–30)

The first thing we notice is that throughout all of human history, human beings have displayed religious beliefs and practices. The archaeological evidence from ancient cultures reveals that most ancient peoples believed in divine beings, gods and goddesses. This is true of cultures in virtually every era of history and region of the world. Many of these cultures had highly developed religious belief systems that were a central element of their cultural identity. Religious rituals and ceremonies and the presence of religious leaders such as priests, monks, shamans, and so on, were an integral part of these cultures.

This is not only true of past cultures. Today over 85 percent of people worldwide identify with some religious tradition. According to *The World Factbook* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007), 33.32 percent of the world’s people identify themselves as Christians (Roman Catholics make up 16.99 percent of the world population; Protestants, 5.78 percent; Orthodox, 3.53 percent; Anglicans, 1.25 percent). Muslims account for 21.01 percent of the world’s people, Hindus, 13.26 percent; Buddhists, 5.84 percent; Sikhs, .35 percent; Jews, .23 percent; Baha’is, 0.12 percent; and other religions, 11.78 percent. The figures for people who do not identify with a religious tradition are: nonreligious, 11.77 percent; and atheists, 2.32 percent. What does this widespread presence of religious belief and practice tell us about human nature and the search for God?

There are some who claim that the history of religious belief and practice is a projection of the human ego, a sort of security blanket that humans create when faced with the great unknown, particularly death itself. We create gods and goddesses in our own image to explain the things that we cannot explain. These modern agnostics and atheists are often aggressive in saying that this has caused



humankind more harm than good throughout history; not only have we projected our need for security onto our gods and goddesses, we have also projected our greed and aggression, resulting in numerous wars and injustices in the name of religion.

Religious people should not discount this analysis. There is truth in the claim that humanity all too often creates gods in our own image and after our own desires. The Bible calls this idolatry, and the prophets and Jesus challenged this practice of worshipping gods of our own making. The history of Christianity includes many examples of injustices and violence caused by misguided and sinful believers who falsely acted in the name of God. But just because this is so does not mean that all religious yearning and all the many manifestations of the human search for the divine are only projections of our fears and need for control.

To believe that God is only a projection of our egos, a rational person has to ignore the many occasions when religious belief and practice has led to societal order, sacrificial service, personal serenity in the face of pain and hardship, and the experience of communion with something greater than ourselves. How could a god only of our own imagination lead to such unlikely behaviors and experiences? It is because of these many positive experiences and outcomes that theological anthropology makes the case that the human person has a built-in “antenna,” if you will, for connection with God. And why would this antenna for the divine be such an integral part of human nature unless it had been placed there by God himself?

In support of this position, we also draw upon the experience of individual persons. We are aware of our inner orientation to moral goodness, our freedom to shape our own destiny, our appreciation for truth and beauty, our longing for happiness and eternity. Further, many people have had transcendent experiences that “go beyond” that which can be perceived only by the five senses. These experiences are, as far as we know, unique to human beings. They are not merely oriented to the survival of the species, even though some researchers continue to seek proof they are such. Rather they point to a longing present within us for something “more.”

Some people have spoken and written eloquently of the restlessness within their lives, the fleetingness of the pleasures of the world, and the spiritual search for something “more,” a search that is ultimately satisfied only by the discovery of God’s presence in their lives. Two classic books about this search are Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* and Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The classic line from *Confessions* that is quoted in the student book comes from this longer passage:

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we men, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we also carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and draw us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.

Grant me to know and understand, Lord, which comes first. To call upon you or to praise you? To know you or to call upon you? Must we know you before we can call upon you?

With these words Augustine gives voice to a theological anthropology that claims that human nature itself points to the reality that human beings are made for communion with God. The very fact that we can and do search for God is a reasonable proof of God’s existence. This is one aspect of what we call natural revelation (more on that in just a bit).



What Does Divine Revelation Reveal about Human Nature?

(See also *Catechism*, 355–421)

Those who are open to it have further help in understanding our human nature through Divine Revelation. This is a very brief summary of how Divine Revelation, communicated through the Scriptures and Tradition, helps us to understand more deeply the human condition.

It is no mystery why our hearts long for beauty, justice, goodness, and communion, because that is what human beings were created to know. The figurative stories of Creation in the first chapters of Genesis reveal that God created human beings to live in perfect holiness and justice—that is, to be in intimate, loving, perfect communion with God and with one another. God created us in his image in order that we might share in his love for all eternity. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it: “Being in the image of God, the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead” (357).

Divine Revelation also teaches that the human person is composed of both a body and a soul. The body is our physical principle; it is what human beings have in common with all the rest of creation. But the soul is our spiritual principle, our innermost aspect; it is created by God, not our human parents. God unites our soul with our physical body at the moment of conception. “The unity of the soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature” (*Catechism*, 365). The soul is immortal; it lives on after we die until it is ultimately reunited with our resurrected body.

Through the symbolic story of the Fall in chapter three of Genesis, we learn that God’s plan for human beings was thwarted by the sin of our first parents. Through their Original Sin, all human beings have lost the original holiness and justice—the perfect, loving communion with God and with one another—that God intended for us. Our physical bodies now experience death, it is much easier for human beings to commit sin, and we no longer commune with God easily and naturally. But our connection with the divine is not broken completely; it has only been corrupted. Thus Divine Revelation supports what we have reasonably concluded from natural revelation by explaining:

- the persistent presence of religious belief and practice throughout human history
- the restlessness of our hearts, which can be thought of as our immortal souls longing to be in full communion with God
- our attraction to goodness, truth, and beauty, the qualities of God
- why we only find our true happiness and joy when our communion with God has been fully restored
- why nature and reason alone (natural revelation) are not enough to help human beings fully understand our true nature and destiny (because the Fall has diminished our capacity for this)

Natural Revelation

(See also *Catechism*, 279–289, 341)

Though the Church has always emphasized the critical importance and centrality of Divine Revelation, Christians have recognized that God also reveals himself outside of the Scriptures and Tradition. Put



another way, even if someone never had access to Divine Revelation, that person could still know God through the use of human reason. The *Catechism* puts it this way: “Human intelligence is surely already capable of finding a response to the question of origins. The existence of God the Creator can be known with certainty through his works, by the light of human reason, even if this knowledge is often obscured and disfigured by error” (286).

There are at least four commonly recognized ways in which this “natural revelation” is made manifest: through creation, through the natural order, through human nature, and through human conscience. These are not four unique and separate ways, but four interconnected lenses that support and reinforce one another to create what John Henry Cardinal Newman called a “convergence of probabilities” by which the existence of God is revealed through nature and reason. We have already looked at human nature; now we take a very brief look at three other natural avenues of revelation.

Revelation through Creation

The beauty, order, and vastness of creation have awed human beings in many ages. Creation gives witness to a creative power and an organizing intelligence far beyond anything we can know or imagine. It is a reasonable conclusion that something caused the universe to be: a Divine Creator, or God. This is a reasonable conclusion not only for ancient peoples, but also for us today as modern science takes us into the far reaches of the universe and explores the mysteries of subatomic particles. While there are many scientists who see Creation as a purely mechanical construct evolved through statistical chance, there are also many scientists who see in Creation clear signs of the guiding hand of God (see *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*, by Stephen Barr, for example).

Numerous Scripture passages, particularly in the Psalms, see the evidence of a Creator God in Creation. See especially Psalms 19, 29, 33, 104, 136, 148.

Revelation through the Natural Order

Those who observe the relationships between elements of nature and created beings, including human beings, find an intrinsic order in these relationships. This order leads to balance, harmony, and fruitful life—what we sometimes call (especially with Disney’s influence) the circle of life. When this order is violated, the result is disequilibrium, disease, barrenness, and unnatural death. This order witnesses to an intelligent Creator, who built an order into Creation. When this order is respected, life flourishes; when it is not respected, life is diminished.

Modern people are not the first ones to observe this. Ancient peoples were excellent observers of the patterns and order in life. The Bible’s Wisdom literature (the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, and Sirach) gives voice to the ancient Israelites’ reflection on God’s presence in the order of Creation and human relationships: “My son, if you receive my words \ and treasure my commands, \ Turning your ear to wisdom, \ inclining your heart to understanding; \ Yes, if you will call to intelligence, \ and to understanding raise your voice; \ If you seek her like silver, \ and like the hidden treasure seek her out: \ Then will you understand the fear of the Lord; \ the knowledge of God you will find” (Proverbs 2:1–5).

Revelation through Human Conscience

The fact that human beings have a moral conscience has been an argument for the existence of God since the early Church Fathers. Saint Gregory the Great said, “For by the very fact that God created man as a rational creature, He puts a stamp on . . . all men so that individuals know their own deeds” (*Moral*



Teachings from Job). Why would we feel compelled to be good, even when it provides no immediate benefit for ourselves? Why do we imagine and hope for a world without war, injustice, and deceit? These things make the most sense only if we have within us a God-given conscience for what is right and what is wrong, a divinely given prediction for acting justly.

Indeed, it is the existence of human conscience that provides the basis for the Church's teaching that salvation is available to those who do not know Christ and his Church:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 16)

Summary

Throughout history philosophers and theologians have appealed to the use of reason to make a case for or against the existence of God. The most well known of these efforts is the work of the great scholastic philosophers and theologians of the high Middle Ages. And of these none is probably better known than the five proofs for the existence of God postulated by Thomas Aquinas. This is why these proofs are presented in the student book and explored in the teacher guide.

Though none of the arguments from natural revelation will sound conclusive to most modern minds, we can make a compelling case that belief in God is completely reasonable. By pairing class work on natural revelation with presentation and discussion of Divine Revelation, we can reach a wider cross-section of our students who are at different places in their own quest for God. The appeal to human experience that is the basis for natural revelation is critical for influencing post-modern thinkers.

