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St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Theology
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In general, theology is the study of God. Theology can either be approached from the standpoint of natural reason, or from divine revelation (“sacred theology”).\(^1\) St. Thomas Aquinas explained that “theology included in sacred doctrine differs in kind from that theology which is part of philosophy.”\(^2\) Theology from the perspective of divine revelation has been defined as “faith seeking understanding.”\(^3\) Sacred theology can be further defined as “the disciplined exploration of revelation.”\(^4\)

For a fuller understanding of sacred theology we can turn to Aquinas, who discussed what theology is in Question 1 of the First Part of his *Summa Theologiae*. In particular, Aquinas outlined why man needs divine revelation for salvation, described the science of sacred doctrine, discussed the object of the science of sacred doctrine, and explained how the unity of God’s knowledge affects the science of sacred doctrine.

**Divine Revelation and Salvation**

Man needs divine revelation for his salvation. Man’s end is God, and because God is so utterly other and our finite minds cannot exhaustively comprehend the infinite (i.e., God), divine revelation is important in helping humans properly direct themselves towards God. Aquinas explained that “it was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed

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\(^3\) Ackeren, "Theology" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 891–902.
by God . . . because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason. . . . But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end.”

Although some individuals may realize salvation without being exposed to divine revelation (e.g., those who follow the natural law written on their hearts, babies who die in the womb), as a race/species divine revelation is necessary for the salvation of humankind. Aquinas pointed out that “the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few” if humankind’s only route to God was through philosophy and the use of reason. God blessed us with divine revelation in order to make salvation more possible for all of humankind and to provide greater certainty about the Truth and the proper path to God.

**The Science of Sacred Doctrine**

Aquinas declared that “sacred doctrine is a science.” A “science” is "any branch or department of things knowable which presents related data with certitude, proof, system, completeness." Put another way, science is "a body of related data that is systematic, complete, evidenced, and certain” (when used here, "evidence" includes not just empirical data, but also "reasoned or rational evidence" such as in mathematics). In other words, science can mean not just the natural sciences, but also any subject that is systematically investigated and structured in a reasonable, logical, "evidence"-based manner.

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5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.1 resp.
7 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.1 resp.
8 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.1 resp.
Aquinas stated that sacred doctrine is the type of science that “proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science.”¹² This “higher science” from which sacred doctrine proceeds is “the science of God and the blessed.”¹³ That is, “sacred science is established on principles revealed by God.”¹⁴ Here Aquinas is explaining that the foundation for sacred doctrine is divine revelation. All of divine revelation is contained within the Church’s “single deposit of faith,” which is made known to us through sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture.¹⁵ In summary, Aquinas understood sacred doctrine as a subject of study that is systematic in nature and structure, meant to be investigated in a reasonable, logical, evidence-based manner, and that is founded upon and derived from the study of sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture.

**The Object of Sacred Doctrine**

The object of the science of sacred doctrine is primarily God.¹⁶ More specifically, the science of sacred doctrine is focused on and concerned with divine revelation.¹⁷ It has been argued that sacred doctrine has more than one subject (e.g., angels and humans), and more than one class of subjects (e.g., God and creation), and “therefore sacred doctrine is not one science.”¹⁸ Aquinas explained that although different subjects and classes of subjects are considered within sacred doctrine, sacred doctrine is still “one science” since it has only one “formal object,” because it always has God – as understood through divine revelation – as its

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¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, I.1.3 resp.
¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, I.1.3 obj. 1, obj. 2.
ultimate primary concern. Those secondary subjects are not examined strictly on their own terms, but rather they are examined and analyzed in the light of divine revelation. The science of sacred doctrine is both broad and focused. This is because it can include any subject, to the extent that divine revelation touches upon that subject.

**The Unity of God’s Knowledge**

The science of sacred doctrine includes any subject that “can be known through divine revelation.” This means that subjects that fall within both the practical sciences and the speculative sciences are also examined within the one science of sacred doctrine. However, sacred doctrine is not only a practical science or only a speculative science, but rather it “includes both.” The unity of God’s knowledge safeguards sacred doctrine as both a speculative and a practical science. According to Aquinas, God “knows both Himself and His works.” As mentioned above, the subjects that are being studied within the science of sacred doctrine are explored and examined through the lens of divine revelation – and therefore it is one science. Being one science that studies multiple subjects, some which can be classified as “practical” and others as “speculative,” sacred doctrine is not properly classified as either a speculative or a practical science. It employs both a practical and a speculative approach, all the

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20 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.3 resp., ad 1, ad 2.
while having one single formal object: “God is the object of this science,” as understood through divine revelation.

Divine revelation encompasses both revelation directly about God and revelation specifically concerning creation. Revelation specifically concerning creation ultimately helps us understand God and has God as its ultimate primary object. Therefore, divine revelation, whether it is about God or the different aspects of His creation, should not be studied as two (or more) distinct sciences. Divine revelation should be treated as an interlocking whole, rather than being treated in a fragmentary disjunctive manner. Sacred doctrine is one single science, both speculative and practical, with many different secondary subjects but only one primary object: Understanding God through divine revelation.

**Conclusion**

Aquinas helps explain what theology is by delving into the study of divine revelation. Aquinas first shows how divine revelation is necessary for humankind. Then, Aquinas shows how the study of divine revelation (sacred doctrine) is its own unique science with a single formal object, and explains how many different subjects fit within the one single science of sacred doctrine. Sacred theology is aimed at understanding God through divine revelation. Any subject that is touched upon by divine revelation can help us better understand God and be included within the study of sacred theology.

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References


