

## Knowledge of God's existence



### Key words:

- **Empiricism:** a way of knowing that depends on the five senses.
- **Grace of God:** God's unconditional and undeserved gifts.
- **Faith:** voluntary commitment to a belief without the need for complete evidence to support it.
- **Immediate revelation:** where someone is given direct knowledge of God.
- **Mediate revelation:** when someone gains knowledge of God in a secondary, non-direct way.
- **Natural theology:** drawing conclusions about the nature and activity of God by using reason and observing the world.
- **Protestantism:** a form of Christianity which rejects the authority of the Catholic Church and places greater emphasis on the Bible and on personal faith.
- **Wisdom Literature:** a genre of writing from the ancient world, teaching about wisdom and virtue. In the Bible, books such as Proverbs and Job are classed as Wisdom literature.

### How do we gain knowledge as individuals?



#### Plato

- True knowledge is gained by the soul in a permanent, eternal world.
- We already have knowledge when born, we do not gain it but simply recognise it from the world of the Forms.

#### Aristotle

- Can only learn anything meaningful from science, looking at the physical world and conducting repeatable experiments.
- Knowledge grows as we have new experiences (this is through the senses).
- Some people argue that all knowledge is gained through the physical world.



#### Knowledge/reason/logic

- Being born with knowledge, learning through senses.
- Taking deductive steps to work out what is true.
- We also learn from sources of authority (teachers/parents etc).
- We have to have a degree of faith that what they are telling us is true.

#### Religious believers

- Limited knowledge gained in physical world, teaches us nothing about spiritual and supernatural truths.
- Also knowledge gained through reason or sense experience does not help us learn how to live a moral life.
- Christians = can learn about God through their own efforts (prayer/meditation/observation of nature/logical powers of human reason)
- Do they need to have truths about God revealed to them?

### Christianity – how can God be known?



- God cannot be understood through the senses as he is not physical.
- God is said to be beyond the realms of the rational and beyond the capabilities of the human mind.
- Do not accept that empirical experience and logical reasoning are the only methods of gaining knowledge available to humanity.

#### Knowing God

- For religious believers, God can not only be known in the way that we know facts, but also known in the way that we know other people. E.g. can know that the prime minister exists BUT this is different to knowing him personally.
- God can be known not just in the sense of knowing of his existence and his attributes, but also known personally in a relationship.

#### Natural and revealed theology

- Natural = is about gaining knowledge of God through the powers of human reason and observation.
- Revealed = is about God choosing to reveal himself directly to humans (through scripture and experience).
- Both of these can help people understand religious truths, however, some argue that revealed theology is the only way we can gain reliable knowledge of God and that natural theology should be rejected.



#### Natural theology

- Attempts to discover truths about the existence of God by using human experience and reason.
- Paley = natural world presented clear evidence of a designer God.



#### The Bible – Psalms

- **'You made them rulers over the works of your hands'** = evident that Christians have the role of being good stewards (looking after God's creation).
- By looking at God's creation humans realise the power and unfathomable wisdom of God.

#### Paul's letter to the Romans

- People have made God angry because they have ignored the obvious fact of God's existence.
- People have chosen to live Godless lives of immorality.



#### Aquinas

- Natural theology in demonstrating that Christian belief was reasonable. He argued that reason and observation could be used in support of Christian belief.

### Natural theology as arising from an innate sense of the divine

- Some argue that knowledge of God is an intrinsic part of human nature.
- Cicero = in all cultures and all times in history, people have had a sense of a divine presence.
- Cultures who have no knowledge of other cultures develop similar religious beliefs, looking to an invisible, powerful and spiritual being which they worship with rituals.
- Are we then all born with a sense of the divine?

### Evidence to support the idea that we have an innate sense of the divine

<u>Philosopher/Evidence</u>	<u>What do/does they/it suggest?</u>
<b>The Bible</b>  	God makes people in his own image (Genesis 1:27) and breathes into Adam with his own breath (Genesis 2:7) – suggesting spark of divinity within each human – is there something in humans which is designed to seek and respond to God?
<b>John Calvin</b>  	Sensus Divinitas (innate sense of God) <b>'There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity'</b> Universal to all, not just Christians Anyone who can reflect on natural beauty of world can understand God and his attributes. This knowledge can be gained by all, including 'even the most unlearned and ignorant people' Epistemic distance – created by humans. God has made it impossible for humans to ignore him and if they fail to recognise God in the world it is their fault.
<b>Butler/Newman/C.S Lewis</b>  	We all have feelings of guilt when we do something wrong, even if no one sees us, and we all feel satisfied when we know we have done the right thing. This inner voice of conscience is evidence not only that God exists but of a God who makes moral demands of his people and wants them to follow his commandments.



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### Natural theology as arising from the order of creation

- God can clearly be seen in the order and beauty of creation.
- Cicero = **'for what can be clearer and more obvious, when we have lifted our eyes to the sky, and have gazed upon the heavenly bodies, than that there exists some divine power of exalted intelligence by which these are ruled?'**
- We naturally recognise and understand that beauty comes from God.
- Calvin = the natural beauty of the universe as a **'sort of mirror'** of God. Creation reflects the nature of God in its beauty and orderliness. Can learn about God through nature. Can understand God's power and eternity, care for humanity, justice and mercy, through observing the natural world with senses and contemplating it with their reason.



### Revealed theology

- How God chooses to show himself to people.
- Distinction between natural and revealed theology began to be made in the Middle - Ages.
- Believed that natural theology could:
  - Show the existence of God
  - The existence of the human soul
  - The existence of human free will
- Revealed theology was special = did not rely on intelligence but was available to everyone through faith.
- Some truths are difficult to discover through reason alone, therefore God reveals them to us e.g. the doctrine of the Trinity, the truth about Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, ideas about life after death.
- Christians believe that the fundamental, distinctive teachings of their faith have been given to them by God as revelation (making clear something that was hidden).



### Immediate and mediate revelation

- Immediate = God makes himself directly known to people.
- Mediate revelation = when people learn about God and gain knowledge of him less directly.

### Revelation through faith and God's grace

- A much fuller knowledge of God can be gained through faith and by God's grace in giving knowledge of himself through the Holy Spirit.
- *What is faith?*
  - Type of belief held despite concrete evidence.
  - It is considered to bridge the gap when sense experience and reason cannot give an answer to a question (people make a 'leap of faith')
  - The lack of evidence and lack of reasonable support for a belief is compensated for by an effort of will, where the person chooses to commit to the belief on trust.

### Aquinas on faith and reason

- In *Summa Theologica* he explores how empirical and logical knowledge, which he called 'scientia' is certain because we can see the evidence in front of us, either through our senses or by using our reason.
- Faith does not have this firm self-evident certainty and therefore is a voluntary choice.
- He calls this **'an act of the intellect assenting to the truth at the command of the will.'**
- He argued we cannot have faith and scientific knowledge about the same thing as they provide us with different answers/responses.



### The grace of God

- It is believed that people can only have knowledge of God when God graciously decides to give it.
- **God as the Holy Spirit is believed to:**
  - Give the prophets of the OT the right words to say at the right time.
  - Guide the writers of scripture so that they produce the word of God with God given authority.
  - Give people wisdom by which to understand what has been revealed to them.
  - Give people faith by which to believe the Christian message
  - Give people confidence to share Christian faith, even in times of danger.
  - Enable people to live a Christian life on a personal level.
  - Strengthen the Church as a community of believers.
  - Bring people to salvation.

### How revelation is understood in the Bible

- Bible does not make a distinction between natural and revealed theology.
- **God wants to communicate with people in different ways:**
  - Through the beauty of the world.
  - Through the events of history.
  - Through traditional wisdom.
  - Through the words of Prophets.
  - Through religious experiences and visions.
  - Through the natural laws and design of the material world.
  - Through the person of Jesus.
  - The Bible itself.
  - The life of the Church.



### Acts 17:16-34

- Combines elements of natural and revealed theology.
- Passage focuses on how the first followers of Jesus worked to spread the Christian message after Jesus' death.
- Describes the difficulties the apostles encountered and how the Holy Spirit helped them to overcome challenges, bring people to faith and establish the earliest Christian communities.

### Context to Acts

- Apostle Paul goes to Athens = place where there was many idols to different Gods.
- First time Paul had attempted to present the message of Christianity to an audience with a philosophical background, people who were used to reasoning and debate as methods of uncovering the truth.



### Analysis of Acts

- Paul' speech had limited success in converting his listeners to Christianity and as a result he changed the way he delivered his message in future speeches.
- Calvin = refers to this passage in his own writings, where he uses it to argue that everyone has the capacity and the disposition to believe in God, although not everyone recognises God or chooses the Christian life.
- Acts points out = all people exist only because God is sustaining their existence, their life comes from God and everything they do is only possible because of God and therefore people are 'living in God', whether they realise it or not.
- Calvin = sheer number of people who believe in God suggests that an awareness of God is a natural part of what it means to be human.

### Can the existence of God be known through reason alone?

### Natural and revealed theology

- Natural theology provides people with a sound and rational basis for faith, and revealed theology supplies the detail of that faith.

### Karl Barth

- Took a strong position in arguing that natural theology was almost a kind of idolatry, where people made up and worshipped false ideas, believing that they were so clever and they could access absolute and eternal truths.
- Believed it was a form of arrogance to imagine that fallible human reason could lead people into any knowledge of God.
- Believed that people could only know God when he God chose to disclose himself to them – Revelation only happens when God decides.
- Believed that God was ultimately revealed in Christ = therefore no other truth found in other religions unless they were agreeing with Christianity.
- Only Christ could break through the barrier of human sin to reveal God and therefore any attempt to understand God without Christ was wrong.



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### Defenders of natural theology

- Barth's view is too extreme = if human reason is given no part to play in the knowledge of God, then people have no way of judging between true and false beliefs.
- One person might make a claim that God has disclosed a truth to him, and another might make a 'similar' claim, but the two revealed truths might be contradictory – need human reason to play a role.

### Problems of natural theology

- Human reason is too limited to reach an understanding of God.
- An understanding of the nature of God is beyond reason – not irrational, but non-rational.
- Difficulty remains that God is not something that can be grasped and understood through logical reasoning. Arguments for the existence of God based on reasons are not able to lead people to certain knowledge of God.



### Is faith sufficient reason for belief in God's existence?

- Faith does not just provide insufficient reason for belief, but it is actually harmful, encouraging people to be lazy in their thinking and avoid trying to reach any kind of certainty.
- **"Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence."** Richard Dawkins, Untitled Lecture, Edinburgh Science Festival, 1992.
- He likens belief in God to belief in the tooth fairy – this belief cannot be conclusively disproved but there is no evidence to support them, and therefore no good reason to commit to them.

### Hume

- **"A wise man...proportions his belief to the evidence"**
- Hume made this claim in the context of his discussion on miracles – his argument was that rather than letting faith or superstition cloud our judgement, we should look at the evidence before us and decide on that basis what is appropriate to believe.



### Might the Fall have completely removed all natural human knowledge of God?

- Augustine = the Fall of Adam and Eve was so catastrophic as it created such a barrier between God and humanity.
- Augustine argued that Original Sin prevented people from being able to know God because they had been corrupt in their will and could never be holy enough to approach God through their own efforts.
- Karl Barth = argued that God reveals himself to us and when he wants to, and all our own attempts to gain knowledge of God on our own will fail.
- We need the help of God to gain knowledge about him.
- We have finite capacities to form concepts and to understand, and we have a sinful nature, so without the help of God we are never going to reach knowledge through our own efforts, we will simply create distorted and misleading ideas about God.
- He argues that attempts at natural theology are unnecessary as God has revealed himself perfectly and finally in Jesus.
- Thomas Aquinas = God gave us the ability to use our senses and our reason for a purpose, as well as giving us revealed knowledge of God and therefore both can be used.
- He argued that we should use revealed knowledge to guide us when we use our reason to work out natural knowledge of God, but both can be used together to complement each other.
- Towards the end of his life, Aquinas gave up writing about God as he argued that the knowledge of God in this world could only reach the most basic level and that God is essential unknowable.
- It could be argued against Barth that the Bible does suggest that humans can gain natural knowledge of God.
- If the Bible is revealed by God, and that revelation from God suggests we can learn truths naturally, then perhaps both natural and revealed theology are helpful.



### Is natural knowledge of God the same as revealed knowledge of God?

- Could be argued on some levels they are the same, on the grounds that everything that exists, does so because God has chosen it should.
- Natural knowledge of God has been distinguished from revealed knowledge of God in terms of the ways in which we arrive at such knowledge.
- Natural knowledge = through reason.
- Revealed knowledge = through faith.
- However, if it is argued that God can reveal truths to us through reason, and our reason was given to us so that we might learn more about God, then the distinction between the two becomes blurred.
- Christians would argue there is a difference between the kinds of knowledge that can be gained through reason and through revelation.
- Through revelation = Beliefs about creation of world and humanity, beliefs about the nature of Christ, the Trinity and life after death.