

The Role of Argumentation in Theology

In the eighth article of the *Summa theologiae*'s initial question (*ST* I.1.8), Thomas Aquinas offers a consideration about theological method, inquiring whether the theology that pertains to sacred doctrine (i.e., sacred theology) is argumentative, proceeding by manner of argument. Thomas's response is complex, but affirmative: Yes, sacred theology makes both appropriate and necessary use of argumentation, but in different ways and for different purposes.

An initial distinction that Thomas draws concerns the differentiation of arguments from reason and arguments from authority, both of which have a certain place within sacred theology.

With regard to *arguments from reason*, Thomas clarifies that these cannot be mustered in proof of the principles of sacred theology, that is, the articles of faith, since these are beyond reason's grasp—as such, they are only knowable by divine revelation, and are received and held by faith (see *ST* I.1.8c, ad1). Nonetheless, rational argumentation still has an appropriate place in sacred theology, and this in the following three ways (see *ST* I.1.8c, ad1; Feingold, pp.156–68):

1. *argumentation from fittingness* seeks to provide clarification of the articles of faith (or points related thereto) by establishing their harmony or agreement with other truths, either revealed or non-revealed;
2. *theological deduction* goes further than argument from fittingness, seeking to provide not just clarification but demonstration of an article of faith (or a point related thereto) insofar as it is a corollary to another article or articles of faith that are admitted to be true;
3. *philosophical demonstration* seeks to provide demonstration not of the articles, but of the preambles of faith (i.e., divinely revealed truths about God and things related to God that can be grasped by natural reason on the basis of the created order), which are the rational premises to the articles of faith and are presupposed to them.

With regard to *arguments from authority* (i.e., appeals to claims made by others who may be in a position to know), Thomas states that at least some of these are necessary for sacred theology, as it receives its first principles on the basis of the revelation that is given by God through humans (see *ST* I.1.8ad2). Yet place also is given to other sorts of arguments from authority (e.g., claims made by Church doctors and philosophers), which taken together provide us with the following hierarchy of authoritative claims (filled in from elsewhere in Thomas's writings):

1. claims that are probative (i.e., demonstrative) and proper to sacred theology
 - 1A. claims made by the human authors of Scripture
 - 1B. claims implied in or by Sacred Tradition
 - 1C. infallible teachings of the Magisterium regarding matters of faith or morals
2. claims that are probable and proper to sacred theology
 - 2A. claims made by Church doctors
 - 2B. claims implied in or by ecclesial traditions
 - 2C. non-definitive teachings of the Magisterium on faith and morals
 - 2D. claims made by more recent theologians and Christian thinkers
3. claims that are probable and extrinsic to sacred theology
 - 3X. claims made by (pagan) philosophers