

Christian theology topic 3 – Knowledge of God's existence

General Revelation (Natural theology)

- God can be known through **reason and observation** of the natural world

Innate knowledge

1. **The unknown God:** Paul's speech to the Athenians convinces the people that **they are actually worshipping the true God even though they're not sure he exists.** Desire to know the "unknown God" has been a constant quest of Greek philosophers.
2. **Universal consent argument:** Cicero, **if so many people believe** in God he must exist/ it is reasonable to believe so – universal human belief
3. **Humans are religious beings:** Catechism, **wide spread practice of prayer and rituals** etc. "*The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God*"

John Calvin

- **Sensus divinitatis:** a "seed of religion" which was the **natural human inclination** to carry out religious practices such as rituals and prayer
- One argument for the innate sense is that every human **society has some form of religious practice**

The natural world

- The world provides a point of contact between us and God, which reveals things about his nature
 - **Point of contact:** God's revelation in the world which provides humans with the first step to knowing him as a redeemer
 - **Principle of accommodation:** God is an infinite being that finite humans cannot fully comprehend or know, so **he reveals his appearance to us more simply through nature.** This doesn't reveal his essence, but is a "sort of mirror" or reflection of his invisible nature. We can know some of these "sparks of his glory" as love, justice and mercy...
1. **Beauty and moral goodness – connection with God (CATHOLICISM, CALVIN)**
 - Humans have an "**openness to truth and beauty**" – they read books, listen to music, paint etc.
 - Catholics and Protestants: Human sense of beauty and moral goodness are the foundations of knowledge of God
 - **Natural law:** Catholicism states that all humans have an **innate sense of right and wrong**, small children quickly develop a sense of justice! Show's God exists.
 - **Conscience:** Calvin said this was a gift given by God which means "joint knowledge" between us and God about what is right and wrong, his **way of guiding us.**
 2. **Order and design (AQUINAS, PALEY, CALVIN)**

Clear signs and organization and purpose that it is reasonable to infer that it must have a designer. As this designer must be greater than the universe it would be referred to as God.

 - Aquinas, if his Five Ways, argued for purpose
 - Paley used the Watch Analogy to argue for design
 - A God who: **set up** the initial conditions of the world (or it wouldn't exist), **sustains** all material causes (or the world would cease to be), orders these causes to be **purposeful** (otherwise there would be chaos)
 - "*Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in this universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory*" – Calvin
 3. **Process theology**
 - **God acts in tandem with the world** and works alongside it
 - Unlike classic theology, **God is not totally unknowable**, but loves his creation and works with it – process theologians **don't make a sharp distinction between natural and revealed theology** as every moment in creation God revealing his participation in nature

Special Revelation (revealed theology)

- God can only be known when he **lets himself be known** e.g. through a prophet, scripture or prayer

Why we need faith over reason

The fall and human finiteness

- Original sin has removed our ability to connect with God through conscience, sensus divinitas etc. “in this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God”
- We must regenerate ourselves through prayer and baptism
- Catholics believe that the Fall did not cut us off completely from God, but made it harder for us, our sinful nature distracts us from now knowing God

Faith

- **Unformed faith** – can find intellectual reasons for a belief but cannot believe it’s true
- **Formed faith** – this is faith which wills to accept or “assent” what it can believe through the intellect
- In Calvin’s Protestant teaching, faith is:
 - Firm and certain knowledge – only possibly as revealed knowledge by Christ
 - Willingness to believe – faith “is given to anyone who is willing to accept it.” It’s an emotional and spiritual experience of assurance, “sealed upon our hearts” (a big, on-going process)

God’s Grace

- You need God’s grace as well as faith to complete the relationship
- Aquinas – faith can only be justified by grace through the Holy Spirit (presence of God) – the Catechism describes this as a moment of intimacy with God and the “*grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith*”
- For Calvin, the gift of the Holy Spirit is to aid a person’s faith, which will have been damaged after the Fall

1. Revelation through Christ (CATHOLICISM, CALVIN)

- God’s revelation is through the Trinity – father, son and holy spirit (Trinitarian view)
- But even God’s revelation in Christ isn’t his true essence, just adapted to fit our finite minds – allows us to understand him emotionally and physically as a human
- Calvin describes Christ as the “*mirror and mediator of the divine*” – mirror because he mirrors qualities of love and mercy which we would otherwise not understand, and mediator because he brings people to believe in God
- Catholics agree with Calvin, but think you still need faith to interpret God’s revelation as Christ, “*it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries*”

2. Revelation through scripture (propositional)

- Christians see the Bible as God’s active and specific action in the world – this knowledge cannot merely be gained through experience, it also needs scripture to explain it
- The words of the Bible are “*speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit*”
- The Catechism warns that faith should not be reduced to the Bible because the “*Christian religion is not a “religion of the book*” – also need personal encounter with God

Scholars’ views: Reason or Faith

Aquinas – reason and faith (Catholic approach)

- Faith is volitional – it is a choice. It involves free will, I ought to choose to believe in God
- Faith is stronger than knowledge because of God’s grace – it’s a higher power than connects us with God, reason is a human function and doesn’t connect us to God
- Reasons props up faith
- Truths of faith = less certain than truths of reason – we can doubt our faith, but cannot doubt reason
- Reason is proof e.g. cosmological argument, but faith is truth
- Have to except “life everlasting”, “resurrection” etc. as there is no empirical evidence to prove it – you simply have to believe or have faith

John Locke – reason is faith

- Tabula rasa – blank slate: we have experiences and learn throughout life
- Our capacity to reason and arrive at the truth is a gift from God, judged by how well we use our reason, which is a gift from God (expects us to use it)
- Faith is a matter of being properly guided by reason – reason would suggest that the existence of God is highly probable
- For Locke, faith is a rational belief in God

Kierkegaard – revelation and faith

- **Faith and reason are opposed** - From the perspective of reason, faith in God must always appear absurd
- **Reason cannot know God** or what God is
- Reason is the **currency of thought** – we think always with rational thought, and to access God we have to rise above reason

Martin Luther – faith (Protestant approach)

- During the Reformation, emphasized the **corruption of reason** (due to Original Sin and the Fall)
- **Rejects rational arguments** – God is something different and much greater than us, **we have a limited capacity to know God**: rationalizing his existence means we can understand his existence, which we can't
- **Reason reduces God** to the level of the human mind “reason is a whore” – anyone can access God, but he's in charge!
- Faith and revelation in the Bible, faith is total surrender to the promises of God
- Faith is only as **strong as the one in whom we believe** – the living God, power of God to give you eternal life

Tischendorf and Strauss – biblical criticism

- Bible stories, i.e. Genesis, are **myths**
- Bible is flawed – has changed over the years, **not the same as the word of God at the beginning**
- The problem is... If Protestants just rely on **faith**, through scripture and the Bible, **if the scripture is inaccurate we won't be able to access God**
- **Codex Sinaiticus** (350AD) – **earliest form of the Bible**, but very different to Bible today!
- 35,000 of corrections – Christians thought it was the **unchanged and unchangeable word of God**... the corrections show it isn't

Barth/ Brunner debate

Barth and general revelation/ faith and reason

- Natural theology is just a prompt towards God's grace, it is not enough for us to receive redemption from it
- Nature is a starting point! Also use:
 1. **Imago Dei** – formal image (spirit) of God is uncorrupted (otherwise we wouldn't be different from animals) so we can use this to connect with God
 2. **Nature** – general revelation through surroundings is proof of God's existence, but the fall prevents us from knowing anything about him through this, only that he exists
 3. **Conscience** – guilt and moral guidance prove God exists
 4. **True knowledge** – revelation through Christ and faith is more helpful than nature

Brunner and special revelation/ faith

- Original sin completely corrupted our nature and ability to connect with God through general revelation
- Influenced by Nazism – danger of reduces God's power to human reason
- 1. **Corrupt material self/ spiritual self** – original sin prevents the formal self from revealing anything to the material self
- 2. **Rejection of conscience and nature** - Guilt and seeing the beauty of nature come AFTER God has acted, so we see his effects but never see him at the same time he acts. It's as if God has left the world, we are too late. Result of God's mercy and grace, not points of contact.
- 3. **Order of creation in nature comes from knowledge in scripture** – we only see order of nature and our surroundings as a result of reading the Bible and understanding God's intentions through this. Barth says Brunner puts too much on human ability to reason, not the uniqueness of faith