

# Is *Sacra Doctrina* Theology?

Brian Davies OP

Thomas Aquinas begins the *Summa Theologiae* with the question *de sacra doctrina, qualis sit et ad quae se extendat*. Readers of this question often assume that he is here asking about the nature of Christian theology. This assumption is open to question and in what follows I shall briefly explain why that is so and what Aquinas actually does mean by *sacra doctrina*.

## I

The most obvious reason for refusing to equate *sacra doctrina* in Aquinas with 'theology', as that word is commonly used, is that much that would now pass for theology would not be recognised by Aquinas as *sacra doctrina*. In most modern discussions, 'theology' does not mean 'teaching we agree with'. It means what people who earn their living as theologians say or write. On that basis, editors and librarians, whether Christian or not, will class as theology the views of people as different as Augustine and Troeltsch, Luther and Cajetan, Schillebeeckx and Ratzinger. These pairs of authors, and others one could mention, have wildly divergent things to say, but all of it counts as theology. For Aquinas, however, not all of it would constitute *sacra doctrina*. That, for him, is nothing but true teaching. For him, *sacra doctrina* is indeed 'teaching we agree with'. Or, more precisely, it is teaching we *ought* to agree with. As we read in Ia,1,1, it is something revealed by God.

In the second place, 'theology' does not translate *sacra doctrina*. The proper translation is 'holy teaching' or 'sacred doctrine'. In Latin there is a readily available word to translate into English as 'theology', viz. *theologia*. But in Ia,1 Aquinas is not talking about *theologia*. He writes about *sacra doctrina*. In his usage, *theologia* (which is not a common word in Aquinas and which occurs only three times in Ia, 1) has a much broader sense than *sacra doctrina* (which in Ia,1 occurs eighty times). It means, roughly, 'discourse about God', including natural theology as practised by people such as Aristotle, whom Aquinas certainly did not think of as being in receipt of *sacra doctrina*. In Ia,1,1 Aquinas writes: '*theologia* included in *sacra doctrina* differs in kind from that *theologia* which is part of philosophy'. That, by itself, should warn one against translating *sacra doctrina* as 'theology'. Matters are obviously more complicated. In Ia,1,7 Aquinas explicitly calls *sacra*

*doctrina* by the name *theologia*. But the context makes it clear that his aim is to insist, against an objection, that *sacra doctrina* always concerns God. As he puts it: 'In *sacra doctrina* all things are treated of in terms of God, either because they are God himself or because they relate to him as their beginning and end'. In Ia,1,7, *sacra doctrina* is only *theologia* because it is discourse about God. And a full reading of Ia,1 will show that for most of the time in that text it is something more precise, as is implied by the passage from Ia,1,1 just cited.<sup>1</sup>

## II

What, then, is *sacra doctrina* for Aquinas? I suggested above that 'holy teaching' or 'sacred doctrine' is a good translation. And it is just that. For Aquinas's *sacra doctrina* is nothing less than what we need to know in order to be saved. But to flesh out that definition we need to descend to details. Specifically, and concentrating on the essentials, we need to note that according to Aquinas *sacra doctrina* is (a) revealed, (b) a science (*scientia*) more noble (*dignior*) than other sciences and especially to be called wisdom (*sapientia*), (c) a science whose subject is God, and (d) a matter in which proof can be said to be involved.

The notion of revelation is the first thing raised by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* discussion of *sacra doctrina*. And the point he clearly wishes to stress is that *sacra doctrina* consists of truths which we cannot arrive at by merely philosophical argument. According to Aquinas, our salvation depends on us appropriating the specifically Christian doctrine of God. On the other hand, however, this doctrine cannot, so Aquinas thinks, be demonstrated or known to be true on the basis of human reflection achievable by people in this life. He therefore concludes that it has to be revealed by God himself and that it must be embraced by us in faith, which Aquinas distinguishes from knowledge (cf. Ia,12,1; Ia,12,11—13; Ia,32,1; 2a2ae,1,5; *De Trinitate*, 1,4). And that is where *sacra doctrina* comes in.

According to Aquinas, *sacra doctrina* is the body of truths which is the revealed content of Christian faith. 'It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, besides philosophical science built up by human reason ... It was therefore necessary that, besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a *sacra doctrina* learned through revelation' (Ia,1,1). In a lot of modern theology, as in some traditional apologetics, one encounters the idea that Christian doctrine is rational in the sense that it is grounded on good reasons which any fair-minded person ought to accept. But this is not Aquinas's view at all. For him, rational arguments in defence of Christian doctrine cannot claim to be cognitively authoritative. Christian doctrine has to be taught by God.<sup>2</sup> Hence the need for *sacra DOCTRINA* and hence, by the way, another reason for refusing to translate *sacra doctrina* as 'theology'.<sup>3</sup>

For Aquinas, then, *sacra doctrina* is what God alone has taught us. In that case, however, how does it stand in relation to other teaching? And with what is it to be identified? Where do we look for *sacra doctrina*?

In response to the first question Aquinas would say, as he does in Ia,1,2, that *sacra doctrina* is a *scientia*. By this he means that it consists of principles or truths which are known to be true and that it also consists of truths which are entailed, strictly and logically, from such principles or truths.

Roughly speaking, Aquinas, following Aristotle, holds that *scientia* (*epistemē* in Aristotle) is what you have when your intellect directly and without a process of inference grasps a truth which is unvarying and constant. He also holds that you have *scientia* when you make valid deductions from such a truth (cf. *De Trinitate*, 2,2). And in this sense he holds *sacra doctrina* to be a *scientia*. In his view, the fact that we lack a clear understanding of God in himself means that revealed doctrine is not known by us to be true. But, so Aquinas adds, God understands himself fully. And God has revealed to us the content of his (unvarying) knowledge. The content of revealed doctrine, Aquinas therefore concludes, is, after all, something known to be true. It is not *for us* a matter of knowledge, but it is known *to God* (Ia,1,2 and 6).<sup>4</sup>

And, so Aquinas adds, it can be said to include what can be deduced from what is known to be true. In other words, we can draw out what is implicit in revelation. On this account, therefore, argument is possible with regard to *sacra doctrina*. We are, so Aquinas thinks, in no position to argue with someone who accepts nothing in the body of revealed truth. But we can argue with someone who accepts some of it. And, since revealed truth is certainly true, we can presume that objections levelled against it can somehow be shown to be unfounded. 'Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations, but are difficulties which can be answered' (Ia,1,8). In this sense, Aquinas argues, *sacra doctrina* is more noble than other sciences and especially to be called wisdom. It is, he says, more noble than other sciences (i.e. other cases of *scientia*) since people can always make mistakes, while God is infallible and since it treats of what transcends human reason (Ia,1,5). It is wisdom, he adds, because one who has it has knowledge of God, who is 'the highest cause of the whole universe' (Ia,1,6).

But where do we find this wisdom? Readers of *Summa Theologiae* Ia,1 alone are very likely to feel short of an answer to this question. For Aquinas says very little on the matter. It is clear that he conceives of *sacra doctrina* as something contained in words, for his whole discussion views it as a matter of teaching, which, for him, is always something enunciated (cf. 2a2ae,12,2; 181,3). But he does not have much to say about which enunciations count as *sacra doctrina*. On the other hand,

however, he does say enough to say what he thinks, and when this is taken with what he says outside Ia,1, his position is relatively straightforward. *Sacra doctrina* is what is contained in Scripture and the Creeds.<sup>5</sup>

One tends to forget that Aquinas's first teaching job was that of *baccalaureus biblicus*, a position which required him to study and expound the Bible. The same requirement was laid upon him when he became *magister in sacra pagina* in 1256. For Aquinas, as for the other professors at Paris in his day, the Bible was the word of God and therefore something in the light of which other teaching was to be judged.<sup>6</sup> And, for Aquinas, it is here that *sacra doctrina* is to be found. For him, *sacra doctrina* and *sacra scriptura* can be used interchangeably (as they are in Ia,1,1, Ia,1,8 and Ia,1,9). In his view, access to revelation is given in the words of canonical scripture and especially in the teaching of Christ contained there. Christ, says Aquinas, is 'the first and chief teacher of the faith' (*fidei primus et principalis Doctor*) who, being God, knows divine truth without benefit of revelation. With him come the prophets and apostles (including the evangelists). And with all of them, and with nothing else, comes the matter of revelation. '*Sacra doctrina* ... uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof ... for our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets, who wrote the canonical books' (Ia,1,8 ad.2). Or, as Aquinas puts it elsewhere: 'Faith adheres to all the articles of faith by reason of one mean, viz. on account of the First Truth proposed to us in the Scriptures, according to the teaching of the Church, which has the right understanding of them' (2a2ae, 5,3, ad 2). And again, in Ia,36,2 ad 1: 'We ought not to say about God anything which is not found in holy scripture either explicitly or implicitly'.

In this sense, *sacra doctrina* is, for Aquinas, the content of Scripture. And for him it is also the content of the creeds since, in his view, all the creeds amount to is a restatement of what is in Scripture—a pocket Bible, so to speak. The Old and New Testaments need, so he argues, to be studied with care since 'the truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice' (2a2ae,1,9 ad 1). To make the truth of faith quickly accessible to everyone, so he continues, the creeds are needed. But these add nothing to what is already contained in Scripture. They merely summarise or highlight with a view to the needs of those who hear them (2a2ae,1,9 ad 2; cf. III *Sent.* 25,1,1,3 ad 2).

A modern reader might want to say that creeds and the teachings of theologians over time constitute a source of revelation in their own right. But, whatever the merits of that view, it is not one shared by Aquinas. He certainly seems to acknowledge that there is non-written and binding tradition derived from the apostles. In his commentary on II Thessalonians (2:15), for instance, he explains that 'much has not been

written in the Church which has been taught by the apostles and which, therefore, must be observed because, according to the judgement of the apostles, it was better to hide much, as Dionysius says'.<sup>7</sup> On inspection, however, it emerges that in speaking of such oral tradition, Aquinas chiefly has in mind matters of rubrics connected with the sacraments, not matters necessary for salvation.<sup>8</sup> And, as P. de Vooght has shown, 'In the view of scholastic theologians since St Anselm only one source of Christian doctrine is clearly found—scripture ... Tradition, considered as an original and independent source of Christian doctrine, is unknown in the theology of the period'.<sup>9</sup>

In Aquinas, all this comes to the surface in the teaching that creeds are governed by Scripture and that the same goes for theologians (cf. Ia,1,8 ad 2). The content of Scripture is, he insists, the 'best rule of truth' (*optima regula veritatis*) to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted (*In De div.nom.* 2,1).<sup>10</sup>

And, so we need to note, in speaking of Scripture in this way Aquinas is speaking of something which, in his view, does not require enormous sophistication to understand insofar as what is required for salvation goes. We might say that Scripture needs interpreting in the light of what we believe theologically. We might also say that the meaning of Scripture only unfolds in the wake of historical and literary exegesis of the kind now practiced by academics who specialise in biblical studies. Aquinas, however, does not seem to think in quite this way. For him, Scripture must determine what we teach as theology. And, though he certainly thinks that Scripture can be hard to interpret, and though he concedes that passages in Scripture may bear different senses, he also holds that what principally matters in Scripture is stated there in a clear and literal sense to be taken (so I presume Aquinas would say) at its face value. 'Holy Scripture', he writes, 'sets up no confusion, since all meanings are based on one, namely the literal sense' (Ia,1,10, ad 1). And, so he adds, there is 'nothing necessary for faith' which 'is not openly conveyed through the literal sense elsewhere' (*ibid.*).<sup>11</sup>

It would be wrong to take this as meaning that Aquinas was, quite simply, what we would now call a 'biblical fundamentalist', for his own practice in commenting on Scripture suggests that he would willingly have endorsed the attempt to learn about the origins of biblical texts and to read them in ways they were intended by their authors rather than in ways which ignore the context and beliefs of those from whom they came. On the other hand, however, it seems to me quite beyond doubt that Aquinas was basically convinced (as were his Christian contemporaries) that the text of Scripture, and especially that of the New Testament, gives us a set of statements which are true in the (Aristotelian) sense of saying how things are or were. As anyone working through the *tertia pars* will quickly discover, he presumes, for example, that the Gospels are a fundamentally reliable account of the words and deeds of Jesus.

Once again, then, we see the dubiousness of translating *sacra doctrina* simply as 'theology'. But does this mean that the translation has no value? Is Aquinas in no sense concerned with theology in Ia,1?

The answer, of course, is that it all depends what you mean by 'theology'. As should now be clear, if 'theology' is what those who would normally be classified as theologians teach, then Aquinas is not concerned with theology in Ia,1.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, however, he *is* concerned with teaching about God in that question. He is also concerned with the handing on of that teaching insofar as it is identified with revelation. If we take him to be saying that *sacra doctrina* is theology in the sense of revealed teaching handed on, teaching which can be employed in reasoned discourse and teaching which can be defended, then Aquinas is concerned with theology in Ia,1. But it is theology the content of which is identified with that of texts treated as definitive. Considered as such, it will therefore not be what everyone means by 'theology' today.

- 1 Cf. Victor White O.P., *Holy Teaching: The Idea of Theology according to St Thomas Aquinas* (The Aquinas Society of London Aquinas Paper No. 33, London, 1958), p.4: 'Always and invariably the discussion turns, not on the nature and meaning of *theology*, but on those of *sacra doctrina*. A glance at the list of the ten articles or items which comprise this First Question shows that every single one poses queries, not about theology (which is not so much as named) but about what the author calls *sacra doctrina*'.
- 2 Aquinas allows that one can cite reasons which might be held to carry *some* weight with respect to truths of faith. But for him they are no more than pointers or ways of drawing attention to what coheres with truths of faith. 'Arguments from human reason cannot avail to prove what must be received on faith' (Ia,1,8 ad 1). If *sacra doctrina* contains human reasoning, says Aquinas, that is 'to make clear other things that are put forward in this teaching' and to provide 'extrinsic and probable arguments' (*ibid.*)
- 3 In fact, Aquinas does not exclusively identify *sacra doctrina* with 'teaching that philosophy cannot uncover', for he says that it also contains 'those truths about God which human reason could have discovered' (Ia,1,1), which is, presumably, a reference to natural theology. But throughout his discussion of *sacra doctrina* the emphasis falls on it being a matter of revelation *qua* teaching given to those unable to come to the truth without it. Even where *sacra doctrina* is a matter of what human reason can discover, says Aquinas, it consists of truth 'which would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors' (*ibid.*).
- 4 Victor White (*op. cit.*, p.12) neatly paraphrases Aquinas's thinking at this point thus: 'Because we believe something and do not know it, it does not follow that what we believe is not in itself knowledge, although it does not come from *our* knowledge'.
- 5 Cf. Albert Patfoort, *Thomas d'Aquin: Les clés d'une théologie* (Paris, 1983), p.28: '*sacra doctrina* does not directly signify "theology"; it principally signifies Sacred Scripture, the biblical corpus, and, more generally, the totality of the teaching given in Christianity from the revelations made to the prophets'.
- 6 Aquinas calls God the author of scripture (*auctor sacrae scripturae est Deus*: Ia,1,10). For Aquinas and scripture, see J. van der Ploeg, 'The Place of Holy

- Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas, *The Thomist* 10 (1947); B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1941); M.D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas* (Chicago, 1964); Per Erik Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas* (Oxford, 1970).
- 7 There are other passages in Aquinas saying the same thing. Readers will find a number of texts collected in Etienne Ménard O.P., *La Tradition: Révélation, Ecriture, Eglise selon Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Bruges/Paris, 1964), pp. 16ff.
- 8 Cf. Ménard, *op.cit.*, pp. 22ff.
- 9 P. de Vooght, *Les sources de la doctrine chrétienne d'après les théologiens du XIV siècle et du début du XV avec le texte intégral des XII premières questions de la Summa inédite de Gérard de Bologna* (Paris, 1954), pp. 28 and 148f.
- 10 In his commentary on John's Gospel he asserts that canonical scripture alone is the rule of faith (*sola canonica scriptura est regula fidei*: In Joan. 21,6 [2]).
- 11 Cf. also *Quodlibetum* (VII.15, ad.3): 'Nothing is taught mysteriously (*occulte*) in any place of Scripture which is not explained clearly elsewhere; therefore, the spiritual explanation must always be based on the literal'.
- 12 Cf. James A. Weisheipl, 'The Meaning of *Sacra Doctrina* in *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1' (*The Thomist* XXXVIII 1974), pp. 79f.: '*Sacra doctrina* ... can be called "theology" only in the etymological sense of the term as *Sermo de Deo*, which every believer has'.

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