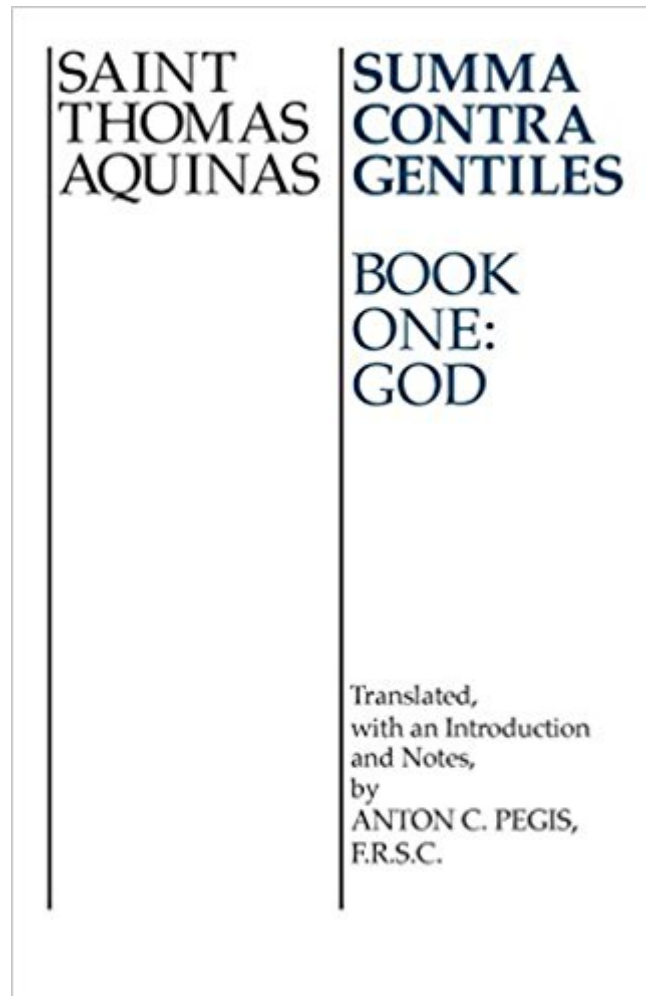




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Summa Contra Gentiles: Book One: God



Synopsis

The Summa Contra Gentiles is not merely the only complete summary of Christian doctrine that St. Thomas has written, but also a creative and even revolutionary work of Christian apologetics composed at the precise moment when Christian thought needed to be intellectually creative in order to master and assimilate the intelligence and wisdom of the Greeks and the Arabs. In the Summa, Aquinas works to save and purify the thought of the Greeks and the Arabs in the higher light of Christian Revelation, confident that all that had been rational in the ancient philosophers and their followers would become more rational within Christianity. This exposition and defense of divine truth has two main parts: the consideration of that truth which faith professes and reason investigates, and the consideration of the truth which faith professes and reason is not competent to investigate. The exposition of truths accessible to natural reason occupies Aquinas in the first three books of the Summa. His method is to bring forward demonstrative and probable arguments, some of which are drawn from the philosophers to convince skeptics. In the fourth book Aquinas appeals to the authority of Sacred Scripture for those divine truths which surpass the capacity of reason.

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Customer Reviews

Depending on the reader's preparation, "Summa Contra Gentiles: God" is either completely impenetrable or one of the easier philosophical works to understand. While it is ideal for the reader to have read Aristotle, particularly his "Physics" and "Metaphysics", less - even much less - will do. What is minimally necessary is an understanding of the vocabulary. Thomas used a number of

terms that he acquired from Aristotle that had a particular technical meaning, a meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of those same terms. Without a good grasp of these terms, the reader simply will not be able to follow Thomas's logic. Fortunately, the list of important terms is not very large, nor are the meanings especially obscure. The purpose of this review is to list and define these terms. For examples, I will draw on the familiar story of "The Three Little Pigs": Matter, material - what a thing is made of. The matter of the three little pigs' houses are straw, sticks, and bricks respectively. Contrast with "form". Form, formal - how a thing is ordered or arranged. The form of all of the three little pigs' houses is the same: "house". Contrast with "matter". Prime matter - the stuff out of which all physical objects are ultimately made. While the third little pig's house has the form of "house" and the matter of "bricks", "bricks" themselves have a form of "brick" and matter of "earth" (assuming they are earthen bricks), and "earth" itself has a form and matter, and so on. Eventually, this process must end with some matter that is not composed of anything more fundamental. This most fundamental matter is given the name "prime matter". Substance, substantial - Ordinarily, matter and form together make a substance.

Thomas Aquinas was an extraordinarily systematic thinker and writer. Because of this, one of the best ways to comprehend "Summa Contra Gentiles" is through consideration of its structure. At the highest level, it consists of 4 books, with the third book in two parts, on account of its length. The titles of the five volumes are as follows: Summa Contra Gentiles: God Summa Contra Gentiles: Creation Summa Contra Gentiles: Providence, Part I Summa Contra Gentiles: Providence, Part II * Summa Contra Gentiles: Salvation Each volume is formally divided into about 100 short chapters. A typical chapter gets its title from some proposition that is to be affirmed, or in some cases refuted. Each paragraph is an argument in support (or denial) of that proposition. The chapters are themselves ordered so that the later chapters build on what the arguments in the earlier chapters have established, and it is this arrangement of chapters that constitutes the real structure of "Summa Contra Gentiles". Although in his later "Summa Theologica", Thomas formalized the higher-level structure of his writing, he did not do so here, which somewhat complicates any presentation of this structure - the book titles are so high level that they give little feel of the work, and the chapter titles so numerous that the reader is easily overwhelmed by a list of them. In order to give the reader some sense of the overall work, I've prepared an outline of the work that (hopefully) is short enough to be readily comprehensible and long enough to give the reader an understanding of what topics are covered and in what order. This outline is presented below:

1.0 Summa Contra Gentiles: God

1.1 Intention of the Work (1 - 2)

1.2 Truths of Reason and Revelation (3 - 9)

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