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GOD

Catholics and evangelicals hold the same basic view of God. From the very earliest formulations of the faith Christians confessed the belief “in the Father almighty,— and in Jesus Christ, our Savior;—and in the Holy Spirit.”¹ Other forms of this Apostolic Creed read, “I believe in God the Father almighty creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only son, our Lord.”² The Eastern form of this creed was even more explicit, confessing “We believe in one God the Father Almighty. The creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible and in one Lord Jesus Christ the only begotten Son of God.”³ It soon became necessary to make explicit the trinitarian implications of the Christian confession. The Creed of the Council of Toledo (A.D. 400) declared: “We believe in one true God, Father, and Son and Holy Spirit, maker of the visible and the invisible, by whom were created all things in heaven and on earth. This God alone and this Trinity alone is of divine name [divine substance].” Further, “this Trinity, though distinct in persons, is one substance, virtue, power, majesty indivisible, not different.”⁴ Later, in the Athanasian Creed, more attributes of God emerged, such as “eternal,” “uncreated,” “immense,” “omnipotent,” and undivided in substance.⁵

DEFINITION OF GOD

From a religious perspective two affirmations can be made concerning God: he is and he may be known. That God *exists* is a statement of faith. That God may be

1 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma* , 1, “The most ancient form of the Apostolic Creed,” p. 3.

2 Ibid., 6, p. 7.

3 Ibid., 9, p. 8.

4 Ibid., 19, p. 13.

5 Ibid., 39, p. 15.

known is a statement of experience. The following definition of God is from *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, with which orthodox Protestants have no difficulty:

[God is] The Supreme Being, Pure Act, First Cause of all, provident conserver and governor of the universe; the Absolute—infinite, eternal, immutable, intelligent, omniscient, all-powerful, and free; the Creator, to whom creatures owe homage, respect, and obedience; the Sovereign Good, diffusive of all goodness, toward which everything tends as to its ultimate final cause; the supernatural source of revelation; the Godhead composed of three Divine Persons in one divine nature— Father, Son and Holy Spirit. ⁶

GOD IN PRIMITIVE RELIGIONS

Since Darwin, it has been fashionable to understand primitive religious concepts in an evolutionary sense: humanity has moved from an initial polytheism toward monotheism. This theory, however, has encountered difficulties. For many primitive peoples believe in a “high god” in addition to a number of lesser gods. “Such a high god appears early in the creation myths of such people as the Australian aborigines and primitive Indians.”⁷ We find creation accounts contained in religious ideas coming from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Samaria. These myths have parallels in early Hellenistic cultures. So this once popular, nineteenth-century evolutionary view has given way to recent critiques.⁸ Further, this evolutionary view of the development of the concept of God is contrary to Scripture (cf. Rom. 1:18–23). Also, it overlooks the early monotheistic views of God in other cultures. The Ebla Archives which contain hundreds of tablets to patriarchal times (no. 239), for example, tell of a monotheistic God who created the world from nothing: “Lord of heaven and earth: the earth was not, you created it, the light of day was not, you created it, the morning light you had not [yet] made exist.”⁹

According to Catholic scholars, Greek philosophers introduced a higher concept of God. In Plato, the role of the “supreme being” became more prominent. “Certainly the overall impression given by Plato’s writings is an atmosphere of great reverence for the divine, an exalted notion of it, and a strong desire for assimilation to it in some intimate personal relationship. To be more precise than this would be to state explicitly what Plato merely hints at implicitly.”¹⁰ To be sure, Plato’s Demiurgos (God) falls short of Judeo-Christian monotheism, since for him God is limited and is subject to the Good which is beyond him. Nonetheless, Plato transcended traditional polytheisms.

Aristotle developed arguments for the existence of God from motion or change in the world. The move from potentiality to actuality can only be under the influence of an actualizer (cause). Hence, there must have been a First Cause. So for Aristotle, God is the

6 “God,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6:535.

7 Ibid.

8 See Lewis M. Hopfe, *Religions of the World* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), p. 10.

9 See Eugene H. Merrill, “Ebla and Biblical Historical Inerrancy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October–December 1983): 302–21.

10 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6:537.

“Uncaused Cause.”¹¹ Later Augustine, using Platonic terms,¹² and Aquinas, using Aristotelian concepts, would develop arguments for the existence of one supreme God.¹³ Of course, whatever the philosophical language used to express their convictions, Catholic theologians believe that their concept of God is based on His self-revelation in Scripture. Two tasks faced the church concerning the concept of God: “First among these is the right conception of God as compared to the distorted ideas found in the world surrounding the Christian fold.” The second problem adheres to the concept of the Holy Trinity: “The Christian concept of God unfolds itself in the mission and revelation of the Son and the Spirit. . . . Together with the Father they are truly divine. . . . This mystery became from the beginning the object of theological reflection.”¹⁴ God, through his mercy, “willed both to reveal himself to man and give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith.”¹⁵ Now we turn to “salvation history” as expressed in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures—the Old and New Testaments.

THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Judeo-Christian concept of the person and work of God is derived from the Old Testament. We addressed the “progressive” quality of revelation in chapter 1 . The concept of God gradually unfolded in much the same way. During its history more and more was revealed to Israel about God’s nature and work.

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the Scripture is a formal philosophical argument presented as to God’s existence. Rather, Old Testament believers were content simply with the evidence God presented of himself in nature and by supernatural messages and events (cf. Exod. 4:1–9). “The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims its builder’s craft” (Ps. 19:1). Even the great agnostic philosopher, Immanuel Kant, after offering criticisms of all the traditional proofs for the existence of God, confessed: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe,

11 See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.8.1073b–74a, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 882–83.

12 See Augustine, *On Free Will* 2.6, in *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Ludwig Schopp et al. (New York: CIMA, 1948–54).

13 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.2.3.

14 Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, p. 103.

15 *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Libreria Editrice Vaticana* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1994), p. 16.

the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”¹⁶

Genesis reveals God to be the creator of heaven and earth and also the sustainer of his work, expecting obedience from the man and woman whom he made. God dealt with our physical ancestors, Adam and Eve, face-to-face (Gen. 2:16–19 ; 3:8). With Abraham (known as the father of the faithful, Gal. 3:7–8), God began to deal with humanity in a new way. The Lord said to Abraham:

Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. “I will make of you a great nation, and will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you” (Gen. 12:1–3).

God had become the God of Abraham, and would later be the God of Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 6:3).

In the Mosaic Period, God installed Moses as the leader of Israel’s religion. Yahweh caused their liberation from Egypt, entered into a covenant with them, and demanded that they renounce the pagan deities that surrounded them and worship him alone (cf. Exod. 4 ; 12 ; 20). Although Moses and the leaders in Israel who followed him recognized Yahweh to be the supreme Deity, this knowledge was to come more slowly to the average Israelite. The fertility gods of the Canaanites were very attractive to the popular mind. However, in the seventh century B.C. , when Jerusalem became the official center of worship, Israelite religion became more defined and centralized. The people came to realize more fully the great Shema of monotheistic Judaism: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD , your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4–5). “Mosaic monotheism implied that God was one, unique, holy, pleased at up-rightness, and deeply interested in Israel. But exactly where did Yahweh stand in relation to other gods and other nations? Was there more to His justice than vindictiveness? Much light was to be diffused upon these and other points during the prophetic period.”¹⁷

In the Prophetic Period, from the ninth to the sixth century B.C. , the concept of God became even clearer. Elijah (9th century), Amos (8th century), Isaiah and Hosea (8th century) all stressed God’s majesty and dominion over all nations and his steadfast love for his particular people. Isaiah asks: “To whom can you liken God? With what equal can you confront him? . . . He sits enthroned above the vault of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. . . . Do you not know or have you not heard? The LORD is the eternal God, creator of the ends of the earth” (Isa. 40:18 , 22 , 28).

Concerning the goal of the prophets, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* says the prophetic mission “did not consist in the formulation of a new belief, but in the

16 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: The Bobbs–Merrill Company, 1956), p. 166.

17 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6:539.

restoration and understanding of traditional belief. The Prophets insisted on the moral qualities of God, but aside from this offered little that was original.”¹⁸

Israel’s experience during the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem (including the temple) proved to be the final victory in the battle against idolatry. “Its political autonomy ended, Israel’s mind turned inward.”¹⁹ The Jewish community as a whole has avoided idolatry since that time.

All attempts by proponents of the “evolutionary hypothesis” to identify Israel’s concept of God with the alleged monotheism of such cults as Akhnaton (c. B.C. 1364–47) and Zoroaster (c. B.C. 500) have failed. “In its monotheism, Israel was utterly unique.”²⁰

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Israel’s monotheism is carried over into the New Testament. When speaking of God, the New Testament writers use Greek words for “God” or for “Lord” (Hb: *Yahweh*). Jesus often refers to God as his Father: “My Father is at work until now, so I am at work” (John 5:17). Our Lord also encourages his followers to address God as Father: in Matthew 6 the phrases “your heavenly Father,” “your Father,” and “Our Father” occur ten times. This term is used sparingly in the Old Testament and is narrowly applied: God as Father of David’s line (2 Sam. 7:14) and God as Father of orphans (Ps. 68:6) are two examples.

In the midst of his prayer in the garden prior to his betrayal, Jesus addresses the Father saying, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you” (Mark 14:36). Concerning Jesus’ use of “Abba,” the *New American Bible* notes: “An Aramaic term, here also translated by Mark, Jesus’ special way of addressing God was filial intimacy. The word ‘abba’ seems not to have been used in earlier or contemporaneous Jewish sources to address God without some qualifier. Cf. Rom. 8:15 ; Gal. 4:6 for other occurrences of the Aramaic word in the Greek New Testament.”²¹

Although the concept of “God as love” is found throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Exod. 20:6 ; Lev. 19:18), Jesus takes it to new heights. And even though God’s concern was that “all the communities of the earth” (Gen. 12:3) would be blessed through them, in the Old Testament the focus of his love was toward Israel. In the New Testament God’s love is extended to all: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16). Thus, Jesus commanded his disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Further, the New Testament provides “the supreme illustration of God’s love, the Incarnation of the Word, His Passion, death, and Resurrection, are to be matched, on

18 Ibid., p. 540.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Footnote on Mark 14:36 , *New American Bible*.

man's part, by love of neighbor.”²² In view of this love, we are to love others as he has loved us (cf. John 15:13 ; 2 Cor. 5:14–15).

BIBLICAL NAMES FOR GOD

“The oldest name used for the deity by almost all Semitic peoples was ‘El’ (perhaps from a root meaning strong). The *El* of Israel stood alone, supreme, without consort.”²³ Pagan cultures that surrounded Israel depicted *El* as the Father of the gods, lord of heaven, the force of nature, and a local deity. In Scripture, however, God is the everlasting *El*. For “Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beersheba, and there he invoked by name the LORD , God the Eternal” (Gen. 21:33). He is also the living *El*, since “This is how you will know that there is a living God in your midst” (Josh. 3:10).

Elohim, as a name for God, is an often-recurring plural form in the Old Testament (Gen. 1:1). The plural usage should not be understood as indicating a polytheistic element in early Israelite theology but as expressing the intensity, power, and majesty of God.

El Elyon means “Most High God.” This idea is developed in Abraham’s encounter with Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18–22). *El Shaddai* has been translated “the Mighty One.” This title comes out of God’s discussion with Moses concerning his original covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 6:3). God was also called *Adonai* which connotes the idea of “King” (Num. 23:21 ; Deut. 33:5) and “Lord” (Ps. 110:1).

By the Mosaic period, the name most frequently used for God was *Yahweh*, which Catholic scholars have traditionally taken to mean “He who is” or the self-existent One, the source of all other being (Exod. 3:14–15 ; cf. John 8:58). Commenting on Exodus 3:14 , the *New American Bible* says, “It is commonly explained in reference to God as the absolute and necessary Being. It may be understood of God as the Source of all created being.” When Moses asked God what his name was he replied: “ I AM WHO I AM .” Concerning Christian names for God, “The New Testament takes over the Old Testament designations for God as found in the Septuagint, and makes the appellation Father, which occurs only in a few places in the Old Testament, the centre of the Christian Revelation.”

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THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD

²² *New Catholic Encyclopedia* , 6:561.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

²⁴ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* , p. 24. Also see *New Catholic Encyclopedia* , 6:538–39.

Catholic as well as evangelical understanding of God is derived from both general and special revelation. General revelation provides a natural knowledge of God available to all persons.

NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The existence of a “natural” knowledge of God has already been discussed in chapter 1 under general revelation. Concerning this possibility, Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott says, “God, our Creator and Lord, can be known with certainty, by the natural light of reason from created things (*De fide*).”²⁵ Scripture states that God may be known naturally in the following ways: from nature (cf. Rom. 1:20); from conscience (cf. Rom. 2:14ff .); and from history (cf. Acts 17:28).

The Fathers, drawing from the aforementioned concepts and their commensurate scriptural proofs, stated the possibility of a “natural” understanding of God. Tertullian said, “O testimony of the soul, which is by nature Christian.”²⁶ Theophilus of Antioch writes: “God has called everything into existence from nothing, so that His greatness might be known and understood through His works. Just as the soul in man is not seen, as it is invisible, but is known through the movement of the body, so God cannot be seen with human eyes; but He is observed and known through providence and His works.”²⁷

Because of our creaturely limitations, we cannot know God “directly” but by “analogical cognition”; that is, we know God by way of analogy, we reason from created things to him. “There is a relation of analogy between the creature and the Creator which is founded on the fact that the creature is necessarily made to the likeness of the Creator. This analogy is the basis of all natural knowledge of God.”²⁸ Although we may come to some understanding of God through the above method, it must be stated that this knowledge is, at best, imperfect. Augustine says: “More true than our speech about God is our thinking of Him, and more true than our thinking is His Being.”²⁹

Finally, concerning the function of the natural understanding of God, Aquinas held “that while man can by his reason alone know *that* God is . . . , man’s reason cannot grasp *what* He is.”³⁰ A natural knowledge of God is useful to point us in the right direction. To enter the kingdom of God, however, and experience its fullness and blessings, we are in need of the Scriptures which can give us “wisdom for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15).

25 Ibid., p. 13. In Catholic theology, “*de fide*” means that the proposition expressed is an article of the Catholic faith.

26 *Apology* 17; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 14.

27 *Ad Autolycom* 1:4–5.

28 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 19.

29 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VII 4.7; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 20.

30 *New Catholic Encyclopedia* , 6:541.

GOD AS TRINITY

While it can be known from general revelation that God exists and that he is one, the knowledge of God as a Trinity is known only through special revelation. Although not itself a biblical term, the term *Trinity* was used by the early church to describe the God who is one in essence, eternally revealed in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Oxford scholar and Anglican cleric Alister McGrath writes:

The doctrine of the Trinity is basically an attempt to bring together the incredible richness of the Christian understanding of God. It is the distillation of the kaleidoscopic Christian experience of God in the light of its scriptural foundations. The scriptural witness to and Christian experience of God came first, and reflection on it came later.³¹

Christianity has always understood the Trinity as one of the most profound doctrines of the Christian faith. It comes to us through the vehicle of special revelation—the teaching is above reason. The early church stressed the mystery and also the necessity of the Trinity. John Damascene said: “It is known and adored in Faith (the Trinity), not by investigating, examining and proving. . . . You have to believe that God is in three Persons. How sublime is this above all questions. For God is inconceivable.”³²

The 11th Council of Toledo (A.D. 675) was a local council, yet it produced a confession of faith that reflected the thinking of the patristic theology of the West. Concerning the Trinity, it states: “We confess and believe that the holy and ineffable Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is one God by nature, of one substance, of one nature as also of one majesty and power.”³³ Concerning the Father, “we profess that the Father is not begotten, nor created, but unbegotten.”³⁴ The Son “was born, but not made, from the substance of the Father, without beginning, before all ages. . . .”³⁵ As to the Holy Spirit, “we also believe that the Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity, is God, one and equal with God the Father and the Son.”³⁶

Many feel that the understanding of the Trinity involves a mathematical mystery: how to conceive of one equaling three. This is a misunderstanding. Roman Catholic lay apologist Frank Sheed spoke to this point: “There is no question of arithmetic involved. We are not saying three persons in one person, or three natures in one nature; we are saying three persons in one nature.”³⁷ Others have noted that the wrong kind of arithmetic is involved, for we do not *add* but *multiply* the Persons of the Trinity. God is not $1+1+1=3$. He is $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1^3$. He is one God in essence who is eternally expressed in

31 Alister McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 116.

32 As cited by Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 74.

33 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 275, p. 106.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 276, p. 106.

36 Ibid., 277, p. 107.

37 Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity*, enlarged ed. (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1978), p. 52.

three different persons simultaneously. We see, then, that the question becomes one of understanding the meaning of the terms *nature* and *person*. Sheed notes that “Nature answers the question *what* we are; person answers the question *who* we are.”³⁸ Thus in God there is one What (essence) and three Whos (persons).³⁹

We mentioned earlier in this chapter that although the Old Testament portrays God’s unity (Deut. 6:4), we also find intimations of plurality (Ps. 110:1 ; Prov. 30:4 ; Isa. 63:7–10 ; Zech. 1:12). In the New Testament, trinitarian evidence is overwhelming. Jesus proclaims his own deity (John 8:58) and accepts worship (Matt. 16:16 ; John 20:28). The Holy Spirit or Comforter is also a member of the Trinity (Matt. 28:20 ; John 14–16 ; Acts 5:3–4 ; 2 Cor. 13:13). All three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned in many passages (cf. Matt. 3:15–17 ; Eph. 1:3 , 13 ; 1 Thess. 1:1–5 ; 1 Pet. 1:2).

Deviations from the Catholic concept of the Trinity are numerous, and both Catholics and Protestants consider these heresies. Several have arisen concerning the nature of God. One such heresy, *tritheism*, dates back to the sixth century, and asserts that there are three equal, closely related Gods. *Modalism* is the heresy that postulates one God who plays three different roles but is not three co-eternal, co-equal persons existing simultaneously in one nature. The Trinity is not three gods but one. Likewise, the Trinity is not one person in God but three persons in one God.

The difference between essence and office is crucial to understanding the Trinity. The three Persons are equal in essence, but not in function. The Son is subordinate to the Father and receives his generation from him. The Athanasian Creed states: “The Son is from the Father alone not made not created but generated.”⁴⁰ The Holy Spirit is also equal to the Father in essence but proceeds from the Father and the Son. Eastern Orthodoxy teaches that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, and this disagreement was one cause of the East/West rupture of A.D. 1054 (see Appendix A).

As some of the heresies involved in the nature of the Godhead have direct implications concerning the Person and nature of Christ, we will address them in chapter 4 which deals with Christology.⁴¹ The evangelical can take comfort that, as John W. Montgomery states, “the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Eastern Churches have never ceased to stand uncompromisingly for the Trinitarian core of the Christian faith.”⁴²

GOD AS CREATOR

38 Ibid.

39 See Norman L. Geisler and William Watkins, “The Incarnation and Logic: Their Compatibility Defended,” *Trinity Journal* (1985).

40 Denzinger (D) 39; quoted in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 62.

41 For a comprehensive treatment of the many concepts that were pronounced heretical by the early church, see *ibid.*, pp. 50–75.

42 John W. Montgomery, *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals and Rome* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p. 20.

Christianity (along with orthodox Judaism) believes that God created *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing.” Roman Catholic dogma states: “All that exists outside God was, in its whole substance, produced out of nothing by God (*De fide*).”⁴³ Scriptural support for this doctrine is provided in the first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). While the Hebrew word for “create” (*bara*) does not always mean to make something from nothing (cf. Ps. 104:30), nonetheless, in the context of God’s initial production of the entire universe it certainly takes on this meaning. The statement “heavens and earth” indicates the whole universe, all extra-divine things. A contemporary Roman Catholic scholar states: “That God alone created the world is an article of the Catholic faith, found in all the Christian creeds and solemnly taught by several ecumenical councils, notably, the Fourth Lateran and First Vatican. The basis in revelation for the doctrine spans the whole of Scripture, from Genesis to the writings of St. John.”⁴⁴

The church fathers testify that God, motivated by his goodness, created the world for his glorification: “We are because He is good,”⁴⁵ and “God does not act for His own profit, but only for His own Goodness.”⁴⁶ It is important to note that what God created was “good.” The Council of Florence held that “there is no nature bad in itself, as all nature in so far as it is nature, is good.”⁴⁷ This statement was directed against the Manichaean heresy, and would have later theological ramifications when the church grappled with the question of the nature of sin.

God not only created but also preserves and sustains his creation. We have proof of this from the Scriptures: “My Father is at work until now, so I am at work” (John 5:17). Concerning Christ in this work of preservation, the writer of Hebrews states that he “sustains all things by his mighty word” (Heb. 1:3). Augustine, commenting on John 5:17 , said, “Let us therefore believe that God works constantly, so that all created things would perish, if His working were withdrawn.”⁴⁸ Paul declared not only that “all things were created through him [Christ]” but also that “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:16–17). Further, “Though the work of creation is attributed to the Father in particular, it is equally a truth of faith that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are the one, indivisible principle of creation.”⁴⁹

A word must be said about the method by which God created. Difficulties have arisen from apparent contradictions between the results of modern science and the creation narrative in Genesis. Although much latitude is given concerning the *how* of creation, official Roman Catholic teaching on these matters holds that “The first three Chapters of

43 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 79.

44 Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, p. 70.

45 Augustine, *De doct. christ.* I 32, 35; quoted in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 81.

46 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I 44, 4 ad I, *ibid.*

47 *Decretum pro Jacobitis* (1441), *ibid.*, p. 84.

48 *De Gen. Ad Litt.* [Literal Commentary on Genesis] V20, 40., *ibid.*, p. 87.

49 *Catechism 1994*, no. 316, p. 84.

Genesis contains narratives of real events . . . , no myths, no mere allegories or symbols of religious truths, no legends.”⁵⁰ Further, they insist that, whatever natural (evolutionary) process may have been utilized by God to produce the first human body, God directly created Adam’s soul and, indeed, creates every rational human soul in their mother’s womb from the very inception of life. As Ott puts it, “Every individual soul was immediately created out of nothing by God.”⁵¹ Although earlier Catholic theologians, like Aquinas, believed that this happened some weeks after conception, in the light of modern science, Catholic theology “holds that the creation and infusion of the spiritual soul coincides with the moment of conception.”⁵²

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Ludwig Ott affirms that “the attributes or properties of God are perfections which, according to our analogical mode of thinking, proceed from the metaphysical substance of God and belong to it.”⁵³ Other Catholic theologians have defined the attributes “as an absolutely simple perfection that exists in God necessarily and formally, and that, according to man’s imperfect mode of knowing, either constitutes the essence of the Divine Being or is deduced from this essence.”⁵⁴

Protestants and Catholics agree that the classical attributes of God fall into two broad categories: incommunicable and communicable. The former are those only God possesses and the latter are those he can communicate to his creatures (2 Pet. 1:4). The former are sometimes called metaphysical attributes and the latter, non-metaphysical (moral) attributes.

GOD’S INCOMMUNICABLE (METAPHYSICAL) ATTRIBUTES

God Is Self-Existent. The formal constituent of the divine essence is God’s self-existence (or “aseity”). Of this attribute “it is commonly taught that God is Being itself, subsistent by itself, and that this aseity (*aseitas*), or ‘by-itself-ness,’ is a constitutive perfection of God.”⁵⁵ God is the “I AM ” who exists in and of himself. He is totally uncaused and independent in his existence. As Aquinas put it, God is pure Actuality with no potentiality for non-existence. He is a necessary being who cannot not be. It is important to note that this does not mean that God is *self-* caused. A self-caused being is impossible,

50 *D.2122*, *ibid.*, p. 92. This position on the inerrancy of Holy Writ would prove to be the downfall of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and his “new age” understanding of creation.

51 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* , p. 100.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

54 *New Catholic Encyclopedia* , 6:557.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 558.

since something cannot be ontologically prior to itself as a cause is to its effect. Rather, God is *un* caused. He is the uncaused Cause of all else that exists.

God Is Infinite. God is not finite or limited. He is “in every way without limit.”⁵⁶ He has no boundaries or restrictions on his being. He has no limiting potential. As Aquinas put it, God is unlimited and unique unless conjoined with passive potency (potentiality). God has active potency (powers) but he has no unactualized potentials. He is fully actual and, as such, has no limitations whatsoever on his being.

God Is Simple. God is undivided in his being; he has no parts. “It [God’s nature] is called simple because it is that which it has, except that which is said of one Person in relation to the Other.”⁵⁷ Thus, the only plurality God has is relational, not essential.

God Possesses Unicity. God is absolute one in his nature, not many. “The true God is one alone.”⁵⁸ God is not only indivisible in himself (simplicity) but he is unmultiplied in terms of others. There is only one of him (Deut. 6:4).

God Is Immutable. God is by nature unchangeable. “I, the LORD , do not change” (Mal. 3:6). Even though the universe will change, being rolled up like a garment, God is “the same” (Heb. 1:12). There is not even the slightest “alteration” in God’s nature. He is “immutable” (Heb. 6:18).

God Is Eternal. God is above and beyond all time. “The eternity of God is His Essence itself.”⁵⁹ He has no “before” or “after” in his being. He is the “first and the last” (Isa. 41:4 ; cf. Rev. 1:8). God is “before all ages.”

God Is Omnipresent. God is everywhere present at all times and in the fullness of his being. In view of this, the psalmist declared, “Where can I hide from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee?” As the Cause of all being, Aquinas understood God to be intrinsically present in everything as long as it exists.⁶⁰

God Is Omniscient. “All things are naked and open to his eyes [cf. Heb. 4:13], even those things that will happen through the free actions of creatures.”⁶¹

God Is Omnipotent. God has all power. He is the “almighty” (cf. Job 6:14 ; Rev. 1:8 ; 19:6). He can do all things that are not intrinsically impossible or contradictory. For example, God cannot make a square circle. Thus when Jesus said, “for God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26), he meant all *non-contradictory* things.

56 Gregory of Nyssa, *Quod non sint tres dii*: PG 45, 129.

57 Augustine, *De civ. Dei* [City of God] XI 10, I.

58 The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), *D. 428*; cf. 1782 .

59 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 101, 2, 10.

60 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I 8, 1.

61 Vatican I, *D. 1784*; cf. *D. 3017* .

GOD'S COMMUNICABLE (MORAL) ATTRIBUTES

There are also attributes that God can give to others. These include moral qualities, such as truth, goodness, justice, and mercy.

God Is Perfect. God is the summation of all perfection, both metaphysically and morally, lacking in absolutely nothing. “The Divine Essence is perfect, (it) is in no way deficient in goodness.”⁶² He is supremely good, the ultimate in all that is of value. “God is infinite in every perfection.”⁶³

God Is Truthful. Truth is the correspondence of thought and thing. It is the adequation of word and reality. God is absolutely truthful. He can neither deceive nor be deceived.⁶⁴ As Holy Writ declares, “it was impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18 ; cf. Titus 1:2).

God Is Benevolent. Indeed, God is all-benevolent or omni-benevolent. He is essentially good. That is, God is desirable for his own sake. He is the ultimate End desired, wittingly or unwittingly, by all rational creatures. He has ultimate intrinsic value within himself.

God Is Holy. “Holy, holy, holy” is what the angels sing (Isa. 6:3 ; cf. Rev. 4:8). “You shall be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:45), said the Lord. Holiness (Hb: *kadosh*), according to Ott, expresses not only “God’s sublimity over all worldliness (objective holiness) but also his sublimity over all sinfulness (subjective holiness).”⁶⁵

God Is Just. God possesses ultimate justice. He will give to all their due. As Paul taught, “There is no partiality with God” (Rom. 2:11) for he “will give to each according to his deeds” (Rev. 22:12).

God Is Merciful. The psalmist declares, “The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works” (Ps. 145:9).⁶⁶ To Moses God said, “I, the LORD , your God am a jealous God . . . bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation” (Exod. 20:5). The psalmists repeatedly proclaimed that God’s mercy endures forever (e.g., Ps. 136).

TESTIMONY OF THE EARLY FATHERS ABOUT GOD’S NATURE

The following statements from the early church fathers concerning God and his nature are helpful.⁶⁷ They form a basis not only for the basic Catholic concept of God but also

62 John of Damascus, *De fide orth.* I, 5.

63 Vatican I, *D. 1782* .

64 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 123, 2. Cited in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 34.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

66 Material on the aforementioned attributes taken from *ibid.*, pp. 30–49.

67 The quotes are taken from “The Fathers Know Best,” *This Rock*, December 1992, pp. 26–27. Their original source was Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Church*.

for the evangelical heritage rooted in them. The essential attributes of the Triune God emerge from their collective wisdom.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH (C. A.D. 35–107)

There is one God, who manifested himself through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is his Word proceeding from silence, and who was in all respects pleasing to him that sent him.⁶⁸

IRENÆUS (C. A.D. 130–200)

For the Church, although dispersed throughout the whole world even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and from their disciples the faith in one God, Father Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them; and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God.⁶⁹ Nor is he moved by anyone; rather, freely and by his Word he made all things. For he alone is God, he alone is Lord, he alone is creator, he alone is Father, he alone contains all and commands all to exist.⁷⁰

TERTULLIAN (C. A.D. 160–230)

The object of our worship is the one God, who, by the word of his command, by the reason of his plan, and by the strength of his power, has brought forth from nothing for the glory of his majesty this whole construction of elements, bodies and spirits; whence also the Greeks have bestowed upon the world the name “cosmos.”⁷¹ There is only one God, and none other besides him, the creator of the world who brought forth all things out of nothing through his Word, first of all sent forth.⁷²

EPIPHANIUS (C. A.D. 315–403)

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things, both visible and invisible.⁷³

FULGENTIUS (A.D. 468–533)

True religion consists in the service of the one true God. For it is truth itself that there is one God; and just as besides the one truth, there is no other truth, so too, besides the one true God there is no other true God. For the one truth itself is naturally one true divinity.

68 Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* 8.1 (c. A.D. 110), *ibid.*

69 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1 (inter A.D. 180–199), *ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*, 2.1.1.

71 Tertullian, *Apology* 17.1 (A.D. 197).

72 Tertullian, *The Demurrer Against the Heretics* 13.1 (c. A.D. 200).

73 Epiphanius, *The Man Well-Anchored* 120 (A.D. 374).

And thus one cannot speak truthfully of two true gods, because it is not possible for the truth itself, naturally one, to be divided.⁷⁴

AUGUSTINE (A.D. 354–430)

By the time of Augustine the Christian doctrine of God had reached full bloom. His book *On The Trinity* is a classic expression of the doctrine of God. It has been definitive for orthodox expression of this truth since his time. To summarize, Augustine spoke of “All those Catholic expounders of the divine Scriptures, both of Old and New, whom I have been able to read, who have written before me concerning the Trinity who is God.” These, he said, have taught according to the Scriptures:

The Father, and the Son, and the holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality; and therefore that they are not three Gods, but one God: although the Father hath begotten the Son, and so He who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and so He who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, Himself also co-equal with the Father and the Son, and pertaining to the unity of the Trinity.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

We have attempted in this chapter to reveal the common Catholic and evangelical understanding of the nature of God. God is one in his eternal and unchangeable essence, yet three Persons. The divine essence is common to the three Persons, they are not separable. Also, the trinitarian mystery is revealed in the ministry and work of the Son and the Spirit for human salvation: “the entire work of salvation is unfolded . . . with the conclusion, borrowed from St. Cyprian, that ‘the Church is clearly a people whose unity derives from that of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’ ”⁷⁶

These beliefs are shared equally by both Catholics and evangelical Protestants. The essentials of Christian orthodoxy are reflected in the Vatican Council II:

The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence.⁷⁷

74 Fulgentius, *Letter to Donatus* 8.10 (post A.D. 512–ante A.D. 527).

75 Augustine, *On the Trinity* 1.4.7; quoted in Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 3:20.

76 Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, pp. 120–21.

77 *Vatican Collection*, vol. 2, *ibid.*, p. 918.

Moreover, concerning the relationship between the doctrine of God and the reality of salvation: “It is true that there has always been a more or less extensive optimism that one could know or have a notion of God apart from and independent of the Christian faith.” Further, “One might be convinced of the existence of God, but God is God in reality only when one can say of him that God is salvation.”⁷⁸

Contemporary Roman Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft says:

the creed does not speak of a God, only of God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ, is the absolute, the Alpha and Omega, the point and pinnacle of all reality. He is not an it or object; his name is I AM , the absolute subject. He is not our object, we are his. He is the I and we are his Thou, not vice versa.⁷⁹

Evangelicals can stand together with Roman Catholics on this most basic doctrine of the Christian faith. As the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “Since man’s knowledge of God is that of the beginning and end of all creation, it is a knowledge that makes possible and reasonable the order of morality and its laws in life. This must include the idea of a personal and provident God, a God to be worshipped and obeyed.”⁸⁰

78 Otto Hermann Pesch, *The God Question in Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther*, trans. Gottfried G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), p. 30. Pesch concludes concerning the “God question” that “if one looks, first of all, at the material from a purely statistical point of view, he will not be able to state that any specific discrepancy exists between Luther and Thomas on the doctrine of God” (p. 17).

79 Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 118.

80 *New Catholic Encyclopedia* , 6:562.