

Thomas Aquinas and the Recovery of 'Religion' in a Theology of Religions

Methodology in theology of religions has by and large proceeded deductively; from the datum of revelation concerning God's relation to the world to a judgment on the status of non-Christian traditions as finding a "place" somewhere within this template. Thus they are deemed a suitable arena for the playing out of the life of grace for an "anonymous Christian" or yet another obstinate form of "unbelief." Beginning with articles of faith such as the Incarnation of the Son, the bestowal of the Spirit and the creation of the Church, among others, Catholic theologians and magisterial authorities have attempted to demonstrate how other religious traditions both participate in this outpouring of Divine Life (through the proper mediating channels) and suffer from a relative privation of its fullness. The "religions"<sup>1</sup> become a broad category encompassing multitudes of peoples, cultures, and traditions, yet very little is said about their actual life save for the divine action, or lack thereof, discerned in their midst. Being religious in the world is reduced to partaking in a vague concoction of grace and error evaluated only from the standpoint of revelation. The split between inclusive-pluralist and inclusive-exclusivist theologians can be understood as the conviction that such a tension and composite situation must be resolved and is logically untenable, either by affirming that all religions are equally true or salvific or that all religions outside of Christianity are deluded, or at the very least, severely hampered in their religious quest and search for truth. Theological approaches to religious diversity grouped under the category of inclusivism lack of a sophisticated account of how engraced human agency may actualize the existential situation of grace/error in different ways and thus end up falling into essentialisms.

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<sup>1</sup> This study continues the critique of utilizing a modernist understanding of "religion" in the line of such scholars as Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Religion is not an inert collective for Aquinas, but an act of living people.

Aquinas, on the other hand, considered religion in the *secunda secundae* of his *Summa Theologiae* from within the context of both divine revelation and human action. Religion as a moral virtue has a particular end that is ordered within the ultimate end of friendship with God. Aquinas, within the vast and comprehensive account of all human meaning and action that is his *Summa Theologiae*, can distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion according to his virtue ethics. It will be my purpose to show that what Aquinas can offer a Christian theology of religions is the recovery of ‘religion’ as a specific kind of action, virtuous or vicious, rather than simply a repository for an essential kind of divine presence or absence or a hopelessly ambiguous composite of the two.

The paper will be divided into three sections. First, I will consider the importance of right choice in Aquinas’s philosophy of human action. Religion is virtuous in the first place because the option to be religious in the world is precisely that, an option. Second, I will develop an exposition of Aquinas’ understanding of the moral virtue of religion in se, detailing what he means by a virtuous exercise of religion and a vicious exercise of irreligion. And finally, I will conclude with a contemporary reassessment of some trends in theology of religions in light of this discussion of religion as a virtue in Aquinas’ ethics.

#### The Goodness of Religion as Voluntary Act

For Aquinas, to act in the world was an integrated event of existential decision and execution, and one that was never “value-free.” Thus, in a discussion of any virtue, one must first understand why there is goodness by acting in this way rather than that way. A short answer is because the voluntary in an act is what makes it human and also what gives it merit. Every virtue is first and foremost a free exercise of the will and a

voluntary habit.<sup>2</sup> The significance of being religious in the world *voluntarily* is our first word.

In Aquinas's philosophy of human action, all rational agents act for an end. Actions are deliberate and have a term (end) which is consciously willed and sought through the action. Because of this the end is the principle, or "cause" of human action, precisely because without it, there would not arise any desire to act and obtain a particular end.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas concludes that there must also be an ultimate end for human life, because in any series of causes (end as principle of this or that action) there must be a first, else "if this principle be removed desire would not be moved at all."<sup>4</sup> All men are therefore said to not only act for an end, but to act for the ultimate end, and Aquinas identifies this as God.<sup>5</sup> This fundamental desire propels the person into his life of activity, a life which desires the attainment of this ultimate end without *a priori* knowing the way to its realization. The consequence of this is a conception of human nature where man does not "thirst" for God after the "touch" of grace. The ultimate end of one's happiness and fulfillment, God, is willed by all without qualification.<sup>6</sup> Although the operation of reason and the vices of the various powers of human action may disrupt and disorder the "wayfarer"<sup>7</sup> on the journey toward fulfillment, this principle of all action and desire remains inviolable.

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<sup>2</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 81, a. 2, ad. 2. Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologica. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Volume II. [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947].

<sup>3</sup> "Although the end is last in execution, it is first in the intention of the agent, and in this way has the aspect of a cause," *S.T.* I-II, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 1. Thomas Aquinas. Treatise on Happiness. trans. John A. Oesterle. [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964].

<sup>4</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 1, a. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 1, a. 6, corpus, and q. 5. a. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas prefers to speak of the "wayfarer" as one who is on the way to beatitude through Christ, cf. *S.T.* II-II, q. 18, a. 4. However, insofar as every rational being desires happiness and God, every being who acts in this world is a wayfarer toward that End.

To attain the ultimate end, the vision of God, is a process that is first worked out through the means of human experience, decision making, and that moral activity on earth which collaborates with the life of grace. To possess perfect goodness without any movement from potency to act is to possess it by nature, and this belongs only to God.<sup>8</sup> The rational agent, on the other hand, as created, must attain this happiness and tend toward it. This tending toward the ultimate end takes place through the means of many actions and deeds.<sup>9</sup> The structure of the *secunda pars* of the *Summa* is comprised of the acts which leads the person back to God.

The road to the actualization of the rational agent's ultimate end as complete happiness and fulfillment in God must then pass through the active life of a person. This life consists in having "the freedom to judge what he shall do and control over his actions."<sup>10</sup> Freedom implies a kind of indeterminacy to this ultimate end. To be sure, the ultimate end is a principle in all of man's actions, for all of man's desires are ordered to the complete good, the ultimate end. The human manifests this desire of complete happiness *through* singular actions and deeds under the aspect of proximate goods "tending toward his complete good because a beginning of something is always ordered to its completion."<sup>11</sup> But the human is free to seek this ultimate fulfillment through other means, other actions, than proximate goods. Aquinas sums this up by distinguishing between the ultimate end as it is desired and the ultimate end as realized: "but with respect to that in which this kind of thing is realized, all men are not agreed as to their

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<sup>8</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *S.T.* I-II, prologue.

<sup>11</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 1, a. 6.

ultimate end”<sup>12</sup> for “different ways of living come about among men by reason of the different things in which men seek the highest good.”<sup>13</sup> The different things in which men seek the highest good through particular goods are many for the rational agent, with the non-good as a particular end capable of being apprehended as the good.<sup>14</sup> This is the meaning of choice for Aquinas. Choice is the selection of one thing over another, dealing with a plurality of things that can be chosen.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, “the proper ends of the virtues ordered to happiness”<sup>16</sup> are matters of choice insofar as among “a number of ends there can be choice among them inasmuch as they are ordered to the ultimate end.”<sup>17</sup>

The so-called “natural law” of Aquinas should then not be confused with the natural law of animals. These creatures have no rational control over ordering and choosing means to a given end and are determined to this or that action in a given context.<sup>18</sup> In an animal act, there is no freedom of choice, no judgment involved. This is a crucial point in the ethics of Aquinas.

Consequently, if something is wholly determined to one thing, there is no place for choice. Now the difference between sense appetite and the will, as we have stated, is that the sense appetite is determined to one particular thing according to the order of nature, while the will, though determined by nature to something one in general, the good, is undetermined with respect to particular goods. Hence, to choose belongs properly to the will and not to the sense appetite, which is all the animals have.<sup>19</sup>

Human beings are not determined to one thing and must choose between them in order to actualize the good and tend toward the Ultimate End. Goodness is something

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<sup>12</sup> *S.T. I-II*, q. 1, a. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, ad. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *S.T. I-II*, q. 8, a. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *S.T. I-II*, q. 13, a. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *S.T. I-II*, q. 13, a. 3, ad. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *S.T. I-II*, q. 13, a. 3, ad. 2.

<sup>18</sup> “The animal selects one thing rather than another because its desire is naturally determined to it,” *S.T. I-II*, q. 13, a. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *S.T. I-II*, q. 13, a. 2.

that is acquired through choice; the good of the virtue of religion or the good of the virtue of temperance do not reside “in” us by nature. Habits are necessary for such virtues, for they order the powers of the soul,<sup>20</sup> capable of being “determined in several ways and to different things,”<sup>21</sup> to certain acts either in accord with its nature and end or in disjunction with this nature and its end.<sup>22</sup> Habits and virtues are necessary, to use two different examples, for a person to properly worship God or to live temperately, because these actions choose the good over the non-good.

The virtue of religion then implies a choice between different ends, to worship God or not to worship God. The right choice in this context is a virtuous one precisely because a rational agent does not need to choose it. The movement of the will to the one and not to the other, and the concomitant execution of the act from the operation of prudence, amounts to a virtuous act. To be religious is a virtue. Theologians who would survey the religiosity of the world, and perhaps overlook its goodness and virtue because of the conventional conclusion that all people are “ordered” teleologically to manifest a relation to the transcendent have missed the point that Aquinas is trying to make. The idea of an ordering to God that is connatural to the human soul is sound. But the uncritical identification of an ontological ordering to God and an actual practical response to this God in the world is not.

### Exposition of the Virtue of Religion

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<sup>20</sup> The soul “is the principle of actions through its powers,” *S.T.* I-II, q. 40, a. 2. Thomas Aquinas. Treatise on the Virtues, trans. John A. Oesterle. [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966].

<sup>21</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 39, a. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas invokes Aristotle’s definition of habit in this regard as “certain dispositions of what is perfect to what is best for it {ie. to the end, or operation} in accord with nature,” Aristotle, *Physics* VII, 3 as cited in *S.T.* I-II, q. 39, a. 2.

Aquinas situates the particular virtue of religion under the cardinal virtue of justice. Justice is the virtue which is directed to an external good, that is, relationship to the “other.”<sup>23</sup> Aquinas defines the cardinal virtue of justice as that which directs man in his relation toward the other.<sup>24</sup> Justice adjusts this relationship to an equality.<sup>25</sup> The example of the payment of a wage due for a service is given to explain what he means by equality.<sup>26</sup> In this example justice is shown to consist in a relation toward the other and the rectification of some type of debt incurred through this relation. A particular relation may be rectified through justice, but because of the rhythms of public and commercial life, similar relations of indebtedness develop without interruption. Justice is therefore “the habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will.”<sup>27</sup>

As a potential part of justice, religion is concerned with what is due to the “other” as God. Religion is a potential part of justice because what is owed to God cannot be adequately rendered so as to establish an equality.<sup>28</sup> The human person owes something to God for His excellence<sup>29</sup> and for all that he has received from Him. Aquinas invokes words of the Psalmist to illustrate: “What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that he has rendered to me?”<sup>30</sup> Yet Aquinas does not say that because the person cannot render to God his equal due he is in a situation of perpetual vice on account of his

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<sup>23</sup> *S.T. I-II*, q. 46, a. 6, ad. 3., trans. Oesterle, *Treatise on the Virtues*.

<sup>24</sup> *S.T. II-II*, q. 57, a. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *S.T. II-II*, q. 58, a. 1., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

<sup>28</sup> *S.T. II-II*, q. 80, a. 1.

<sup>29</sup> The excellence of God comes from his supremacy in being. “It is evident that God has dominion in a proper and singular way because He has made all things and is supreme in all things,” *S.T. II-II*, q. 81, a. 1, ad. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Psalm cxv. 12.

indebtedness.<sup>31</sup> Although the person stands in a position of indebtedness because of the sheer gratuity of God, religion as an act of moral virtue renders unto God what is owed to Him proper for the status of persons.<sup>32</sup> It renders the due but not the equal due. By honoring God with what is owed to him (worship) the person through this very act becomes ordered and proportioned to that other.<sup>33</sup> A rectified proportioning to a superior “other” is “a virtue which makes its possessor good and his act good likewise.”<sup>34</sup> Through these acts of worship, our way of being toward God is properly shaped and proportioned appropriate for our human constitution, as it were. Religion is therefore an aspect of being fully human.<sup>35</sup>

One important issue remains. Even though God is not the direct specifying object of the virtue of religion (it is worship of God), some prominent Thomist commentators have importantly recognized that, as with any virtue, this does not exclude God altogether. Cardinal Cajetan referred to this as the *objectum cui* (“object to whom”)

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<sup>31</sup> That is to say, that whatever the person renders to God is insufficient to the point of it not qualifying as a virtuous act but rather a vice because of a failure to establish a “certain proportion of equality between the external thing and the external person,” *S.T. II-II*, q. 58, a. 10.

<sup>32</sup> Aquinas deals with this problem in responding to the objection that “religion fails to observe the mean of justice, since it does not render the absolute equal to God,” (*S.T. II-II*, q. 81, a. 6, ad 1). He answers that the virtue of religion is praised “because of the will and not because of the ability,” (*Ibid.*). His argument from a different objection is also illuminating and reads as follows: “Religion is not a theological nor an intellectual virtue, but a moral virtue since it is part of justice. It observes a mean not in the passions, but by establishing an equality in actions directed to God. This equality is not absolute because it is impossible to give God his due; rather it is an equality based upon man’s ability and God’s acceptance of his actions,” *S.T. II-II*, q. 81, a. 5, ad. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Thus, as Aquinas states in q. 58, a. 10, the mean of justice is the proper proportioning of the thing to the other, and this is the real mean. As a potential part of justice, a religious act also adheres to this mean and proper proportioning. A real mean requires a real potentiality of excess and defect, and this too is possible in religion, either in not rendering what is due unto God through the acts of religion or by way of excess in performing them, (*S.T. II-II*, q. 93, a. 2). This excess Aquinas neatly points out is not by way of quantity, for a person can never do more than what he owes God, but it is an excess that disrupts the proper proportioning to the end.

<sup>34</sup> *S.T. II-II*, q. 81, a. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. trans. Blackfriars. Volume 39: Religion and Worship. [McGraw Hill: New York, 1964], app. 3, p. 259.

of religion<sup>36</sup> explaining that God indirectly enters into the definition of the virtue of religion. Just as the proper matter of the act of justice for Aquinas are “those things that belong to our intercourse with other men,”<sup>37</sup> in the case of the virtue of religion, it is those things that belong to our dealings with God. If God enters into the definition of the virtue of religion in this way as the “to whom” of the offering, then a proper conception and knowledge of who God is and how to relate to Him become necessary in order to worship Him fittingly.

#### Determining the “Who” and the “How” of the “To Whom”

According to Aquinas, the Old Law was given to safeguard a chosen people from the idolatry of the time and to preserve the belief and worship of the one true God in anticipation of Christ.<sup>38</sup> This is the “cause” of the ceremonial precepts.<sup>39</sup> Philosophically speaking however, Aquinas understands idolatry to be caused by an error in prudential judgment emanating from a false conception of God. An exercise of the virtue of religion “depends on the intellectual apprehension of this relation of man to God by the intellect, and this apprehension requires a true knowledge of God.”<sup>40</sup> A false knowledge of God necessarily entails vicious religious acts because of the process of intellectual apprehension. Reason presents the will with its object, which then moves to the end presented.<sup>41</sup> The practical intellectual virtue of prudence is then able to determine the

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<sup>36</sup> Cardinal Cajetan. Commentary in II-II, as cited in Leies, Sanctity and Religion..., p. 67, fn. 1. John of St. Thomas adds something similar: “For worship involves both the person to whom it is given and the signs of divinity he exhibits.” John of St. Thomas. Introduction to the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas. trans. Ralph McInerny. [South Bend: St. Augustine’s, 2004], p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 58, a. 1.

<sup>38</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 98, a. 2.

<sup>39</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 102, a. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Joseph de Ponton D’Amencourt. The Moral Goodness of Worship: Thomas Aquinas on the Virtue of Religion. diss. Catholic University of America, 1999, p. 230.

<sup>41</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 9, a. 1, a. 3, ad. 3.

mean in a given act.<sup>42</sup> In the case of religion, prudence selects this or that way of worshipping God, which is the real mean. Without the proper knowledge of God, reason presents the will with a sense object in the stead of the true God.<sup>43</sup> After moving to this end, for a superstitious human can still be said to relate to God in some way, imprudence results in the mean being transgressed<sup>44</sup> when one worships a creature or engages in divination.<sup>45</sup> Aquinas's description of idolatrous acts in his commentary on John 4:10-26 are related to this lack of prudence in religion.<sup>46</sup> *Whoever sacrifices to any god, except the Lord, shall be doomed*, he writes with approval in the *ST* article entitled "Whether sacrifice should be offered to God alone?"<sup>47</sup>

For Aquinas then the object of the cognitive act which gives rise to religion and the religious act cannot be "irrelevant to the virtuous nature of religion."<sup>48</sup> Religion depends on the "right grasp of man's stance before God's gift of creation."<sup>49</sup> The cognitive judgment needed for religion is the knowledge which recognizes the need for submitting to God and accepting His gracious act of creation.<sup>50</sup> In this respect, D'Amencourt is correct in stating that human nature "cannot be the sole principle of rightly ordered human action independently from the gift of grace."<sup>51</sup>

However, for Aquinas, this knowledge of God as Excellence and as He to Whom worship is distinct from the theological destiny of the Christian order. Recalling

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<sup>42</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 47, a. 5.

<sup>43</sup> D'Amencourt, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, p. 231.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. note 50.

<sup>45</sup> For the vices of religion, see *S.T.* II-II, qq. 92-97, which are distinguished as superstitious vices committed by those "who agree with religion in giving worship to God" (*S.T.* II-II, q. 92, prologue) and irreligious vices opposed to religion altogether.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, ed. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher, O.P. [Albany: Magi Books, 1980], pp. 247-249.

<sup>47</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 85, a. 2.

<sup>48</sup> D'Amencourt, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, p. 232.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> D'Amencourt, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, p. 230.

<sup>51</sup> D'Amencourt, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, p. 229, drawing on *S.T.* I, q. 95, a. 1.

Aquinas's commentary on the Gospel of John, religion as a strictly moral virtue worships and relate to God as "Lord," while Christians worship and relate to God as "Father."<sup>52</sup> It is significant to note however that the tone Aquinas sets in the treatise on religion is not one of a moribund "obligation" that is performed unto God as a drab and perfunctory Kantian duty.<sup>53</sup> Rather, it is one of thanksgiving and joy;<sup>54</sup> the virtue of religion springs from the recognition that one has been gratuitously invited to, using a biblical image, the banquet of life.

It should be clear that the above is not idolatry. The virtue of religion, like justice, is that which directs man properly in his relation to "other"; rendering homage to a sense object because of disordered affections would not be capable of this rectified action. Aquinas follows the account of the biblical idolater as immoral closely here. By contrast, the person in executing the morally good act of worship does so in cooperation with grace and determines the proper rites of sacrificial worship through human law and custom in accordance with natural law.<sup>55</sup> Idolatry is possible for the sacrifice of the "natural law" tradition, but it is also possible for those belonging to the Old Law and New Law.<sup>56</sup> The specific determination of the sacrifice according to a type of Law (or law) does however indicate a theological range of "goodness."

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<sup>52</sup> Aquinas, Commentary on John, no. 611, p. 250.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P. Thomas Aquinas: Theologian. [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997], p. 144.

<sup>54</sup> Joy is the principal effect of devotion, *S.T.* II-II q. 82, a. 4.

<sup>55</sup> The natural law can be considered a habit when the person "actually considers" the precepts (*S.T.* I-II, q. 94, a. 1) resulting in "proximate conclusions from first principles" (I-II, q. 94, a. 6) which are then translated into human laws and tailored in its specification (I-II, q. 95, a. 2) to the particular customs of the people (I-II, q. 97, a. 3). Understanding this process accomplishes two things; it helps us to understand what Aquinas meant by the human determination of sacrificial rites performed universally by all peoples and reiterates the possibility of acquiring this goodness belonging to the virtue of religion apart from the Divine Law, since an active possession of the natural law is itself a mode of goodness (I-II, q. 94, a. 2). Thomas Aquinas. On Law, Morality, and Politics. trans. Richard J. Regan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002].

<sup>56</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 103, a. 3, II-II, q. 93, a. 1.

Charity and the Qualified Language of Deficiency: Modes of Goodness in the World

Aquinas remarks that the end of the good of virtue is ultimately the enjoyment of God.<sup>57</sup> The cardinal virtues and their particular virtues, including religion, which attain a proximate and particular good, cannot attain this end. These virtues are not good truly<sup>58</sup> unless they are directed to this principal good, God. God is attained in this life, enjoyed as it were, in a union of love effected by the infused theological virtue of charity.<sup>59</sup> Charity as the form of all the virtues thus makes them “true virtue” by acting as an efficient cause directing “all other virtues to its own end,”<sup>60</sup> which is friendship with God. But since charity is neither the material cause<sup>61</sup> nor the essential form<sup>62</sup> of the virtues it leaves intact the proper specifying objects of all of the other virtues.<sup>63</sup> The moral virtues will remain even after the life of the wayfarer has ended and the person is enjoying the Beatific Vision. Aquinas specifically mentions justice in this state as being perpetually subject to God.<sup>64</sup> The point however is that the moral virtues for the human person are perfected by the infused theological virtues – not superseded.

The particular good of religion is then ordered to its perfection when it is directed to charity. Thus, the Christian exercise of the virtue of religion is an expression of the human’s friendship with God. Charity in this vein is the principle of religion<sup>65</sup> but it remains a human action of moral virtue which must be chosen and executed.<sup>66</sup> This

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<sup>57</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 23, a. 7., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 23, a. 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, ad. 3.

<sup>61</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 23, a. 8, ad. 2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, ad. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Leies, Sanctity and Religion According to St. Thomas, p. 69.

<sup>64</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 67, a. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 82, a. 2, ad. 1.

<sup>66</sup> “Although the theological virtues order us sufficiently in relation to our supernatural end, on their own they do not sufficiently order us in relation to the good works that are the means to that end,” as cited in

means, inversely, that if the particular good of the virtue of religion is not obliterated by the form of charity, then without charity it also subsists as a form of goodness.<sup>67</sup> Human actions without the Christian “form” merit the character of goodness. For Aquinas to say otherwise would be for him to limit goodness to the realization of the ultimate end absolutely, an option he carefully considers but rejects.<sup>68</sup> If goodness were not available to humanity apart from charity it would follow that “whoever has not charity, sins mortally in whatever he does, however good this may be in itself, which is absurd.”<sup>69</sup>

Thus, the language of polemic and insufficiency that Aquinas employs when speaking of the non-Christian order is always qualified and never absolute. When the infused theological virtues are not the primary interior principles of activity, Aquinas follows Augustine in saying that the “actions of an unbeliever are always sinful.”<sup>70</sup> But this sinfulness, the separation of man from God which the theological virtue of charity restores, does not take away “faith, hope, or even natural good.”<sup>71</sup> As I have demonstrated with Aquinas, worship is not a theological virtue but a natural and created good. This kind of act without charity can be good<sup>72</sup> but not “perfectly good.”<sup>73</sup>

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Michael S. Sherwin, O.P. By Knowledge & By Love. [Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2005], p. 171.

<sup>67</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, while admitting that this was the position of St. Thomas concerning moral virtues, quickly moves to undermine what he feels is its dangerous autonomy through his theology of the debilitating and crippling effects of mortal sin and his insistence that the good of moral virtue cannot be realized apart from charity. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. The Theological Virtues. Vol. 1: On Faith. [St. Louis: B. Herder, 1965], p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 23, a. 7. “If, however we take virtue as being ordered to some particular end, then we may speak of virtue being where there is no charity, in so far as it is directed to some particular good.”

<sup>69</sup> *S.T.* I-II, q. 100, a. 10.

<sup>70</sup> *S.T.* II-II, q. 23, a. 7, ad. 1.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> This is the way of moral goodness, under which falls the virtue of religion. Cf. especially this statement of Aquinas, “thus the will of one who sees the essence of God necessarily loves whatever he loves in subordination to God, just as the will of one who does not see the essence of God necessarily loves what he loves under the common notion of the good which he knows,” *S.T.* I-II, q. 4, a. 4., trans. Oesterle, Treatise on Happiness.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

### Conclusion: Some Keys for a Contemporary Theology of Religions

The intention of this study was to look at how Aquinas dealt with religion as a moral virtue and to ascertain whether some of his insights could assist the stated problem of a theology of religions which deals with religion exclusively from the standpoint of divine revelation and action without regard to its human actualization. In the following paragraphs, I will not involve myself with the specialized question of how to appropriate a virtue of religion in a theology of religions given our contemporary theological and philosophical sensibilities, a matter which in any case will require further study and deliberation. Instead, I will focus on wider and more basic themes that have surfaced in this study which can be applied in a critical dialogue with some current trends of thinking that have found popularity and prevalence among Catholic theologians and magisterial authorities. Most of what I have to say is directed toward a balance or a synthesis with these positions rather than an outright replacement.

First, it must be said that most theologies of religions, especially those of the inclusivist variety, will not want to cut other religious traditions off from the highest supernatural graces. They are not working with Aquinas' quasi-supersessionist (pre-Law, Law, Grace) schema. Divine grace, revelation, and salvation are available to non-Christian religious communities in the tradition of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II.<sup>74</sup> Still, such inclusivisms often become brittle or evasive when pushed on the question of discernment, and as discussed above, either remain vague or push in either the direction of unbridled pluralism or unbridled exclusivism. If a Christian cannot entrust herself or himself to a particular teaching or practice in either an

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<sup>74</sup> See here Gerald O'Collins and his wonderful recent article entitled: "John Paul II on Christ, the Holy Spirit, and World Religions." *Irish Theological Quarterly*. 72 (2007) 323-337.

apologetic/evangelical position or in a posture of mutual learning and self-indictment in regard to the truth of a given tradition and its communities of practice, the enterprise of dialogue and comparative learning can become both hollow and confusing. Aquinas offers a way to consider religion, universally, as a human ethic and morally good action provided certain criterion are met, such as the exercise of right choice or decision, giving to God what is God's due, and closely related, care for the "stranger." It is obvious that Aquinas' criterion for a virtuous exercise of religion cannot stand up to what we now know to be non-theistic religious traditions which the Church has engaged in serious dialogue with, such as Buddhism. However this can be an area of research for both Catholic Christian philosophers and theologians of religion, as well as ethicists.

Second, Aquinas understanding of religion as a virtue can help to clarify what *Dominus Iesus* meant when it said that non-Christian religions are in a gravely deficient<sup>75</sup> situation and prone to superstition.<sup>76</sup> Deficient and superstitious in relation to what? In the terms discussed in this paper, other religions cannot be said to be deficient in terms of their execution of the religious act. Religion as a human action is good, and although Aquinas would say that this goodness is made perfect in Christianity, he would not deny its goodness as an essential component of what it means to be human in the world - even apart from the Christian "form." *Dominus Iesus* is incapable of assimilating this dimension into their theological evaluation of other religions because its sole reference point is the supernatural. Aquinas on the other hand, even within his limited theology of religions, left the question open whether the exercise of the human virtue of religion could be manifested as superstition or as rectified worship and relationality. With a much

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., (§22), p. 22.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., (§21), p. 21.

enlarged view of grace and the participation of all religions in the life of God through the two hands of Word and Spirit, the possibility of an engraced option for the God of Jesus Christ through the religious life renders such a quick judgment to ‘superstition’ even more problematic. Learning from Aquinas’ approach for our own situation might answer the question of whether, as Frank Clooney asks, “it is inherently superstitious to worship Narayana as Lord”<sup>77</sup>; in short, it would provide for the “sophisticated criteria”<sup>78</sup> Francis X. Clooney pleads for in his comments on *Dominus Iesus* § 21.

Third, to consider religion from the standpoint of action is also to correct the weakness of justifying the existence of lumping together religious traditions along with other cultural phenomena as generic potential receptors of logos spermatikos, the so-called “seeds of the Word.” Such an approach ignores the inherent value of the religious act. Religion is a way of life actualized by certain kinds of activities. Seeds on the other hand can be sown in a variety of environments and terrains. They are not confined to the religious climate alone. Many theologians, when presented with the variety of ways of being religious in the world, affirm the existence and relative value of these religions through some kind of “seeds of the Word” theology that equates religion with music, literature, art and other cultural phenomena as convertible *loci* for divine activity outside of the biblical ambit.<sup>79</sup> This approach may be legitimate in its own right. Yet the response to God and his grace in the world through the option of religious existence has a value all its own and should be affirmed as such.

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<sup>77</sup> Francis X. Clooney, “Implications for Inter-Religious Learning,” in *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Frans Josef van Beeck. “Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology Among the Srivaisnavas of South India.” *Theological Studies*. Review. 58. n2 (June 1997): p. 373.

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