

**Happiness and Religion:
Why the Virtue of Religion is Indispensable for
Attaining the Final End
A *Re-lecture* of Thomas Aquinas with an Eye to
His Contemporary Relevance¹**

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Religet nos religio uni omnipotenti Deo.
—St. Augustine, *De vera religione*²

Introduction

POPE FRANCIS, then-cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, in his notes addressed to his fellow cardinals during the congregations of cardinals preceding the 2013 conclave, named what he regards to be the most

¹ All the essays comprising the symposium on “The Virtue of Religion” have their origin in the Rev. Robert J. Randall Conference on Christianity and Culture that took place at Providence College, Providence, RI, April 19–20, 2013. The theme of the conference was “The Virtue of Religion—Then and Now.” A considerably abbreviated version of this essay was presented at the plenary session of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Casa Pio IV, Vatican, June 19–20, 2015. Special thanks to the University of Our Lady of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary for providing the contemplative space to complete this piece while serving as Paluch Chair of Theology.

² “May religion bind us to the one Almighty God” (Augustine, *De vera religione* 55, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* [hereafter, *PL*], 34:172), cited by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 1. All citations from the *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) are taken from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948; repr. Christian Classics, 1981). Alterations are indicated by brackets. Translations from other works of Thomas Aquinas, if not indicated otherwise, are mine.

pressing margins of human existence to which the Catholic Church is called to evangelize: the margins of the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance—and, of doing without religion. Arguably, doing without religion is an increasingly widespread mode of living in the secular societies of the western hemisphere.³ For very good reasons, Pope Francis identifies this pervasive mode of living as one of the margins of human existence, for it is neither neutral nor benign. Rather, doing without religion constitutes a significant impediment to attaining the surpassing final end to which humanity is ordained in the extant order of providence—to perfect and everlasting happiness in union with God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* renders this surpassing final end in its programmatic opening statement thus: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”⁴

Thomas Aquinas advances an account of the virtue of religion that is theologically profound, philosophically robust, and especially relevant for a context in which doing without religion has become a widespread phenomenon. He takes the virtue of religion to be indispensable for attaining the surpassing final end to which divine providence has ordained humanity—genuine and everlasting happiness in communion with God. To put Aquinas’s central insight in a nutshell: the gratuitous ultimate end of perfect and everlasting participation in the divine life—the beatific vision—is unattainable without the Christian *viator*, the sojourner on the way to this end, living the virtue of religion. This vital virtue signifies the stable disposition, formed by

³ For the standard Western narrative account of how it came to pass that large segments of European and North American societies are doing without religion, see Charles Taylor’s magnum opus, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007). See Matthew Rose, “Tyloring Christianity: Charles Taylor is a Theologian of the Secular Status Quo,” *First Things* (December 2014) (<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/12/tyloring-christianity>) for an astute critique of Taylor’s ambitious project. Taylor promotes a problematically resigned Christian spirituality that accommodates itself all too willingly to the new secular establishment of doing without religion.

⁴ The passage continues the following way: “For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [hereafter, *CCC*], §1).

charity, to submit one's will to God in the interior act of devotion, to direct one's mind completely to God in the interior act of prayer, and to render one's due honor and reverence to God in exterior acts of adoration, sacrifice, oblation, tithes, and vows. The necessary relationship that, according to Aquinas, obtains between the attainment of the surpassing ultimate end and the exercise of the virtue of religion may usefully be cast into this syllogism:

- (1) If humanity is ordained to the gratuitous supernatural final end of union with God, then the virtue of religion is indispensable for the attainment of this end.
- (2) Humanity is ordained to the gratuitous supernatural final end of union with God.
- (3) Consequently, the virtue of religion is indispensable for attaining this end. Doing without religion constitutes a grave impediment in regard to attaining the ultimate end and places one, therefore, on a margin of human existence.

The major premise encapsulates the crucial claim. In the following, I shall advance a brief systematic *re-lecture* of Aquinas's warrant for this premise.

But why should doing without religion constitute one of the margins of human existence in the first place? For the educated elites of the western hemisphere, doing without religion is the welcome effect of an ineluctable progress from ignorance and bigotry to enlightenment and tolerance. For them, doing without religion does not constitute at all one of the margins of human existence but, quite on the contrary, the precondition for the ultimate flourishing of the sovereign self. Therefore, in order to answer the question above in a theologically sound way, two tasks must be accomplished: first, the recovery of the virtue of religion that has suffered unjust neglect from philosophers and theologians during the last fifty years; and second, the recovery of the reason why the virtue of religion is indispensable for attaining the surpassing ultimate end—perfect and everlasting happiness in union with God. Because accomplishing the first task presupposes the accomplishment of the second, I shall attend to them in reverse order. Yet first of all, two preliminary questions must be answered: one, how does the use of “religion” in the virtue of religion relate to and differ from the currently dominant uses of “religion”? And two, what essentially is the virtue of religion?

The Virtue of Religion versus “Religion” in Contemporary Parlance

There are at least five currently dominant uses of the term “religion” from which the virtue of religion must be clearly distinguished:⁵

Political Liberalism’s Use of “Religion”

The first is the quite recent but now widespread secularist—or in the European context, “laicit”—use of “religion,” a use that has risen to the position of virtually unchallenged hegemony in the secular media of Europe and North America. This use is so utterly influential because it is part of the conceptual matrix of a normative secularism that frames—primarily by way of the media—the public discussion in virtually all Western societies. The positive contrastive terms to this negative use of “religion” are “secular reason” and its present instantiation, “secular discourse.” “Religion” stands for sets of beliefs that are presumably more or less arbitrary in nature, beliefs impossible to warrant and adjudicate rationally. Because of its inherently irrational nature—so secularist reasoning goes—“religion” must establish its claims by way of more or less subtle forms of violence, ranging from psychological manipulation to open terror, torture, and religious war.⁶ In order to secure peace in the public square, a pure “secular” reason and discourse must dominate the public sphere, while “religion” in all shapes and forms is to be relegated to the private, or at best, social sphere. While in virtually all Western societies there exists, of course, a constitutional right to religious freedom, the political and judicial powers of current Western liberal democracies interpret this religious freedom not as a constitutional human right antecedent to normative political categories of “public” versus “private,” but

⁵ These five contemporary uses of the term “religion” are far from comprehensive. Rather, they are of paradigmatic significance for the reconsideration of the virtue of religion in the current intellectual, political, social, and cultural climate of the western hemisphere. Incidentally, already in 1912, the American naturalist psychologist of religion, James Henry Leuba, who was committed to the program of an explanatory reductionism of religion to physiological phenomena, collected no fewer than forty-eight different definitions of “religion.” See his *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 339–361.

⁶ For an astute critique and deconstruction of this founding myth of modern political liberalism, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

merely as a political right within them. Conditioned in such a way, the right to religious freedom turns into a right of free exercise that pertains first and foremost to the private sphere and, under increasingly restrictive conditions, also to the social sphere. According to this by now quasi-hegemonic secularist interpretation of the freedom of religion, the public sphere belongs exclusively to “secular” reason and discourse. Religious belief and practice are constitutionally protected as long as they remain within the parameters of the private and social spheres.⁷ This secularist use of “religion,” integral to the strategic

⁷ The “founding theory” of this construal of “public” and “private” was advanced by John Rawls in his magnum opus, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), and fine-tuned in his later *Political Liberalism*, exp. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Jürgen Habermas, in his somewhat more nuanced and sophisticated approach to religion by way of his speech act theory, seeks to assign to “religion” a role in the deliberative political process of law making characteristic of liberal procedural democracies. On this, see especially his: *A Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols. (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1985); *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); *Nachmetaphysisches Denken 2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2012); and together with Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Religion and Reason* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007). For Habermas on Rawls, see Habermas’s important essay, “Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls’ Political Liberalism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 92.3 (1995): 109–131. “Religion,” in Habermas’s theory of communicative action, becomes identical with the speech acts of believers. He differentiates strictly between the unregulated and the regulated public discourse. In the unregulated public discourse, religious reasoning is permitted, while in the regulated deliberative public discourse that involves law-making, religious reasoning is strictly prohibited. Hence, Habermas distinguishes in the “public” between a wider social public and a more specific and restrictive political public. While Rawls requires all citizens committed to “religion” to translate their arguments into a language that is accessible to all citizens, Habermas expects a similar translation process only in regard to the restricted deliberative public discourse that pertains directly to law making. Rawls and Habermas share the underlying assumption that there exists a “rational discourse” whose normative commitments are, in essence, different from the rational commitments that a “religious” interlocutor would hold. Hence, a person who, in the restricted deliberative public discourse of law-making, draws conceptually and semantically, let’s say, on Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, or Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, differs categorically from a person who draws conceptually and semantically on Augustine’s *Civitas Dei*, Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*, or for that matter, the social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII. Holding such tacitly operative convictions as Rawls and Habermas do is, of course,

global outreach of free-market consumer capitalism, constitutes the most preeminent and also most subtle instance of what Pope Francis has identified as the “colonization of the mind.”

American Protestantism’s Use of “Religion”

There exists a second, quite different but equally problematic dominant use of “religion.” Unlike the first use, it is a uniquely Christian use, alive among various strands of Protestantism, first and foremost in North America, and there especially among Baptists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and new post-denominational and post-institutional Christian movements. But like the first use, this one also has a distinctly negative connotation. Here “religion” means “organized religion,” a linguistic marker that identifies negatively institutional management, dissemination, and control of Christian beliefs and behavior. “Religion” in this sense is critiqued and dismissed as an inauthentic and estranged institutional temptation to works-righteousness. It is contrasted with the positive ideal of a non-institutional, “free,” and therefore purportedly authentic faith in Jesus. This use has its roots in the constitutive individualism and the operative anti-Catholicism that are at the heart of what is characteristically American about American Protestantism.⁸

The Consumer-Capitalist Use of “Religion”

A third dominant use of “religion” differs from the first two in that it lacks their principally negative connotations. This use refers to comprehensive world-views or “spiritualities” that pertain to ultimate

nothing but a sophisticated way of being beholden by a rather unreflective (should one say quasi-“religious”) attitude about unexamined Enlightenment presuppositions. And, incidentally, Charles Taylor, in his probing engagements of Habermas’s political thought, has pressed the question quite convincingly whether non-religious philosophical systems do not share central characteristics of their “religious” counterparts. If Taylor is right—and I think he is—the distinction between a pure “secular reason” and merely “religious views” is a self-serving fiction of political liberalism. For a striking analysis and critique of how the artificial restrictions of Rawlsian secularist rationalism have emptied public discourse of intellectual and moral substance and authenticity, see Steven D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁸ This dominant use is best captured not by this or that book—their name is legion—but by the extremely popular YouTube video “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhD-GYlpqY>). I am indebted to Holly Taylor Coolman for pointing me to this greatly instructive performance.

matters and that answer what one might usefully call “Life Questions” such as: “What should I live for, and why?”; “What should I believe, and why should I believe it?”; “What kind of person should I be?”; and “What is meaningful in life, and what should I do in order to lead a fulfilling life?”⁹ Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and innumerable other religions constitute distinct species of the overarching genus of a spiritual world-view option. In Western capitalist consumer societies governed by the dictatorship of relativism—that is, by the unfettered rule of the free market—“religions” constitute spiritual commodities in the ambit of a comprehensive wellness life-style liberalism—to be sampled, acquired, returned, or discarded by their demanding consumers.

The Religionswissenschaft Use of “Religion”

A fourth dominant use of “religion” is found primarily among cultural anthropologists, as well as sociologists and philosophers of religion. According to this use, “religion” denotes a unique constant in the evolution of the *homo sapiens*, the origin and ultimate point of reference of which is a pre-linguistic and pre-reflective awareness of the primordially “numinous” or “sacred.” “Religion” expresses a fundamental and ultimately ineffable experience of “being-in-the-world,” of utter dependency, contingency, and finitude toward death, but also of unity with the cosmos, with ancestors, with the totality of life, and last but not least, with the numinous or sacred. The *interior* perspective of each religion is not reflective of a distinct transcendent truth about God or the world. Rather, it is a distinct reception and expression of what remains essentially ineffable but is universally shared by all religions. The *exterior* scientific methodologies of *Religionswissenschaft* facilitate a genealogical account of “religions” as the emerging cultural-historical expressions of a primordial anthropological constant in the evolution of *homo sapiens*. Under the gaze of the exterior scientific perspective, “religions” become the object of historical, linguistic, cultural-anthropological study in the “departments of religion” found in contemporary secular colleges and universities.¹⁰ The theoretical

⁹ I borrow these questions from Brad S. Gregory, who, in the introduction to his important study, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), advances an astute discussion of these life questions.

¹⁰ For the most substantive and comprehensive account that deploys this use of “religion,” see Robert Bellah’s commanding magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belk-

commitments hidden in such a notion of “religion” have their roots either in the reductive naturalist accounts of “religion” advanced in the “natural history of religion” during the Enlightenment period¹¹ or in the romantic anti-Enlightenment experiential-expressivist concept of “religion.” Also, given that Liberal Protestantism (represented especially by Schleiermacher) and Catholic Modernism favored an understanding of “religion” as arising from a faculty completely different from the intellectual and volitional faculties, such an emphasis on religion as a feeling or awareness that is essentially pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic would only underscore religion as something essentially ineffable.¹² Unsurprising, therefore, is the probably most central tenet of “religion” according to liberal Protestantism and Catholic Modernism: the doctrine that religious experience arises fundamentally from the transcendental constitution of human subjectivity itself, a subjectivity that emerges slowly but inexorably in the long history of human evolution and that extends itself into the intersubjectivity of linguistically configured complexes of symbol and ritual. Consequently, religious narratives and doctrines purportedly constitute secondary and inherently insufficient linguistic and conceptual expressions of these primordial religious experiences of the sacred, or in Rudolf Otto’s famous term, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.¹³

nap, 2011). For an astute identification of the tacit but normative theological framework characteristic of liberal Protestantism that arguably informs Bellah’s account in this extraordinary work, see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “Sociology as Theology: Robert Bellah’s Book Renews the Liberal Protestant Project,” *First Things* (June 2013), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/06/sociology-as-theology>, and for a devastating Augustinian critique of Bellah’s grand narrative, see Paul J. Griffiths, “Impossible Pluralism: Choosing Between Universal Academic History and Christian Faith,” *First Things* (June 2013), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/06/impossible-pluralism>.

¹¹ See paradigmatically David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *The Natural History of Religion*, best accessible in David Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹² The probably iconic early nineteenth-century locus classicus of this use of “religion” is the programmatic work of the young Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), especially the second speech, “The Nature of Religion.”

¹³ Among the paradigmatic twentieth-century works that encapsulate this use of “religion” are Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt, 1917)—English: *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford

The Use of “Religion” in Protestant Dialectical Theology

A fifth conventional use of “religion” has become prevalent in one influential strand of twentieth century Protestant theology. Karl Barth and his disciples deploy the liberal Protestant notion of “religion” as a contrast term that puts into relief the principal concept of Barth’s theology—“revelation.” In the Barthian theological scheme, “religion” represents a fundamental and irrepressible human dynamic arising again and again from the post-lapsarian universal condition of original sin—“natural theology” purportedly constituting its purest expression—a condition that can only be overcome again and again by God’s own definitive self-revelation in Christ as witnessed to by Holy Scripture. In his theological critique of “religion,” Barth fuses Calvin’s radicalization of Augustine’s critique of pagan religion in books 1 through 10 of the *Civitas Dei* with the famous projection theory of Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*, so that his hyper-Augustinian use of “religion” signifies the ever recurring attempt of a humanity, fundamentally alienated from God, to project their hopes, wishes, and desires onto a fabricated product, the religious idol. The agent of this theological critique of religion is, of course, a dialectical theology exclusively funded by God’s self-revelation in Christ.¹⁴

Significantly, the notion of “religion” (*religio*) as used in the virtue of religion cannot be subsumed under any of these five dominant contemporary uses of “religion.” Rather, as we will see later, the virtue of religion puts fundamentally into question the central assumptions on which each of the five dominant uses of “religion” rests. Having accomplished the first preliminary task, we must turn to the second and examine what the virtue of religion signifies and what its proper definition is.

**The Virtue of Religion According to Thomas Aquinas:
A Brief Introductory Account**

Thomas Aquinas is the first theologian to compose a comprehensive and complete treatise on the virtue of religion in which he develops an original and unitary conception of what he regards as the most

University Press, 1950)—and Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1959).

¹⁴ For the by now classical expression of this notion of “religion,” see Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, §17, “Gottes Offenbarung als Aufhebung der Religion” (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1940), 304–397. This part of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* is now available in an affordable English edition: Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

eminent of the moral virtues.¹⁵ Drawing upon Cicero, Isidore of Seville, and especially Augustine, he conceives of *religio* as a specific moral excellence that comprises a set of operations characteristic of the human being as a rational creature. It denotes both interior and exterior operations (interior acts of devotion and prayer and exterior acts of adoration, sacrifice, oblation, tithes, vows, etc.) by way of which the human being renders what is due to the source of all being and life, to “the first principle of the creation and government of things.”¹⁶ Because these acts denote a human excellence in relationship to a common object (the *habitus*—a stable disposition hard to lose) that enables and facilitates these specific acts, *religio* constitutes a distinct virtue.¹⁷ It “denotes properly a relation to God.”¹⁸ By the proper and immediate acts that the *habitus* of *religio* elicits (such as adoration and sacrifice), the human being is directed to God alone.¹⁹ This virtue is akin to the cardinal virtue of justice, which Aquinas defines as “rendering to everybody his [or her] due by a constant and perpetual will.”²⁰ But since justice is “the virtue of actions among equals,”²¹ constitutively asymmetrical relationships—children to parents, citizens to their homeland, and, first and foremost, rational creatures to their Creator—cannot belong directly to the virtue of justice. For the constitutive inequality characteristic of these relationships makes it impossible to render what is properly due. Consequently, acts of moral excellence that pertain to these essentially asymmetrical relationships must belong to virtues different from justice in the strict sense, but

¹⁵ *ST* II-II, qq. 80–100. In his introduction to *La virtù di religione*, the Italian Dominican Thomist Tito Centi, O.P., characterizes “S. Tommaso come la fonte primaria del trattato *De Religione*. Si risale a lui perché egli ha avuto il merito di costruire per la prima volta, e quasi d’inventare l’argomento . . . Non c’è dubbio che, già prima di S. Tommaso, molto si era parlato di devozione, di adorazione, di preghiera, di sacrificio, di voti e giuramenti: ma non era chiaro il legame di tutti questi atti come esercizio di un’unica virtù, specificamente distante da quelle teologali e dalle altre virtù morali” (Tommaso d’Aquino, *La Somma Teologica*, vol. 18 [Siena: Salani, 1967], 8).

¹⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3.

¹⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3: “Habits [*habitus*] are differentiated according to a different aspect of the object. Now it belongs to religion to show reverence to one god under one aspect, namely as the first principle of the creation and government of things.”

¹⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1: “Religio proprie importat ordinem ad Deum.”

¹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 1.

²⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 58, a. 1.

²¹ *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 3, ad 2.

insofar as some due is rendered, they must nevertheless still be related to justice. Hence, *religio* cannot be a subjective part of justice—that is, one of the species into which a cardinal virtue may be divided. Rather, it must be a potential part of justice. And so, as “a virtue which resembles a cardinal virtue without manifesting its complete specific nature,”²² *religio* occupies a position similar to “piety” (*pietas*)²³ and “observance” (*observantia*).²⁴ These two virtues facilitate those acts of rightly acknowledging what is due and what cannot be rendered according to the order of justice in the constitutively unequal relationships all human beings have to their parents and to their homelands. *A fortiori*, no rational creature is able to render what is justly due to God. The virtue of religion is the operative *habitus* that enables human beings to exercise the greatest approximation to justice possible in the most asymmetrical relationship of all, the rational creature to “the first principle of the creation and government of things.”²⁵

Consider the real (and not merely stipulative) definition of *religio* that the noted Hungarian Dominican Thomist, Alexander M. Horvath, formulates based on Aquinas’s account: *religio* is (1) a moral

²² Kevin D. O’Rourke, O.P., in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 39 (2a2ae 80–91), *Religion and Worship* (New York/London: Blackfriars in conjunction with McGraw-Hill Book Company and Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), xxiii.

²³ *ST* II-II, q. 101.

²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 102.

²⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3. The first principle (*primum principium*) signifies the transcendent universal source and cause of all that exists. Since every cause contains the perfections characteristic of its proper effect to a higher degree than the effect, all genuine extant perfections are in a surpassing way characteristics of the first principle. These perfections include among others intellect, will, life, personhood, and with them love, justice, mercy, providence, and blessedness. Given this understanding—implicitly as a vague awareness to which conscience gives rise or explicitly as the knowledge natural theology affords—it is a dictate of natural reason that the first principle is to be honored by way of acts of adoration and sacrifice. However, since the metaphysical knowledge of the first principle’s perfections remains notional and limited and its implicit awareness weak and insecure, the former tends to a reductive, de-personalized rationalization (Plato’s religion and Hindu mysticism) and the latter to a multi-personal mythologization (the pantheon of pagan deities). Only by way of a personal self-introduction to Abraham and Moses and culminating in the Incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, does the first principle’s identity, He Who Is, as triune Lord become accessible—to faith, an act of assent to a testimony that surpasses and simultaneously affirms what natural reason is implicitly aware of or may come to know explicitly as the existence of the first principle of the creation and government of things.

virtue, whose (2) acts (3) through an ordination of reason refer (4) to God as the first principle in order (5) to testify our reverence and submission and to participate in God's gifts. The *formal* cause of the acts of the virtue of religion is the ordination of reason to God. Reason's *ordinatio ad Deum* occurs in regard to interior religious acts (submission of the will, mental prayer, etc.) by way of a purely transcendental relation to God and in regard to all exterior acts by way of a predicamental relation to God. The *efficient* cause of this ordination is its very *ratio*, the judgment and command of reason that are the very origin of the relation to God, be it transcendental or predicamental. The *material* cause signifies everything that is taken up or chosen as an offering in order to signify the honor that is due to God. These things may include acts of the will, the intellect, or the other virtues and all things that, through their ordination, may be ordered to God directly or indirectly. The *final* cause, the cause of all causes, is the person's intention to testify reverence and submission to God and to participate in God's gifts.

From the formal and material cause of the acts of *religio* issues the formal object of *religio*—*cultus*. *Cultus* signifies what is offered to God and that through which God is honored and revered; that is, all the acts that the *habitus* of *religio* elicits and commands. *Cultus* broadly understood signifies (1) the act of *religio* (oblation), (2) the matter or object in and through which oblation is exercised, and (3) the end (*finis*) of oblation, which is reverence of God and participation in God's gifts.²⁶

The virtue of religion presupposes some rudimentary universal knowledge of God's existence and providence and is rooted in the third inclination of the natural law. The principles of the natural law govern and guide the acquired virtue of religion.²⁷ It is this mostly tacit and implicit knowledge of God and its rootedness in the natural law that account for the integrity of the *formal* cause of the acquired virtue of religion, the ordination of reason and of its *ratio*, the judgment and command of reason to exercise acts of religion. The *material* cause—everything taken up or chosen as offering in order to signify the honor that is due to God—may be more or less deficient due to the state of wounded nature (*status naturae corruptae*) in which humanity finds itself

²⁶ Alexander M. Horvath, O.P., *Annotationes ad II-II Quaest. 81–91 De Virtute Religionis* (Pro Manuscripto) Pontificum Institutum Internationale “Angelicum” (Rome: Tipografia Agostiniana, 1929), 3–8.

²⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 94, a. 2: “Thirdly, there is in [the human being] an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him; thus [the human being] has a natural inclination to know the truth about God and to live in society.”

after the fall.²⁸ Importantly, the *de facto* deficiency of its material cause does not compromise the *formal* integrity of *religio* as a moral virtue. It is precisely this constitutive *formal* integrity that affords the definition of the virtue in the first place. Aquinas states:

A virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his act good likewise, wherefore we must needs say that every good act belongs to a virtue. Now it is evident that to render anyone his dues has the aspect of good, since by rendering a person his due, one becomes suitably proportioned to him, through being ordered to him in a becoming manner. But order comes under the aspect of good. . . . Since then it belongs to religion to pay due honor to someone, namely to God, it is evident that religion is a virtue.²⁹

The *formality* of the object of all the operative *habitus*—including *religio*—and the formal integrity of their respective acts account for the teleological perfectibility of human nature (regarding the good of moral excellence). Since grace does not destroy but rather presupposes and perfects nature, it is divine grace that, in the extant order of providence, accounts for the surpassing perfection of the virtue and the agent, a perfection that comes about by way of the healing and elevation of human nature by sanctifying grace and the infusion of the theological virtues, especially charity.

The acquired virtue of religion differs from its infused analogue in that, in the case of the latter, the material cause is definitively perfected by way of divine and human instruction. According to Aquinas, the New Law of the Gospel and human law (that is, Christ's mandates and the additional determinations of the Church) establish what specific things are to be done in reverence of God.³⁰ Furthermore, and more importantly, the acts of the infused virtue of religion are commanded by the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity, and formed by the virtue of charity, which already unites the person in some fashion with God "by a union of the spirit."³¹ Furthermore, in order to make the human soul amenable to the motions of the Holy Spirit, the human being receives, together with the theological virtue of charity

²⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2.

²⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 2.

³⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 2, ad 3.

³¹ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1.

also the gifts of the Holy Spirit, infused *habitus* of their own. The apostle Paul states, in Romans 8:15: “You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” Precisely because it is the Holy Spirit who moves to this effect, to have such filial affection toward God, Aquinas argues, there must be a corresponding gift of the Holy Spirit, a stable disposition that facilitates and elicits such acts:

Since it belongs properly to piety to pay duty and worship to one’s father, it follows that piety, whereby, at the Holy Spirit’s instigation, we pay worship and duty to God as our Father, is a gift of the Holy Spirit.³²

The gift of piety perfects the infused virtue of religion. While the latter elicits acts of worship to God the Creator, the former elicits worship to God the Father. Last but not least, the person receiving the infused virtue of religion and the gift of piety also receives an imprinted seal or character on the soul that efficaciously capacitates him or her to the worship of the Triune God. This very seal or character that the rational soul receives is the effect of the sacraments, first and foremost of baptism.³³ Because of the gift of piety and the seal of baptism, the *cultus* of *religio* is now worship of the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

Unsurprisingly, but nevertheless significantly, Aquinas regards the virtue of religion to be “the chief among the moral virtues.”³⁴ The virtue of religion acquires its surpassing preeminence among the moral virtues from its relationship to the end to which the agent is ordered. The closer something is to this end, the greater is its goodness. Since the virtue of religion, whose acts are directly ordered to the honor of God, approaches nearer to God than any other moral virtue, this virtue holds a position of preeminence among all the moral virtues.³⁵

³² *ST* II-II, q. 121, a. 1.

³³ *ST* III, q. 63, a.1: “As is clear from what has been already stated [*ST* III, q. 62, a. 5] the sacraments of the New Law are ordained for a twofold purpose; namely, for a remedy against sins; and for the perfecting of the soul in things pertaining to the Divine worship according to the rite of the Christian life.”

³⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, s.c.

³⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6: “Whatever is directed to an end takes its goodness from being ordered to that end; so that the nearer it is to the end the better it is. Now moral virtues are about matters that are ordered to God as their end. And religion approaches nearer to God than the other moral virtues, in so far as its actions are directly and immediately ordered to the *honor* of God. Hence religion excels among the moral virtues.”

This brief account and definition of the virtue of religion shall suffice. We are now in position to turn to the two interconnected tasks. By demonstrating that the virtue of religion is indispensable for humanity to attain its final end—happiness or beatitude—the centrality of the virtue of religion for genuine human flourishing is established, as is the reason given why doing without religion constitutes an existential margin of the first order.

The Ultimate End of the Human Being: Perfect and Everlasting Beatitude

In his prologue to the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas offers the key to answering the question why *religio* is indispensable for attaining the supernatural end:

Since, as Damascene states (*De Fide Orthod.* ii, 12), [the human being] is said to be made to God's image, in so far as the image implies *an intelligent being endowed with free-will and self-movement*: now that we have treated of the exemplar, i.e., God, and of those things which came forth from the power of God in accordance with His will; it remains for us to treat of His image, i.e., [the human being], inasmuch as he too is the principle of his actions, as having free-will and control of his actions.³⁶

Aquinas's programmatic announcement of the fundamental correlation between the Divine exemplar and the human image makes immediately plain the striking structural parallel in the *Summa theologiae* between questions 1 through 5 of the *Prima Secundae* and questions 2 through 43 of the *Prima Pars*. Both treat the essential *actus* of *intellectus*, its finality, and its beatitude: the former treats the exemplar, God; the latter treats the image, humanity. Indeed, in the whole *Prima Pars*, Aquinas considers the *actus ad intra* and the *actus ad extra* of the exemplar, God, and in the whole *Secunda Pars*, the structure and the constitutive principles of the *actus* of the image as *viator* toward beatitude. The universal principle of causality and the priority of the final cause apply to both the exemplar and the image, albeit analogically according to the difference between the transgeneric order of divine causality and the contingent order of secondary causality. The end or purpose that an intelligence (*intellectus*) conceives constitutes the final cause according to which efficient causes are ordained. Consequently,

³⁶ ST I-II, prologue.

the end that is conceived first in the order of intention will, in the order of execution, be accomplished last. Final causality presupposes rational agency, not proximately but ultimately. The transcendent universal First Cause of Aquinas's five ways is necessarily also the transcendent universal Final End.³⁷ Since the transcendent universal First Cause must contain in a surpassingly eminent way all the perfections extant in the universe, and since *intellectus* is one such perfection, the universal transcendent First Cause must, in a surpassingly eminent way, be *intellectus*.³⁸

Two important consequences follow. First, because beatitude is the perfect good of an intellectual nature, "beatitude belongs to God in the highest degree."³⁹ The perfection of an intellectual nature is its intellectual operation by which it grasps in some way everything. Hence, the beatitude of an intellectual nature consists in understanding (*intelligendo*). Because in God *intellectus* and *esse* are identical, "beatitude must be assigned to God in respect to his *intellectus*." Importantly, Aquinas adds: "as also to the blessed, who are called blessed (*beati*) by reason of the assimilation to His beatitude."⁴⁰

Second, the final end of all God's acts *ad extra* must be God. "God wills Himself as the end, and other things as ordained to that end; inasmuch as it befits divine goodness that other things should be partakers therein."⁴¹ Divine goodness is the final end to which the divine will directs all the eternal divine decrees that efficaciously unfold the extant order of divine providence: creation, salvation, and divinization (the

³⁷ *ST I*, q. 2, a. 3: "We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God."

³⁸ *ST I*, q. 14, a. 4.

³⁹ *ST I*, q. 26, a. 1: "Beatitude belongs to God in a very special manner. For nothing else is understood to be meant by the term beatitude than the perfect good of an intellectual nature, which is capable of knowing that it has a sufficiency of the good which it possesses, to which it is competent that good and ill may befall, and which can control its own actions. All of these things belong in a most excellent manner to God—namely to be perfect and to possess intelligence. Whence beatitude belongs to God in the highest degree."

⁴⁰ *ST I*, q. 26, a. 1.

⁴¹ *ST I*, q. 19, a. 2.

diverse modes of participation in the divine goodness). Hence, due to the intrinsic, divinely ordained finality of creation, every created agent, constituted by a specific nature, acts for an end that is proportionate to and perfective of that nature and is thereby directed to the final end of the whole universe.

Due to its specific nature, the human being qua *animal rationale* acts in a specific way in order to attain its twofold final end, natural and supernatural.⁴² The determination to one—that is, to a specific—proximate end is conceived by the intellect and effected by the rational appetite, the will. Aquinas argues that the order of ends to which the rational appetite, the will, is directed is an essential, or a *per se* (rather than *per accidens*) order. Unlike an accidental order, an essential order is characterized this way: each end is actually here and now ordered to another end in such a way that the whole order of ends is *actually here and now* ordered to a single final end. “For that which is first in the order of intention, is the principle, as it were, moving the appetite; consequently, if you remove this principle, there will be nothing to move the appetite.”⁴³ Hence, in an essential, *per se* order, all other ends are subordinated to this single final end.

Why does Aquinas insist on the initially counterintuitive point that the order of ends to which the will is directed must be an essential, *per se* order? Consider this line of reasoning: if there were no single end to the human life, the purposes of human agency would only accidentally interconnect. But such a merely accidental connection

⁴² *Nota bene*: In virtue of the ontological structure of the created intellect (*intellectus*), the created image of the divine exemplar, and its specific finality, the two orders of finality do not entail two distinct ultimate ends for the human being, one natural and one supernatural. Rather, there obtains one, albeit twofold, ultimate end for the human being. This twofold ultimate end is God: as First Truth, Author of Nature, and the Common Good of the whole universe, the final end of the created intellect (angelic and human), and as the Holy Trinity, the absolutely surpassing reality of participative union of vision and love that characterizes the beatific vision. Grace presupposes and perfects human nature such that the finality of the created intellect is subsumed under and included in the supernatural final end. Hence, the natural final end is neither extrinsic nor intrinsic to the supernatural ultimate end. Rather, their relationship is analogical. There obtains an analogy of proper proportionality between the supernatural ultimate end and the natural finality of the created intellect. For an astute rendition of the twofold finality of the human being, see Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., “Integral Human Fulfillment according to Germain Grisez,” in *The Ashley Reader: Redeeming Reason* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), 225–269.

⁴³ *ST* I-II, q. 1, a. 4.

of purposes would immediately destroy the structure of an intelligible action that is the most basic unit of a human action (*actio humana*).⁴⁴ For, every action receives its end (and thereby its intelligibility and, hence, desirability) from being embedded—not chronologically, but *actually here and now*—in a wider essential order of intelligible purposes. Without the final end bearing *actually* (but not necessarily consciously) *here and now* causally upon the proximate end, human actions would lack their constitutive intelligibility and, hence, their desirability for the rational appetite, the will, that they receive ultimately from the last end. Aquinas puts it tersely: “That in which a [human being] rests as in his last end, is master of his affections, since he takes therefrom his entire rule of life.”⁴⁵ Bereft of the last end, these actions would receive their intelligibility (and, hence, their desirability) for the rational appetite exclusively from some proximate end. For, absent an essential order of finality, the relationship between ends—or clusters of ends—becomes purely accidental, indeed arbitrary. When several ends are not ordained to one another by one last end—in short, when ends lose their teleological embeddedness in relationship to the final end and hence their *ratio*—they become pointless and virtually indistinguishable from what Aquinas calls “acts of man” (*actiones hominis*),⁴⁶ like scratching one’s head—which is obviously absurd. Hence, all basic actions *qua* intelligible (and hence, desirable) are ordered *here and now* to a single last end in an essential order of finality. While human beings *actually* desire *here and now* everything that they in fact desire for the sake of one last end, they obviously do not always think of the last end when desiring or doing something particular. But nevertheless, it is the case that “the virtue of the first intention, which was in respect of the last end, remains in every desire directed to any object whatever, even though one’s thoughts be not actually directed to the last end. Thus while walking along the road one needs not to be thinking of the end at every step.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 1. Following the original insight of Aristotle and Aquinas, G. E. M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre have made the case in the modern context that intelligible actions are the basic units of human moral agency in Anscombe’s *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), and MacIntyre’s “The Intelligibility of Action,” in *Rationality, Relativism, and Human Sciences*, ed. J. Margolis, M. Krausz, and R. M. Burian (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1986), 63–80.

⁴⁵ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 5, s.c.

⁴⁶ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 1.

⁴⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3.

Furthermore, while all human beings agree that “happiness means the acquisition of the last end,”⁴⁸ they differ widely about what this end consists in and, therefore, how happiness is achieved. Hence, Aquinas distinguishes between the *formal* aspect of the last end and its *material* aspect:

We can speak of the last end in two ways: first, considering only the aspect of last end; secondly, considering the thing in which the aspect of last end is realized. So, then, as to the aspect of last end, all agree in desiring the last end: since all desire the fulfilment of their perfection, and it is precisely this fulfilment in which the last end consists. . . . But as to the thing in which this aspect is realized, all [human beings] are not agreed as to their last end: since some desire riches, as their consummate good; some, pleasure; others, something else.⁴⁹

Regarding the *formality* of the last end, there is necessarily universal agreement among human beings, for the formality of the last end corresponds to the formality of human nature in its teleological constitution. The disagreement about the *material* aspect of the last end Aquinas understands to be a factual, perennial human phenomenon of fallen, post-paradisiacal life. This disagreement comes to an end concretely but tenuously for the person who pursues the wisdom afforded by first philosophy or the metaphysics of being and who will come to understand God, the universal First Cause and Sovereign Good to be the ultimate end. Consider the highest insight that Aquinas grants to the wisdom first philosophy affords:

It is impossible for any created good to constitute [human] happiness. For happiness is the perfect good, which lulls the appetite altogether; else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired. Now the object of the will, [that is, of the rational appetite], is the universal good; just as the object of the intellect is the universal true. Hence it is evident that [nothing] can lull [the human] will, save the universal good. This is to be found, not in any creature, but in God alone; because every creature has goodness by participation. Wherefore God alone can satisfy the [human] will, according to the words

⁴⁸ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 8.

⁴⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 7.

of Ps. cii. 5: *Who satisfieth thy desire with good things.* And consequently, God alone constitutes [human] happiness.⁵⁰

The person thus enlightened by the wisdom of first philosophy will, however, remain profoundly uncertain about how to attain this end. Only the person who receives divine faith and who pursues the wisdom afforded by *sacra doctrina* (especially the person who receives the surpassing wisdom of infused contemplation) will be endowed with the certainty that the theological virtue of hope affords, namely that, with the help of the omnipotent God, he or she will attain the ultimate end of surpassing beatitude permanently. For such a person, God is indisputably and definitively the sole reality in which the aspect of the ultimate end is realized and in union with whom alone perfect beatitude is attained.

In order to take into consideration the ultimate ontological incommensurability between the transcendent First Cause, the very plenitude and infinite *actus* of being, *ipse esse subsistens*, and the contingent creature that receives its existence and its essence from another, Aquinas draws upon Aristotle's distinction between the *objective* and the *subjective* end, between the thing itself and its use.⁵¹ While God is indeed the *objective* ultimate end of the rational creature, the *subjective* ultimate end cannot be the uncreated absolute beatitude of God, but must be a created participating beatitude, the fruition of the *objective* ultimate end.⁵² Consider Aquinas's argument:

As the philosopher says (*Phys.* ii.2), the end is twofold—the end *for which* (*cuius*) and the end *by which* (*quo*); viz., the thing itself in which is found the aspect of good, and the use or acquisition of that thing. . . . If, therefore, we speak of [the human being's] last end as of the thing which is the end, thus all other things concur in [the human being's] last end, since God is the last end of [the human being] and of all other things.—If, however, we speak of [the human being's] last end, as of the acquisition of the end,

⁵⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 8.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* I, 3 (1184^b10–17), in *Metaphysics Books X–XIV. Oeconomica. Magna Moralia*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, C. Cyril Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library 28 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935); *Physics* II, 2 (194^a35–36), in *Physics, or Natural Hearing*, trans. and intro. Glen Coughlin, William of Moerbeke Translation Series (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004).

⁵² *ST* I, q. 26, a. 3, ad 2.

then irrational creatures do not concur with [the human being] in this end. For [the human being] and other rational creatures attain to their last end by knowing and loving God: this is not possible to other creatures, which acquire their last end, in so far as they share in the Divine likeness, inasmuch as they are, or live, or even know.⁵³

The two faculties of the rational creature that make this fruition possible are the intellect and its appetite, the will. Like the senses and the sense appetites, intellect and will are ordered to their respective proper object, the intellect to universal truth and the will to universal good and to its fruition, perfect happiness. Significantly, the human will is constitutively directed to will happiness; it is “hardwired” to happiness.⁵⁴ Happiness is the epitome of those things that “the will is incapable of not willing.”⁵⁵ This being the case, Aquinas must draw an indispensable distinction pertaining to the way the attainment of happiness comes about: the distinction between the happiness human beings can attain on their own and that perfect happiness they can attain only by way of a special divine assistance—sanctifying grace:

Imperfect happiness that can be had in this life, can be acquired by [human beings] by [their] natural powers (*per sua naturalia*),

⁵³ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 8. See also *ST I-II*, q. 2, a. 7: “As stated above [q. 1, a. 8], the end is twofold: namely, the thing itself, which we desire to attain, and the use, namely, the attainment or possession of that thing. If, then, we speak of [the human being’s] last end, as to the thing itself which we desire as last end, it is impossible for [the human being’s] last end to be the soul itself or something belonging to it. . . . But if we speak of [the human being’s] last end, as to the attainment or possession thereof, or as to any use whatever of the thing itself desired as an end, thus does something of [the human being], in respect of his soul, belong to his last end: since [the human being] attains happiness through his soul. Therefore the thing itself which is desired as end is that which constitutes happiness, and makes [the human being] happy; but the attainment of this thing is called happiness. Consequently we must say that happiness is something belonging to the soul; but that which constitutes happiness is something outside the soul.” See also *ST I-II*, q. 11, a. 3, ad 3.

⁵⁴ *ST I*, q. 82, a. 1; *I-II*, q. 10, a. 2.

⁵⁵ Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 21. *ST I-II*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 2 reads: “homo non potest non velle esse beatus.” “[The human being] craves by nature happiness and bliss” (*ibid.*, 20). Consider Pieper’s felicitous rendition: “[The human being], as a reasoning being, desires his own happiness just as the falling stone ‘seeks’ the depths, as the flower turns to the light and the beast hunts its prey” (*ibid.*, 21).

in the same way as virtue, in whose operation it consists. . . . But [the human being's] perfect Happiness . . . consists in the vision of the Divine Essence. Now the vision of God's Essence surpasses the nature not only of [the human being], but also of every creature. . . . Consequently, neither [the human being], nor any creature, can attain final Happiness (*beatitudinem ultimam*) by his natural powers (*per sua naturalia*).⁵⁶

While the regular way of attaining imperfect happiness is by living the life of virtue in a full human life (Aristotle's *bios praktikos*), the extraordinary but surpassing way of attaining imperfect happiness is by a life of virtue that is crowned by and has as its overarching focus the pursuit of wisdom (Aristotle's *bios theoretikos*). The goal of this *bios* is the contemplation of the unchanging eternal truths and, ultimately, of the first principle of the creation and government of things. For such a person, the subjective attainment of the ultimate end will issue in a genuine, but transient, and therefore imperfect, beatitude of a natural contemplation of the First Cause as mediated by the created effects. But only for the person elevated to the beatific vision, the intellectual and volitional union with the Triune God, will the subjective attainment of the ultimate end issue in a surpassing fruition, in everlasting, unitive, and therefore perfect, beatitude.

Whether this happiness is imperfect or perfect depends on the way in which the human intellect participates in the objective ultimate end, God. If the participation is mediated and transitory, the corresponding happiness is imperfect, albeit genuine. This scenario pertains to the person who pursues the life of virtue and, in addition, the wisdom of *prima philosophia*. Quite different is the situation of the person who has the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The intellect of such a person is still bereft of the beatific vision, for the light of glory does not yet actualize the possible intellect such that the likeness of the divine essence is in the intellect.⁵⁷ For, recall that the intellect's act attains completion when the object's likeness is in it. The will's act, on the contrary, attains perfection by being "inclined to the thing itself as existing in itself."⁵⁸ "Charity works formally; . . . by justifying the soul, it unites it to God."⁵⁹ And for this reason "the charity [of the *viator*]

⁵⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 5 (my emphasis).

⁵⁷ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 2.

⁵⁸ *ST* I, q. 82, a. 3: ". . . ex eo quod voluntas inclinatur ad ipsam rem prout in se est." See also *ST* I-II, q. 27, a. 2, ad 2, and *ST* II-II, q. 27, a. 4.

⁵⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 2, ad 3.

adheres to God immediately.”⁶⁰ “Charity, by loving God, unites the soul immediately to Him with a chain of spiritual union.”⁶¹ Because of the inclination of charity, the will of the person who has faith formed by charity is already united with “the thing itself as existing in itself”⁶² and, consequently, already attains inchoatively its ultimate perfection. And therefore such a person is in a state of inchoative perfect happiness or beatitude, the immediate consequence of which is spiritual joy (*spirituale gaudium*):

Charity is love of God, Whose good is unchangeable, since He is His goodness, and from the very fact that he is loved, He is in those who love Him by His most excellent effect, according to 1 John 4:16: ‘He that abides in charity, abides in God and God in him.’ Therefore, spiritual joy, which is about God, is caused by charity.⁶³

The perfect beatitude that is achieved when the intellect receives in itself the likeness of the First Truth is anticipated in the inchoative spiritual joy that issues from the charity-engendered spiritual union between God and the soul.⁶⁴ At the very moment the intellect’s participation in the First Truth becomes unmediated, “when by His grace God unites Himself to the created intellect, as an object made intelligible to it,”⁶⁵ the *viator* becomes the *comprehensor*. The dawn of perfect beatitude, encapsulated in the life of charity, of friendship with God, turns into the beatific vision’s noon-day of everlasting perfect beatitude.

To summarize: According to Aquinas, the happiness of the human being is twofold (*duplex*): the genuine but transitory, and therefore imperfect, happiness is proportionate to human nature, and thus the

⁶⁰ ST II-II, q. 27, a. 4, s.c.

⁶¹ ST II-II, q. 27, a. 4, ad 3.

⁶² ST I, q. 82, a. 3.

⁶³ ST II-II, q. 28, a. 1.

⁶⁴ The transient but genuine happiness that the *bios theoretikos* affords, the contemplation of the eternal truths (metaphysics, mathematics, cosmology) is accessible only to a very small minority of intellectually gifted and exceedingly well educated persons. The everlasting perfect beatitude that the beatific vision affords is, by contrast, open to every human being irrespective of natural disposition and cultural formation, since every created human soul has the natural capacity to be elevated to the beatific vision and to the concomitant everlasting perfect beatitude.

⁶⁵ ST I, q. 12, a. 4.

human being has the natural potency to obtain this beatitude, and so *can* obtain it. The everlasting, unitive, and therefore perfect, beatitude surpasses the capacity of human nature and can be obtained “by the power of God alone, by a kind of participation of the Godhead, about which it is written (2 Pt 1:4) that by Christ we are made partakers of the Divine nature.”⁶⁶ The perfect beatitude of the human being is the subjective fruition of the objective ultimate end by way of an unmediated direct union of the intellect and the will with God, who is the first cause of the rational soul’s creation and enlightenment and who also is the rational soul’s final end as the soul’s universal good.⁶⁷ And since the rational soul is the substantial form of the body, it is the whole human being, soul and body, whose final end in the extant order of divine providence—gratuitously decreed from all eternity as merited by Christ—is to become a partaker of the divine nature, and thus a partaker of the unfathomable bliss of the divine life.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 62, a. 1.

⁶⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8: “Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence. To make this clear, two points must be observed: first, that [human beings are] not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for [them] to desire and seek; secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object. Now the object of the intellect is *what a thing is*, i.e., the essence of a thing, according to *De Anima* iii. 6. Wherefore the intellect attains perfection, in so far as it knows the essence of a thing. If therefore an intellect know the essence of some effect, whereby it is not possible to know the essence of the cause, i.e., to know of the cause *what it is*, that intellect cannot be said to reach that cause simply, although it may be able to gather from the effect the knowledge that the cause is. Consequently, when [the human being] knows an effect, and knows that it has a cause, there naturally remains in [the human being] the desire to know about that cause, *what it is*. And this desire is one of wonder, and causes inquiry, as is stated in the beginning of the *Metaphysics* I, ch.2. . . . If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than *that He is*, the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach simply the First Cause, but there remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause. Wherefore it is not yet perfectly happy. Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone [human] happiness consists.”

⁶⁸ *ST* I, q. 26, a. 3. As one noted interpreter of Aquinas’s thought rightly emphasizes, “[Human beings] cannot know that they are capable of attaining the vision of God except through faith based on divine teaching. That God actually does ordain [human beings] to Himself is a revealed truth known only by faith. Only the believer can hope and pray for this divine gift” (Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happi-*

The Attainment of Perfect and Everlasting Beatitude and the Rectitude of the Will

Significantly, there obtains an essential requirement for the attainment of this everlasting perfect beatitude. In order to illustrate this requirement, Aquinas adduces a central principle of the philosophy of nature and puts it to analogical use in his theological argument of fittingness (*convenientia*): “Matter cannot receive a form, unless it be duly disposed thereto.”⁶⁹ Material cannot be shaped unless it is duly prepared. Wood must be cut and dried in order to receive the form of fire; iron must be heated in order to receive the form of a plow. Similarly, nothing achieves its end unless it is well adapted to the end. And therefore no one can attain perfect beatitude without a right good will.⁷⁰

The rectitude of the will is, of course, necessarily a *concomitant* condition of attaining perfect happiness. For, “happiness or bliss by which [the human being] is made most perfectly conformed to God, and which is the end of human life, consists in an operation,”⁷¹ and this operation that realizes the perfect conformity to God entails necessarily the *concomitant* rectitude of the will.

But the rectitude of the will, the will properly set on the ultimate end, is also a condition *antecedent* to attaining perfect beatitude. Why so? Could God not conceivably have created a rational creature that,

ness in Aquinas's Moral Science [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997], 524f.). See also *Compendium theologiae* II, ch. 7 in *Opera omnia*, vol. 42 (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, 1979) and in English: Thomas Aquinas, *Light of Faith: The Compendium of Theology* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1993). Aquinas states explicitly: “The ultimate happiness [of the human being] consists in a supernatural vision of God: to which vision [the human being] cannot attain unless he be taught by God. . . . Hence, in order that a [human being] arrive at the perfect vision of heavenly happiness, he [or she] must first of all believe God, as a disciple believes the master who is teaching him” (ST II-II, q. 2, a. 3).

⁶⁹ ST I-II, q. 4, a. 4.

⁷⁰ ST I-II, q. 4, a. 4: “Final Happiness consists in the vision of the Divine Essence, Which is the very essence of goodness. So that the will of him who sees the Essence of God, of necessity, loves, whatever he loves, in subordination to God; just as the will of him who sees not God's Essence, of necessity, loves whatever he loves, under that common notion of good which he knows. And this [to love everything our will loves in explicit subordination to God, or to love everything our will loves in implicit subordination to God, namely by loving God within the common notion of goodness] (*sub communi ratione boni*) is precisely what makes the will right. Wherefore *it is evident that Happiness cannot be without a right will*” (my emphasis).

⁷¹ ST I-II, q. 55, a. 2, ad 3.

in the original state, is endowed with a will rightly ordered to the ultimate end and that, in the next instance after its creation, would be elevated by God to the attainment of the ultimate end and to perfect and everlasting beatitude in the beatific vision? Because any answer to this question refers necessarily to the mystery of the divine wisdom and will, Aquinas advances an argument of *convenientia*, of what seems to be most fitting for divine wisdom. It is worth quoting at length:

[T]he order of Divine wisdom demands that it should not be thus; for as is stated in *De Caelo* ii. 12, of those things that have a natural capacity for the perfect good, one has it without movement, some by one movement, some by several. Now to possess the perfect good without movement, belongs to that which has it naturally; and to have Happiness naturally belongs to God alone. Therefore it belongs to God alone not to be moved towards Happiness by any previous operation. Now since Happiness surpasses every created nature, no pure creature can [fittingly] gain Happiness, without the movement or operation, whereby it tends thereto. But the angel, who is above [the human being] in the natural order, obtained it, according to the order of Divine wisdom, by one movement of a meritorious work. . . . whereas [the human being] obtains it by many movements of works which are called merits. Wherefore also according to the Philosopher (*Ethic.* i. 9), happiness is the reward of works of virtue.⁷²

The reception of the gratuitous gift of perfect and eternal beatitude requires antecedent movement or operation by the embodied rational creature. And such movement—initiated by grace, ordered by the restored rectitude of the will to God, and united inchoatively with God by way of the theological virtue of charity—merits the attainment of everlasting perfect beatitude. “Merit” denotes the essential cooperation of rational creatures with divine grace in attaining the ultimate end and their perfect beatitude.⁷³ Aquinas takes Augustine’s

⁷² *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 7 (my emphasis).

⁷³ *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 2, esp. ad 2; q. 114, a. 2. For an excellent analysis and interpretation of the theological concept of “merit” in Thomas Aquinas, see Joseph P. Wawrykow, *God’s Grace and Human Action: “Merit” in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). And for an astute ecumenical defense of this concept, see Michael Root, “Aquinas, Merit, and Reformation Theology after the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*,” *Modern Theology* 20.1 (2004): 5–22.

universally accepted axiom, “God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us,”⁷⁴ to be the guiding theological principle that accounts for the proper preparation of the rational creature for eternal union with God. The proper preparations of the created image, the human being, to receive an essentially disproportionate, surpassing realization of its perfection—conformity to and union with the exemplar—are acts chosen and executed by a right good will. But the goodness of the will depends on the intention of the end. The last end of the human will is the sovereign good, God. Hence, for the will to be good, the will has to be properly set on the ultimate end, God, the sovereign good. The sovereign good—God’s own infinite goodness—relates to the divine will as its proper object. In other words: God, always and in all, wills His own goodness, and God wills things apart from Himself by willing His own goodness, the sovereign good.⁷⁵ Hence, God wills also our will to be ordered to the sovereign good. And so for the rectitude of the human will to obtain, the human will must be properly conformed to the divine will.⁷⁶ Consequently, the rectitude of the human will, the intellectual appetite, depends on the intellect being instructed by the natural and the Divine law⁷⁷ and on the will being thus ordered by right reason and the acquired moral virtues to a due end,⁷⁸ and by sanctifying grace, the theological virtues, the infused moral virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the gratuitous ultimate end.

The Rectitude of the Will and the Virtue of Religion

The rectitude of the will finds its proper realization in virtues that are about *operations*. The paradigm is the virtue of justice, which applies

⁷⁴ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 11, 13 (*PL* 38, 923).

⁷⁵ *ST* I, q. 19, a. 2, ad 2.

⁷⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 19, a. 9: “As stated above [a. 7], the goodness of the will depends on the intention of the end. Now the last end of the human will is the Sovereign Good, namely, God, as stated above [q. 1, a. 8; q. 3, a. 1]. Therefore the goodness of the human will requires it to be ordained to the Sovereign Good, that is, to God. Now this Good is primarily and essentially compared to the Divine will, as its proper object. Again, that which is first in any genus is the measure and rule of all that belongs to that genus. Moreover, everything attains to rectitude and goodness, in so far as it is in accord with its proper measure. Therefore, in order that [the human being’s] will be good it needs to be conformed to the Divine will.”

⁷⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 19, a. 4.

⁷⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 55, a. 4, ad 4.

the will to its proper act,⁷⁹ thereby realizing its rectitude *in actu*.⁸⁰ “Wherefore,” Aquinas concludes, “all such virtues as are about operations, bear, in some way, the character of justice.”⁸¹ The virtue of religion resembles the virtue of justice, for it is also about operations, but it is not an integral part of justice, but rather annexed to it because its operations fall short of justice due to the impossibility to render what exactly is due in the relationship of the rational creature to the Creator.⁸²

Precisely because the virtue of religion belongs to a family of related virtues whose head is the virtue of justice—the virtue that applies the will to its proper act and thereby actualizes the will’s rectitude—it would be a grave error to mistake the virtue of religion for some supererogatory moral excellence that is up to one’s personal discretion.⁸³ Aquinas emphasizes that:

It belongs to the dictate of natural reason that [the human being] should do something through reverence for God. But that [the human being] should do this or that determinate thing does not belong to the dictate of natural reason, but is established by Divine or human law.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ *ST* I-II, q. 59, a. 5.

⁸⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 58, a. 1: “Justice is a *habitus* [a stable disposition of the will] whereby a [human being] renders to each one what is his [or her] due *by a constant and perpetual will*” (my emphasis).

⁸¹ *ST* I-II, q. 60, a. 3.

⁸² *ST* II-II, q. 80: “Whatever the [human being] renders to God is due, yet it cannot be equal, as though the human being rendered to God as much as he [or she] owes Him, according to Psalm 115:12: *What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that He hath rendered to me?*” While the strict equality of commutative justice is out of the question, there must be some semblance of equality, since Aquinas, after all, understands the virtue of religion as a part of justice: “Religion is . . . a moral virtue, since it is a part of justice, and observes a mean, not in the passions, but in actions directed to God by establishing a kind of equality in them. And when I say *equality*, I do not mean absolute equality, because it is not possible to pay God as much as we owe Him, but equality in consideration of [the human being’s] ability and God’s acceptance” (*ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 5, ad 3).

⁸³ For the most comprehensive recent study of the virtue of religion in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, see Robert Jared Staudt, “Religion as a Virtue: Thomas Aquinas on Worship through Justice, Law, and Charity” (PhD diss., Ave Maria University, 2008).

⁸⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 80, a. 1.

Natural reason dictates the very *ratio* of the virtue of religion, namely that reverence to God is due and this due is so necessary “that *without it moral rectitude cannot be ensured*.”⁸⁵ Without the acts of *religio*, moral rectitude cannot be ensured. And if moral rectitude is deficient, the integrity and unity of the cardinal virtues is compromised, if not lost. This sequence of entailments leads to two problematic alternatives pertaining to those who do not have charity—that is, those whom Aquinas would have called practitioners of pagan virtue.

The first alternative is what is conventionally considered as straightforwardly Aristotelian: since moral rectitude requires the practice of the virtue of religion and since Aquinas assumes that pagans were able to practice the acquired moral virtues, or as he also calls them, the social or political virtues,⁸⁶ pagans were able to practice the virtue of religion. What complicates, or even undercuts, this alternative is that according, to Aquinas, it is impossible for human beings in the state of wounded nature to fulfill the natural duty to love God above all things.⁸⁷ Yet, falling short of this natural love of God above all things “in the appetite of his rational will,”⁸⁸ the human being in this state seems incapable to acquire the specific *habitus* of *religio*, the *cultus* of God as “the first principle of the creation and government of things.”⁸⁹

This complication at the heart of the first alternative compels consideration of the second alternative, which is conventionally considered as the Augustinian one. Since moral rectitude requires the practice of the virtue of religion and since the acquired moral virtue of religion is only a counterfeit, moral rectitude cannot be assured. Yet, without moral rectitude, the unity, and with it the integrity, of the cardinal virtues is destroyed. Hence, all moral virtues except the infused moral virtues are mere counterfeits. Only the virtue of religion that is infused and formed by charity is a genuine virtue because, through healing grace, the natural love of God above all things can again be exercised. But Aquinas expressly denies this consequence.⁹⁰

Each alternative leads to unsavory consequences that, as a matter of fact, contradict aspects of Aquinas’s complex doctrine of virtue. Certain aspects of both the straightforwardly Augustinian and the straightforwardly Aristotelian approach find support, others do not. It

⁸⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 80, a. 1 (my emphasis).

⁸⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 5.

⁸⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 119, a. 3.

⁸⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 119, a. 3.

⁸⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3.

⁹⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 1, a. 5.

would be all too precipitous to conclude at this point that Aquinas's attempt to integrate Aristotle's virtue ethics and Augustine's theology of sin and grace into one coherent system ultimately failed. Neither of the all too conventional alternatives matches the daring and depth of Aquinas's actual synthesis. Rather, as David Decosimo puts it rather felicitously in his recent *Ethics as a Work of Charity*, "Aquinas strives to be Aristotelian by being Augustinian and vice versa."⁹¹ In order to appreciate how Aquinas does this, it is apposite to recall the various distinctions he makes between the perfection and imperfection of virtue in different respects and between different sets of virtues.⁹²

The first distinction between perfection and imperfection pertains to the supernatural final end and regards the crucial difference between acquired and infused moral virtues. While the theological virtues are always infused, moral virtues can be acquired or infused. Infused moral virtues are perfect and simply true, for they conduce to the supernatural final end. Because acquired moral virtues do not, they are imperfect in this respect.⁹³

The second distinction between perfection and imperfection pertains to what is conducive to the principal good, the ultimate final end. Here Aquinas introduces two distinctions. The first distinction pertains to what conduces directly to the principal good, the ultimate final end, versus what leads away from it. Virtues that conduce to the

⁹¹ David Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity: Thomas Aquinas and Pagan Virtue* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 9. Decosimo's book is the best recent study on the complex and controverted matter of Aquinas's teaching on the acquired and the infused moral virtues. His conceptually astute and textually meticulous analysis and interpretation demonstrates that what are conventionally considered as the straightforwardly Aristotelian and Augustinian alternatives are ultimately unhelpful interpretive strategies because they fall, in their respective ways, short of the daring and depth of Aquinas's synthesis.

⁹² *Nota bene*: The following core distinctions rest on the supposition that the Christian can have both acquired and infused moral virtues, not only in general, but simultaneously and specifically. On this very complex and greatly controverted matter, I agree with Brian J. Shanley, O.P., in "Aquinas on Pagan Virtue," *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 553-577, Angela McKay Knobel in "The Infused and Acquired Virtues in Aquinas' Moral Philosophy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004), Michael Sherwin, O.P., in "Infused Virtues and the Effects of Acquired Vice: A Test Case for the Thomistic Theory of Infused Cardinal Virtues," *The Thomist* 73 (2009): 29-52, Markus Christoph, S.J.M., in "Justice as an Infused Virtue in the *Secunda Secundae* and Its Implications for Our Understanding of the Moral Life" (Ph.D. diss., University of Fribourg, 2010), and Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity*.

⁹³ *ST I-II*, q. 65, a. 2.

principal good, the ultimate final end, are perfect and simply true. They are the infused moral virtues we encountered already above. What leads human beings away from the ultimate final end can only be an apparent good, and what conduces to it is consequently a counterfeit virtue. The second distinction pertains to acquired moral virtues and differentiates between those that are directed to the virtuous good, the good *simpliciter*, or the good in itself (*bonum honestum*),⁹⁴ and those that are directed to a merely useful or pleasurable good (*bonum utile; bonum delectabile*). In the latter we encounter again the counterfeit virtues.⁹⁵ But the former, those directed to the *bonum honestum*, are true but imperfect virtues. Because they are true, they can be perfected when referred to charity. Consider the following: Civic fortitude is directed to the welfare of the state (*conservatio civitatis*), which is a *bonum honestum*. Consequently, civic fortitude is a true, albeit imperfect virtue—imperfect, unless it is referred by charity to the principal good and ultimate final end, whereby it becomes a perfect and simply true virtue.⁹⁶

The third distinction between perfection and imperfection pertains to the very constitution of moral virtues *qua habitus*. According to Aquinas, moral virtues are virtues *simpliciter* because they make the persons who possess them good and render their activity good too—good in respect to the connatural final end proportionate to human nature, not good in the sense of acceptable to God as meritorious of an increase in charity.⁹⁷ Moral virtues *simpliciter* are to be differentiated from non-moral or “natural virtues.” The latter are virtues *secundum quid*, virtues in only a qualified sense, because they indicate a vague natural inclination either to true goods common to all human beings or to the specific form such an inclination takes in an individual soul/

⁹⁴ ST I-II, q. 39, a. 2: “Every virtuous good results from these two things, the rectitude of the reason and the will.”

⁹⁵ ST II-II, q. 23, a. 7: “If this particular good is not a true, but an apparent good, it is not a true virtue that is ordered to such a good, but a counterfeit virtue.” Then Aquinas cites at length Augustine, who uses the example of the miser whose prudence, justice, temperance, and courage are counterfeit virtues because his particular good is not a true but an apparent good.

⁹⁶ ST II-II, q. 23, a. 7: “If, on the other hand, this particular good be a true good, for instance the welfare of the state, or the like, it will be a true virtue, imperfect, however, unless it be referred to the final and perfect good. Accordingly, no strictly true virtue is possible without charity.”

⁹⁷ ST I-II, q. 56, a. 3: “Since virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his work good likewise, these habits are called virtues simply [*simpliciter*]; because they make the work to be actually good, and the subject good, too.”

body composite.⁹⁸ This mere disposition to act (*virtus inchoata*) is fundamentally different from and imperfect in relation to the acquired *habitus* that is stable and difficult to lose (*difficile mobile*). Compared with this natural virtue, or *virtus inchoata*, an acquired moral *habitus* is perfect, true, and simple. For the “*difficile mobile*” belongs to the *ratio* of virtue; it is proper to virtue *per se*.

In light of these central distinctions, we are now in a position to consider again the acquired virtue of religion and the solution Aquinas advances, a solution that the two conventional alternatives do not consider. Aquinas immediately grants the fundamental Augustinian point, but in an Aristotelian way: among the acquired moral virtues, the virtue of religion indeed has a unique deficiency. For, in regard to this unique acquired virtue, it matters significantly that human beings in the state of wounded nature are unable to exercise the natural love of God above all things. Hence, far from being a mere semblance or counterfeit of virtue, the acquired virtue of religion is nevertheless a uniquely imperfect virtue. Like all the other acquired virtues, it is imperfect in respect to the supernatural ultimate end.

But unlike all the other acquired moral virtues, the virtue of religion is also imperfect in respect to the proper realization of the *cultus* of God as the first principle of the creation and government of things. Recall, *cultus* results from the formal and the material cause of the acts of *religio*. Here Aquinas is Aristotelian, but in an Augustinian way: the formal cause, reason’s ordination to God, and the efficient cause, the *ratio* of this ordination, accounts for the constitutive integrity, the proximate perfection characteristic of an acquired operative *habitus*. But its material cause—everything taken up or chosen as offering in order to signify the honor that is due to God—remains *de facto* deficient. For the proper perfection of the material cause presupposes the capacity to exercise the natural love of God above all things *qua* final end. Only if human beings were able, in the state of wounded nature, to exercise this natural love of God above all things would the virtue’s proper *ratio*, the judgment and command of reason, be matched consistently and stably by an equivalent volition of God as ultimate good. Hence, despite its formal integrity *qua* specifying object and despite its proper *ratio*, the *cultus* of the acquired virtue of religion remains *de facto*

⁹⁸ ST I-II, q. 58, a. 4, ad 3: “The natural inclination to a good of virtue is a kind of beginning of virtue, but is not perfect virtue. For the stronger this inclination is, the more perilous may it prove to be, unless it be accompanied by right reason, which rectifies the choice of fitting means towards the due end.”

deficient. However, due to its *formal* integrity, the acquired virtue of religion is able to ensure moral rectitude and, consequently, also the unity of the acquired moral virtues. While not at all a counterfeit of virtue, the acquired virtue of religion, due to its material imperfection, nevertheless produces necessarily a deficient *cultus*. The material imperfection that causes the deficient *cultus* is overcome only through the restoration of the capacity of the natural love of God above all things. Yet, this restoration comes about only by healing grace and the infusion of faith, hope, and charity.⁹⁹

And there is more: the person who receives, together with faith, hope, charity, and all the other infused moral virtues, also the infused virtue of religion receives in addition an imprinted seal or character on the soul that efficaciously capacitates him or her to the worship of the Triune God. This very seal or character that the soul receives is the effect of the sacraments, first and foremost, of baptism:

The sacraments of the New Law [which derive their power especially from Christ's passion, *ST* III, q. 62, a. 5] are ordained for a twofold purpose, namely for a remedy against sins, and for the perfecting of the soul in things pertaining to the Divine worship according to the rite of the Christian life.¹⁰⁰

The New Law and its correlative human law (that is, Christ's commands and the additional determinations of the Church) establish what determinate things are to be done in reverence of God.¹⁰¹ Thanks to the gift of piety, the range of what is to be done for the sake of reverence to God, now worshipped as Father, is remarkably expansive:

By the gift of piety [a human being] pays worship and duty not only to God, but also to all [human beings] on account of their relationship to God. Hence it belongs to piety to honor the saints, and not to contradict the Scriptures whether one understands them or not . . . Consequently [piety] also assists those who are in a state of unhappiness.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 3.

¹⁰⁰ *ST* III, q. 63, a.1.

¹⁰¹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 2, ad 3: "It belongs to the dictate of natural reason that [the human being] should do something through reverence for God. But that he should do this or that determinate thing does not belong to the dictate of natural reason, but is established by Divine and human law."

¹⁰² *ST* II-II, q. 121, a. 1, ad 3.

The gift of piety and the theological virtue of charity display a similar structure. In each, the unique relationship with God—in the case of piety worship of God as Father and in the case of charity friendship with God—includes those to whom God’s Fatherhood and friendship extends.¹⁰³

The theological virtues have God as their direct object; faith and hope are directly engaged by God as their immediate object, and the theological virtue of charity already realizes a certain union with God, the perfect ultimate end. Higher virtues, like faith, hope, and charity, can command the acts of lower virtues.¹⁰⁴ The acts of the infused perfect virtue of religion—commanded by faith, hope, and charity¹⁰⁵—are not in reference directly to God (like believing God, hoping in God, loving God with God’s own shared love of charity), but rather are about things referred to the ultimate end; they are acts issued by faith, hope and charity and are done out of due reverence for God.¹⁰⁶ There obtains a unique relationship between the theological virtue of charity and the infused moral virtue of religion. By way of charity, the Christian adheres to God “by a union of the spirit.”¹⁰⁷ For this reason, charity is the form of all the infused moral virtues, first and foremost the virtue of religion. But the relationship between charity and the infused virtue of religion goes even deeper:

It belongs immediately to charity that [the human being] should give himself to God, adhering to him by a union of the spirit; but it belongs immediately to religion, and, through the medium of religion, to charity which is the principle of religion,

¹⁰³ See *ST II-II*, q. 23, a. 1, ad 2 and ad 3.

¹⁰⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 5, ad 1: “[T]he theological virtues faith, hope, and charity have an act in reference to God as their proper object, wherefore, by their command, they cause the act of religion, which performs certain deeds directed to God.”

¹⁰⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 5, ad 1.

¹⁰⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 5. But how do the theological virtue of charity and the infused moral virtue of religion relate exactly? By way of charity, the Christian adheres to God by a union of the spirit (*ST II-II*, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1). And for this reason, charity informs all the infused moral virtues, also the virtue of religion; but here the relationship goes deeper. For, “it belongs immediately to charity that [the human being] should give himself to God. . . . but it belongs immediately to religion (and through the medium of religion, to charity . . .) that [the human being] should give himself to God for certain works of Divine worship” (*ST II-II*, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1).

¹⁰⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1.

that [the human being] should give himself to God for certain works of Divine worship (*divini cultus*).¹⁰⁸

The person who adheres to God by a union of the spirit receives a supernatural principle or cause that issues immediately in the infused *habitus* of religion and orders that person immediately to acts of divine worship, *cultus divini*. In short, it is impossible for a person who adheres to God by a union of the spirit not to practice the virtue of religion. These works of divine worship arise from two principal interior operations facilitated by the infused *habitus* of *religio*.

Devotion is the first and is a special act of the will “to devote [oneself] to God so as to subject [oneself] wholly to God.”¹⁰⁹ Devotion applies the will to its proper act, namely, to refer all the other moral virtues to the service of God, who is the ultimate end. Devotion, the principal act of *religio* (that is, of actualizing the will’s rectitude regarding what is due to God) ensures that the service of God constitutes the end or purpose of all the other acts of religion and, indeed, of all the other moral virtues.¹¹⁰ The second principal operation of the virtue of religion is *prayer*, the surrendering of one’s mind to God by presenting the mind to God and asking becoming things of God.¹¹¹ Devotion and prayer are the interior constitutive acts of the infused virtue of *religio*, and among the two, devotion holds the position of primacy.¹¹² Exterior acts of adoration, sacrifice, oblation, vows, tithes, and others become proper acts of the infused virtue of religion only by way

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 1, ad 1: “Since devotion is an act of the will whereby [a human being] offers himself for the service of God Who is the last end, it follows that devotion prescribes the mode of human acts, whether they be acts of the will itself about things directed to the end, or acts of the other powers that are moved by the will.”

¹¹⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 1, ad 1: “The mover determines the manner or mode of action of the object it moves. The will moves the other powers of the soul to their actions, and because it is concerned with the end, the will also moves itself to the means which lead to the end. Hence, since devotion is an act of the will by which a man promptly offers himself to the service of God who is the last end, devotion determines the mode of human acts, whether they are actions of the will concerning the means to the end, or acts of the other powers moved by the will” (O’Rourke’s translation).

¹¹¹ *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 1; a. 3, ad 3.

¹¹² As O’Rourke rightly stresses in his commentary: “As the first and principal act of religion, inward devotion must be in every religious act, otherwise it will not be a true act of religion at all, though it may have the external appearance” (*Summa Theologiae*, vol. 39 [II-II, qq. 80–91], 257).

of their mediation through the interior acts of devotion and prayer.

The infused virtue of religion is analogous to the theological virtue of charity in that, similar to the way charity unites all the other infused virtues with the last end (by being their form) and commands acts of all the other virtues, the infused virtue of *religio* unites all the other infused moral virtues by submitting their acts to the interior worship of God.

“Religion” in Contemporary Parlance—Revisited in Light of the Virtue of Religion

After having accomplished the two interconnected tasks—demonstrating the indispensability of the virtue of religion for the attainment of the final end and, hence, demonstrating the centrality of the virtue of religion for genuine human flourishing—we return now to the dominant contemporary uses of “religion” and ask what difference the virtue of religion makes to each one of them.

Political Liberalism’s Use of “Religion”

Recall that the specific moral excellence of the virtue of justice is to render “to everybody his [or her] due by a constant and perpetual will.”¹¹³ Hence, it is according to very nature of the virtue of justice to transcend and to encompass both the public and the private spheres. All the operative virtues that are annexed to justice share this essential feature. The virtue of religion, rightly understood and practiced—which is the essential feature of virtue *simpliciter*—cannot submit to the superimposition of a political disciplinary distinction that compromises the essence of the virtue itself. And what holds for the acquired virtue of religion holds even more so for the infused virtue of religion. While rooted in the person’s soul in the interior acts of devotion and prayer, true *cultus* arises from there to take an ineluctably public, communal, and also a quasi-political form. Being directed to the most eminent *bonum honestum*, reverence of and honor to the first principle of the creation and government of things, the First Truth and Sovereign Good—in short, the Triune Lord—this virtue is only practiced authentically according to its nature when it is practiced in the political public such that the political public itself is rightly ordered to the first principle of the creation and government of things.

Now, to say the least, this is obviously not how contemporary democracies constitute themselves in the spirit of sovereign secularism. Banishing the practice of the virtue of religion from the political

¹¹³ *ST* II-II, q. 58, a. 1.

public is a constitutive element of their self-understanding. Of course, to force the virtue of religion into the purely private sphere is to force it to turn into its own counterfeit. During his apostolic journey to the United States of America in September of 2105, Pope Francis made the following pointed statement that pertains to the essentially public nature of the virtue of religion:

Religious freedom certainly means the right to worship God, individually and in community, as our consciences dictate. But *religious liberty, by its nature, transcends places of worship and the private sphere of individuals and families*. Because religion itself, the religious dimension, is not a subculture; it is part of the culture of every people and every nation.¹¹⁴

Not only does the virtue of religion suffer from the profoundly alienating imposition of its privatization, but also does the body politic suffer eventually. One of the foremost post-Second World War German legal philosophers, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, argued famously—and persistently—that a truly just, and therefore free, democratic society lives from moral sources that transcend its scope, sources that secular liberalism *per se* cannot provide and replenish on its own terms, but on which a truly free and just society at the same time vitally depends.¹¹⁵ These sources are fundamentally connected with and accessed by way of the public practice of the virtue of religion. And this practice of *religio*, according to Böckenförde, will be ideally and preferably Christian because it is nothing but the Christian understanding of the human being that is presupposed in the tenets and the program of genuine liberalism: the human being as created in the image of God and, therefore, endowed with an indelible dignity and an intrinsic orientation toward transcendence, an orientation expressed first and foremost in humanity's universal desire for knowledge and happiness and consequently in the public practice of the virtue

¹¹⁴ My emphasis. Pope Francis made this symbolically charged statement in his speech at the Meeting for religious liberty with the Hispanic community and other immigrants at the Independence Mall in Philadelphia, September 26, 2015 (found on the Vatican's website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150926_usa-liberta-religiosa.html).

¹¹⁵ Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *State, Society and Liberty: Studies in Political Theory and Constitutional Law*, trans. J. A. Underwood (New York: Berg Publications, 1991).

of religion that gives honor and reverence to the first principle of the creation and government of things, the Triune Creator and Lord who is the fount of every good. By privatizing the virtue of religion, late modern secularist democracies cut themselves off from the trans-political moral and spiritual roots that fund the public ethos of their own citizens. This development leads to the transformation of the citizen into the essentially private consumer of goods, the sovereign self in the order of consumption, for whom the public “secular discourse” is nothing else but the interminable negotiation of the competing interests of consumers, customers, and clients.

American Protestantism’s Use of “Religion”

The virtue of religion also defies the modern American evangelical and post-denominational dichotomization between inauthentic “organized religion” and authentic free individual faith and spirituality. For, the proper practice of the infused virtue of religion does, as we have seen, entail an ordered relationship between, on the one hand, the deep interior submission of the will and mind to God—a profound personal “spirituality,” the end and purpose of which is nothing but holiness, the inclusion of everything into the *ordo ad Deum*—and, on the other hand, personal and communal practices that can only be facilitated and sustained by way of what some rather infelicitously choose to call “organized religion.” Hence, the practice of the virtue of religion entails *necessarily* the full existential involvement of the person and, simultaneously, their communal, public, and institutional embodiments. The virtue of political justice and the politically organized body politic are correlative realities; analogously, the virtue of religion and the organized ecclesial body politic, the visible one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, are correlative realities. Abolish the latter, and you will eventually lose the former.

The Consumer-Capitalist Use of “Religion”

Because all moral excellence presupposes a discerning moral agency, the virtue of religion, when properly practiced, necessarily defies the dynamic of commodification characteristic of late modern consumer capitalism and its concomitant life-style liberalism. The will and the intellect’s *ordinatio ad Deum* constitutes a real relation of reason that blocks the dynamic of the subtle estranging reification that is the heart of the commodification of “religion,” a reification that makes it absorbable as one more item enriching the life-style options in late modern consumer societies.

The Religionswissenschaft Use of “Religion”

As has become sufficiently clear by now, the virtue of justice and all its practices are about *operations*, that is, about interior or exterior acts in relationship not to oneself (as the virtues of courage and temperance are), but rather in relationship to specific others. These operations are specified by their object, which communicates itself to the individual agent as he or she is embedded in a specific cultural-linguistic matrix of traditioned practices. The very constitution of the virtue of religion by its specific object undercuts the experiential-expressivist use of “religion.” For, if the experiential-expressivist use of “religion”—being a reductive explanatory strategy—were to be applied consistently to the virtue of religion, the latter would instantaneously lose its intelligibility as a moral excellence. For justice, or a virtue close to justice, to be intelligible (let alone operative), it must formally presuppose the objective reality that specifies its acts.

Hence, the *interior* formal constitution of the virtue of religion as moral excellence for a practitioner of religion and the *exterior* explanatory perspective of experiential-expressivism are mutually exclusive. Adopting the latter means to understand the operations of the virtue of religion as rituals, customs, and disciplines that symbolically express some pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic awareness of the numinous or sacred. According to this explanatory framework, there cannot exist a justice-like virtue of religion, for the latter presupposes the existence and the knowledge of some personal Other to whom honor and reverence are due. Practicing the virtue of religion, on the other hand, presupposes formally the existence of such an Other, and that necessarily makes for such a practitioner experiential-expressivism a misguided, reductively non-referential strategy of explanation.

The Use of “Religion” in Protestant Dialectical Theology

Quite obviously, the Barthian theological critique of “religion” does not at all affect the virtue of religion the way Thomas Aquinas conceives it primarily—namely in its proper Christian instantiation as an infused moral virtue. On the contrary, the infused virtue of religion—in theory and in practice—puts into full relief the interminably dialectical character of the Barthian concept of revelation and its corresponding dialectical ecclesiology. For, the infused virtue of religion is a gift of grace that presupposes not only divine and justifying faith, but also the efficacious sacramental mediation of grace through the Church’s sacraments, especially Baptism and Holy Eucharist. In short, there cannot exist any infused moral virtue of religion without the

grace that flows from the head through the sacraments to the members of Christ's body, the Church. The infused virtue of religion presupposes the prolongation of the Incarnation into the Church and her sacraments and thereby exposes Barth's theological critique of religion as the necessary correlate of his dialectical ecclesiology.¹¹⁶

*A Modern Theological Use of "Religion" Congruent with
the Virtue of Religion*

As it has become clear in the course of these considerations, the virtue of religion can be defended against the Barthian critique of "religion" not only in its instantiation as an infused moral virtue, a virtue that is a direct consequence of sanctifying grace and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Rather, it is also possible, on a more fundamental level, to defend the virtue of religion as a necessary constant of created human nature, a constant that, after the fall, is enacted in weakened and variously compromised ways. Hence, the acquired virtue of religion is not simply a surd; rather, precisely in its imperfection, the virtue of religion remains a distinct moral excellence that reflects aspects of truth about the human condition vis-à-vis the Creator.

One eminent Catholic thinker of the modern period who captures this insight well is John Henry Newman. Awareness of God, of the self, and of human need characterizes, according to his view, "natural religion." According to his semantics, natural religion stands in opposition, on the one hand, to civilized or artificial religion (the religion of liberalism) and, on the other hand, to revealed religion that culminates in Jesus Christ. Because of the fall, natural religion in actual practice focuses on the dark side of the human predicament. Natural religion depicts the human being first and foremost in need of expiation in order to be reconciled to God. Hence, Newman takes atonement to be central to natural religion. Consequently, practices of sacrifice and prayer—fueled by a hope of deliverance from suffering and confidence in divine providence—are the most common traits of natural religion.¹¹⁷ Newman's use of "religion" in his notion of natural religion

¹¹⁶ See chapter 5, "Karl Barth's Dialectical Catholicity," in my *Bound to Be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 78-94.

¹¹⁷ John Henry Newman, Sermon 2, "The Influence of Natural and Revealed Religion Respectively," in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 16-36; Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 95-107 and 303-17.

amounts to possibly the best modern appreciation of what, on the one hand, is true and valid as a moral virtue in the acquired natural virtue of religion encountered in countless instantiations outside of the orbit of the special revelation that culminates in Christ and what, on the other hand, is the surpassing perfection of the virtue of religion—a *habitus* infused by sanctifying grace and formed by charity, the inchoative union with God. On the supposition of Newman’s understanding of natural religion and of revealed religion—an understanding that, incidentally, is fully congruent with Aquinas’s understanding of the acquired and the infused virtues of religion—doing without religion is both *contra naturam* and *contra gratiam*, and consequently amounts to a uniquely modern margin of human existence, a margin made possible by the advent of the surpassing perfection of *religio* as instantiated in the human life and oblation on the cross of the Incarnate Lord. Doing without religion becomes a possibility only after natural religion has been perfected by revealed religion. By spurning revealed religion, one necessarily also foregoes natural religion and is consequently left with doing without religion. Doing without religion constitutes the most elusive, and simultaneously the deepest, form of injustice the human being is capable of—injustice against God, the first principle of the creation and government of things, the Triune Creator and Lord.

Practicing this injustice of doing without religion is, of course, far from the often announced end of religion. On the contrary, doing without religion introduces the ultimate counterfeit of *religio*, the last religion, ushered in silently but devastatingly in modern philosophy with the anthropocentric turn and the adoption of the principle of immanence.¹¹⁸ The “last religion” is the counterfeit religion of the sovereign self, the erection of the quasi-divine self-will and its unquenchable desires for all imaginable semblances of true happiness. Its central feature John Henry Newman would characterize as infidelity. With remarkable prescience he states in his 1873 sermon “The Infidelity of the Future”:

The special peril of the time before us is the spread of that plague of infidelity, that the Apostles and our Lord Himself have

¹¹⁸ See the unjustly neglected, but still utterly relevant, magnum opus by Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile—Modern Atheism: A Study of the Internal Dynamic of Modern Atheism, from Its Roots in the Cartesian Cogito to the Present Day*, trans. and ed. Arthur Gibson (New York: Newman Press, 1968). For the third edition of the Italian original and the first edition of Fabro’s complete works, see Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione all’Ateismo moderno. Opere Complete*, vol. 21 (Segni: EDIVI, 2013).

predicted as the worst calamity of the last times of the Church. And at least a shadow, a typical image of the last times is coming over the world. I do not mean to presume that this is the last time, but that it has had the evil prerogative of being like that more terrible season, when it is said that the elect themselves will be in danger of falling away. . . . Accordingly, you will find, certainly in the future, nay more, *even now, even now*, that the writers and thinkers of the day do not even believe there is a God. They do not believe either the object—a God personal, a Providence and a moral Governor; and secondly, what they do believe, viz., that there is some first cause or other, they do not believe with faith, absolutely, but as a probability. . . . Christianity has never yet had experience of a world simply irreligious.¹¹⁹

In 1883, only ten years after Newman delivered his all too clairvoyant homily, Friedrich Nietzsche published the first two parts of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Zarathustra personifies the spirit of infidelity and utters, as clearly as one could wish, the *credo* of this counterfeit *cultus* of the sovereign self: “But that I may reveal my heart entirely to you, my friends: if there were gods, how could I endure it to be no God! Therefore there are no gods.”¹²⁰

While the *cultus* of the “last religion,” the celebration and adoration of the self-constituting self beyond good and evil, is still on the rise, Aquinas’s account of the profound relationship between the attainment

¹¹⁹ “The Infidelity of the Future. Opening of St. Bernard’s Seminary, 2nd October 1873,” in *Faith and Prejudice and Other Unpublished Sermons of Cardinal Newman*, ed. The Birmingham Oratory (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), 113–128; here: 117, 124–125.

¹²⁰ “Aber dass ich euch ganz mein Herz offenbare, ihr Freunde: *wenn es Götter gäbe, wie hielte ich’s aus, kein Gott zu sein! Also giebt es keine Götter. . . . Auch im Erkennen fühle ich nur meines Willens Zeuge- und Werde-Lust; und wenn Unschuld in meiner Erkenntnis ist, so geschieht dies, weil Wille zur Zeugung in ihr ist. Hinweg von Gott und Göttern lockte mich dieser Wille; was wäre denn zu schaffen, wenn Götter—da wären! Aber zum Menschen treibt er mich stets von Neuem, mein inbrünstiger Schaffens-Wille; so treibt’s den Hammer hin zum Steine. . . . Vollenden will ich’s: denn ein Schatten kam zu mir – aller Dinge Stillstes und Leichtestes kam einst zu mir! Des Übermenschen Schönheit kam zu mir als Schatten. Ach, meine Brüder! Was gehen mich noch—die Götter an!—Also sprach Zarathustra” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, “Zweiter Teil, Auf den glückseligen Inseln,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* vol. 4, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari [Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980], 110–12).*

of authentic happiness and the practice of the virtue of religion makes plain that such a *cultus* compromises the rectitude of the will detrimentally and thwarts the attainment of the twofold final end, connatural as well as supernatural. Unsurprisingly, the modern counterfeit *cultus* does not adduce to happiness, but to a world bereft of transcendence and delivered over to the principle of immanence, the vice of sloth, traditionally called *acedia*,¹²¹ and the boredom it breeds—a very far cry from the noon-day ecstasy of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.

The Indispensability of the Virtue of Religion for the Attainment of Perfect, Everlasting Beatitude

It is nothing but the virtue of religion that actualizes the will's rectitude through acts of honor and reverence due to God. Minimally, doing without religion is a failure at doing justice to the most fundamental and most essential relationship, that of the rational creature to the Creator. Precisely because "it belongs to the dictate of natural reason that [the human being] should do something through reverence to God,"¹²² doing without religion is a mode of existence contrary to the dictate of natural reason. And because the dictate of natural reason is always according to nature, doing without religion is *contra naturam humanam* and therefore constitutes a unique margin of human existence.

For a baptized and confirmed Christian, acts of *religio* commanded by charity are meritorious and thus contribute essentially to preparing the *viator*, the sojourner, for attaining the ultimate end and perfect

¹²¹ *Acedia* is arguably the root cause of the typically modern boredom of which Martin Heidegger has offered an intriguing phenomenological analysis. Due to the inescapably supernatural character of the extant providential order, however, *acedia* itself becomes the theological key to Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of boredom. The scope of his analysis coincides with the existential horizon of *Dasein zum Tode* ("being towards death"), which is nothing but a shrewd philosophical elevation of *acedia* to the constitutive characteristic of *Dasein*, being-in-the-world ("Die Verfallenheit des Daseins an die Welt"). See Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit* (Freiburger Vorlesung 1929/30), ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), 117–249 (English: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995], 78–167). For a robust and relevant analysis of *acedia* as the source of the pervasive boredom modern people face, see the penetrating study by the Christian philosopher, R. J. Snell, *Acedia and Its Discontents: Metaphysical Boredom in an Empire of Desire* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015).

¹²² *ST* II-II, q. 80, a. 1.

beatitude as *comprehensor*, as partaker in the beatific vision. But for a baptized and confirmed Christian, due to neglect or indifference, not to practice the acts of the infused virtue of religion as established by Divine and human law is a serious sin of omission, and to commit intentional acts of irreligion and irreverence is a grave sin of commission.¹²³ Since the acts of religion are commanded by God—they fall under the precepts of justice and are expressed as revealed divine law in the second commandment of the Decalogue, where they make explicit a dictate of natural reason¹²⁴—intentional acts of irreverence and irreligion cause persons who know the precept to lose friendship with God and do damage to the rectitude of their will and, consequently, err from the path to everlasting perfect beatitude. For a baptized and confirmed Christian, doing without religion is something *contra gratiam Dei* that in view of the supernatural ultimate end of eternal unitive beatitude constitutes a perilous placement at the periphery of human existence.¹²⁵

“*Nel mezzo del cammin di loro vita si ritrovarono per una selva oscura, che la diritta via era smarrita.*”¹²⁶ Midway upon the journey of their lives,

¹²³ *ST* II-II, q. 97, preamble; and q. 122, a. 3.

¹²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 122, a. 3.

¹²⁵ Displaying indifference or even open contempt to the Lord’s Day by neglecting the public worship of God, prayer, recollection, and resting in God and replacing it with the *cultus* of the “last religion” and its characteristic rituals, with wellness, sports, entertainment and, of course, shopping, is the most widespread and widely accepted form of irreverence and irreligion practiced by baptized Christians in the West—supposing, of course, they do not belong to the working class of the new service industry that has to cater around the clock to the demands of the counterfeit *cultus*. To advance the objection that this phenomenon is merely the result of the “24/7” work and consumption schedule of Western consumer societies run amok, is to confuse the effect with the cause. Western modern capitalism is, to a large degree, the result of the replacement of the good life (to which the virtue of religion is central) with the “goods life” (to which the counterfeit virtues of acquisitiveness and self-indulgence are central). See Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), especially ch. 4 (“Subjectivizing Morality”) and ch. 5 (“Manufacturing the Goods Life”).

¹²⁶ The opening stanza of the first Canto of Dante’s poem reads thus:

“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita.”

In his noted translation, Anthony Esolen renders this opening stanza thus:

“Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wilderness,
for I had wandered from the straight and true.”

having wandered from the straight and true, and thus finding themselves lost in a dark and hard wood of indifference, irreverence, and irreligion, all of these persons—whether Christian or not—still desire happiness. They seek the universal good to which their will is directed by necessity, but with the rectitude of the will compromised, or even corrupted, they will not find what they crave even in fame, wealth, pleasure, power, a long life, and the accumulation of things. Because all of these are, at best, only aspects of the universal good, the persons possessing them still desire the universal good *in toto*. Short of attaining it, they will ultimately fail in their quest of finding perfect and everlasting beatitude.

Recall the syllogism from the introduction and its major premise: (1) If humanity is ordained to the gratuitous supernatural final end of union with God, then the virtue of religion is indispensable for the attainment of this end. The systematic *re-lecture* of Aquinas has yielded a coherent, and arguably compelling, warrant for this premise. It has also afforded a Thomistic recapitulation of Pope Francis's identification of a religionless wasteland. In the practical order, where the mandate and challenge of a new evangelization is paramount, Pope Francis exemplifies in his own papal ministry a crucial insight of Aquinas's treatment of humanity's surpassing ultimate end: the subjective attainment of beatitude, fruition, is necessarily accompanied by joy. And insofar as the theological virtue of charity brings about an inchoative participation in the life of God, in the final attainment of everlasting beatitude, the Christian life, even in the midst of profound suffering, is one of deep joy, a joy that arises from the inchoative union with God in charity.¹²⁷ That is why the deep joy of the saints attracts almost irresistibly. Hence, persons lost in the dark and hard wood of indifference, irreverence, and irreligion are best encountered with the joy that is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁸ Encountering such joy might serve as the first impulse of desiring the happiness that blossoms in the existential center of faith—the life of charity, the inchoative friendship with God, the very beginning of eternal beatitude—and that moves us from the margin where both religion is eschewed and ignorance abounds. Becoming a *viator* presupposes receiving at least

(Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. and ed. Anthony Esolen [New York: Modern Library 2002], 2–3).

¹²⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 28, a. 1.

¹²⁸ Following the Vulgate, Catholic tradition as synthesized and interpreted by Aquinas lists twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity. (See *ST* I-II, q. 70, a. 3, as well as *CCC*, §1832.)

some knowledge through reason and through faith of the journey's destination—God.

Becoming again a *viator*, a sojourner—the universal ordination of all human beings in the extant order of divine providence—has one characteristic, indeed one indispensable feature: the ready submission of the will and intellect to God. From these two interior acts, devotion and prayer, flow all other interior and exterior acts of *religio*. Thus joyfully and devoutly, as the Psalmist says, “I incline my heart to perform thy statutes, forever, to the end” (Psalm 119:112 RSV). N-V