

9. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotelean Worldliness

When I suggest that Thomas Aquinas is in the center of the next huge turning point in Church history, I do not mean to deny that many significant events took place between the fifth century Augustine and the thirteenth century Aquinas. One of the most significant of those events was a development in Christian monasticism. Christian monasticism predated Augustine. Augustine himself was a monastic and the founder of the Augustinian order. Nevertheless, the work of Benedict (480-543 CE) in redesigning Western monasticism can be viewed as a major event in Church history. Benedict combined labor, prayer, contemplation, thoughtfulness, and communal stability into concrete practices that are still amazingly provocative. In spite of his important innovations, Benedict was a worker in the Augustinian wake. He did not contradict or change the basic Augustinian pull together. Theologically Benedict was an Augustinian.

And there are many other events before Aquinas that might be counted as major: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1178) was a Benedictine abbess of remarkable creativity in terms of her love of nature. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and Claire (1194-1253) also supported the deepening of this love of nature. All three of these persons we can view as Augustinians in their basic theology.

However, the turning point I am associating with Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is a fundamentally new approach of the Church to a much changed world, a world under many influences – a world that is due to change even more. The more mystical and metaphysical emphasis of the Augustinian heritage was in need of an upgrade in the scientific realm of living. The Church would have been left with a weakened relevance unless the Aquinas' revolution was accepted.

With Aquinas we are dealing with a radically competent response to the Aristotelian thought that was being imported from the south Mediterranean Islamic world. A much changed response for the Church was already underway through a development of Aristotelian thinking within the Dominican order of which Aquinas was a member.

While Aristotelian thought had some influence on Plotinus who was Augustine's philosophical mentor, both Plotinus and Augustine leaned heavily toward the Plato side of the ancient Plato-Aristotle polarity in philosophical thought. The extent to which the thought of Aristotle had been neglected during those eight centuries between Augustine and Aquinas is remarkable. And this meant a lack of serious interest in what we today call the natural sciences – that is, with how the particulars of "material" nature affect our overviews of thought. Today in the West we are so embedded in a post-Aquinas culture of scientific emphasis that it is hard for us to imagine that such was not the case in those earlier centuries.

Aquinas was a revolutionary in his time. His writings were strongly opposed by the Augustinians in the Franciscan order and elsewhere. The Franciscan movement was another important development within the Augustinian wake. In Aquinas' day the Franciscan Bonaventura (1221–1274), born Giovanni di Fidanza, was an Italian medieval scholastic theologian of formidable power and a strong opponent of Aquinas' innovations. In spite of this and other strong opposition, we can suppose that Aquinas finally won his place in Church thinking because the power of his thought dealt more adequately with the new challenges of the complex social world in which he lived.

I find reading Aquinas somewhat difficult. We have to do some translating to our own times to feel our way into the greatness of his work. Following is an example. I am commenting upon a piece of his *Summa Theologica* "On the Laws."

Is there an Eternal Law?

By “Eternal Law,” Aquinas meant something very similar to what some of our contemporary evolution deniers call “Intelligent Design.” But these contemporary science-deniers need to hear what Thomas says about “Eternal Law.”

A law is nothing else than the dictate of practical reason in the sovereign who governs a perfect community. Now it is manifest, supposing that the world is ruled by a Divine Providence, that the whole community of the universe is governed by Divine Reason.

By “sovereign” Aquinas means a king, the top leader of any society known at that time. By “perfect community” Aquinas means any grouping of humans in which all the aspects of society (political, economic, and cultural) are manifesting in a specific scope of geography. With this down-to-Earth picture in the readers’ minds, Aquinas uses the word “supposing” when referring to a world “ruled by a Divine Providence.” The word “supposing” indicates analogical thinking. Following is a restatement of the meaning of what Aquinas is saying: “Let us suppose that, just like we experience a king in our human societies, there is a KING that rules the whole universe. If so, then the Divine Reason of this Eternal KING is like unto a Law. Aquinas goes on to say what this “Eternal Law” is like.

And therefore the plan of government of things, as it is in God the Sovereign of the universe, bears the character of a law. And because the Divine Reason conceives nothing according to time, but has an eternal concept, therefore it is that this manner of law must be called eternal.

For we 21st century enculturated persons, these sentences require much interpretation. Aquinas is still using his “supposing” or “analogical” thinking and he is also using the taken-for-granted, two-story metaphor known to everyone in his times. In terms of the meaning of the above sentences for Aquinas’ existence and ours, we need to consider carefully this sentence: “Divine Reason conceives nothing according to time, but has an eternal concept.” This “eternal concept” exists only in the “Mind of God.” And that means that the “Eternal Law” is something that cannot be conceived from the point of view of our time-bound human minds. This “Divine Reason” which is the “Law” ruling the entire universe is to us humans, Sheer Mystery. We may be experiencing this Sheer Mystery in our conscious guts, but we are not experiencing this Eternal Law with our minds. With our minds we are merely *supposing* Eternal Law as a thought project. What we are experiencing with our consciousness is Sheer Mystery.

In contrast to Aquinas, contemporary conservative Christians insist on using the term “Intelligent Design” for something that human beings can understand with their minds by reading their Bibles or listening to their Church teachings. In doing so, they are not on the same wave length with Aquinas. If they were to notice that their so-called “Intelligent Design” is analogical thinking about the Sheer Mystery, then they would be able to see what Aquinas is saying to them about their lives. Aquinas is expressing his faith that the process of the whole universe is good – well ordered by a trustworthy “Orderer” whose order, design, rules, laws are incapable of ever being understood by humans. Let us continue with Aquinas’ remarkable logic.

Is there in us any natural law?

Law being a rule and measure, may be in a thing in two ways: in one way as in one ruling and measuring, in another way as in one who is ruled and measured. Hence, since all things subject to Divine Providence are ruled and measured by the Eternal Law, it is manifest that they all participate to some extent in the Eternal Law, inasmuch by the stamp of that law upon them they have their inclinations to their several acts and ends. But among the rest the rational creature is subject to Divine Providence in a more excellent way, being itself a partaker in Providence, providing for itself and others. Hence there is in it a participation of the Eternal Law, whereby it has a natural inclination to a due act and end: such participation in Eternal Law in the rational

creature is called natural law. Hence it is clear that the natural law is nothing else than a participation of the Eternal Law in the rational creature.

Putting this in our 21st Century words, Aquinas is saying that whatever we humans know about the Sheer Mystery of the universe is a participation of that Sheer Mystery in our finite human minds. Here are examples: If we know that mass and energy is two forms of the same reality, that is a participation of the Sheer Mystery in our human minds. If we know that gravity is not a force of attraction operating at a distance, but a bending in space caused by the presence of great mass, that is a participation of the Sheer Mystery in our human minds. If we know that the average Earth temperature is getting warmer as a result of our burning of fossil fuels, that is a participation of the Sheer Mystery in our human minds. Natural law, if that term can have meaning for us, is simply what the human mind can currently know about the Sheer Mystery of the universe. Our contemplative inquiry into our own consciousness can also turn up “natural law” about the Sheer Mystery of what it means to be conscious beings. So with such careful translation, we can perhaps agree with Aquinas that there is such thing in our minds as natural law. But not Eternal Law. Natural law is what we know about the Eternal Law. About the Eternal Law itself we are still mystified. The Eternal Law in its wholeness and essence remains Sheer Mystery. Next we see the practical results of Aquinas’ logic for human society:

Whether there is human law?

As we have stated above, a law is a dictate of the practice reason. Now it is to be observed that the same procedure takes place in the practical and in the speculative reason, for each proceeds from principles to conclusions. Accordingly, we conclude that, just as in speculative reason, from naturally known demonstrable principles we draw conclusions of the various sciences, the knowledge of which is not imparted to us by nature, but acquired by the efforts of reason, so too it is that from the precepts of the natural law, as from common and demonstrable principles, the human reason needs to proceed to the more particular determination of certain matters. These particular determinations, devised by human reason, are called human laws, provided that the other essential conditions of law be observed as was stated above.

So what does Aquinas mean by human law? He means whatever a human ruler, president, Congress, reform movements etc. finds it needful to add to natural law in order to make a society workable – for example: determining on which side of the road we are required to drive; what color of light means stop; or what corporations are allowed to do and what not to do. All such matters are not prescribed by our knowledge of natural law.

In a later part of his section on human law, Aquinas makes it clear that any human law that is not in accord with natural law does not have the standing of “law,” and thus has no claim upon the conscience of the citizen to be obeyed. It can be disobeyed. It needs to be changed to be a true law. Here is an example: Any US law about energy that is not in accord with the natural law concerning global warming (climate crisis) does not have the standing of law. It does not have a claim upon conscience to be obeyed. So the current laws permitting the mining and transport of tar sands oil should not be counted as laws: they should not be obeyed or enforced by the police. Here are Aquinas’ words on this point:

Every law framed by man bears the character of a law exactly to the extent to which it is derived from the law of nature. But if on any point it is in conflict with the law of nature, it at once ceases to be a law: it is a mere perversion of law.

Catholics who claim to revere Thomas Aquinas as their top theologian and yet deny climate science and evolutionary science need to notice that Aquinas does not support them in this attitude. And Protestants, who claim that the Right-wising of our

lives begins and ends with faith alone, need to notice that Aquinas' statements about Eternal Law actually express his "faith" that all the processes of nature and history that are happening to us are the trustworthy gifts of that Eternal Enigma, "whose" ways are mysterious and forever unknown to us. This means that Aquinas might be viewed as supportive of a radical Protestantism that claims that God is not "a person," that "person" is just a metaphor that expresses our devotion to this Ground of Being that is the source and the terminator of all things.

From this tiny piece of Thomas Aquinas' vast work, we can see that he is a practical ethicist (even a revolutionary one) as well as an ecclesiastical reformer. He is a mediating thinker between the rising Aristotelian science (objective thought) and the church's collective wisdom (authoritative thought about our primal existence). He is much concerned to give credence to the best science of his day as well as give credence to the Church's vast collection of deep wisdom. With regard to Church wisdom Aquinas is a type of mystic and a devoted person of deep trust. These qualities were not as prominent among many of the thinkers that came after him. Aquinas wanted to assure his generation that they could absorb Aristotelian science as far as it goes. He also wanted to convince his generation that such wisdom does not go the whole way to our "Final Blessedness." We still need to access the Grace of God ministered by the Church to open in us the "supernatural virtues" of Trust, Hope and Love. These gifts of God are essential to our true fulfillment, and they are missing from the greatness of Aristotelian wisdom and virtues.

Aquinas ends up with a two-story stack of wisdom – the natural and the supernatural. The separation between the meaning of these two categories was increased. The more mystical thought of Augustine tended to interlace natural and supernatural. For Aquinas, the supernatural is separate and firmly on top, but this top layer is on top of something valid – the natural realm and wisdom, which is also a gift to us from the same Sheer Mystery that gives us the healing grace carried by the Church. It was Aquinas' affirmation of natural wisdom that the established Augustinian theologians found objectionable. Aristotle did not square with their more mystical views of nature. Also, the practical consequences involved in admitting this wisdom distressed them. Aquinas and his whole religious order were a revolutionary force within that time. They did not win the majority mind right away, but they did more or less win eventually. Had they not won what they won, we today might not be the science-loving Western world that we are. Or perhaps the science-loving Western world would have evolved, but the Church could not have been able to minister to it.

As the post-Aquinas flow of events unfolded, the unleashed natural sciences began to challenge the Church half of Aquinas' two-story stack of wisdom. Let the science of evolution be our example. The scientific understandings that went into the Genesis myth-writing does indeed conflict with today's cosmology and biology. When conservative Christians insist on a literal rather than mythic view of Genesis, they are in serious tension with evidence for species evolution and with the evidence for a 14-billion-year-old cosmos. In spite of the fact that the scientific community has already won this war with the intelligencia, there is still a huge percentage of the U.S. population that reject evolution and contemporary cosmology. As Christian theologians, it remains for us to do for our time what Aquinas did for his time, namely to reconcile science and religion.

But before we return to questions of how the Christian religion needs to be recast in such a way that the ongoing work of science is an enrichment rather than a nemesis of our "faith," we need to explore another major turning point in Christian church history. This next turning point had much to do with that word "faith." When Martin Luther claims that our lives are "made righteous" by faith alone, only a small minority of contemporary people understand what he was taking about.