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HUMAN NATURE AND TRUTH

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Aquinas on Religion and Human Nature

In presenting religion as a human virtue connected to the cardinal virtue of justice, the Medieval luminary, Thomas Aquinas, underscores that what properly defines religion is to be found in that connatural and inalienable relation which every human being has with the divine: “ordo ad Deum” (STh. II-IIae, 81, art. 1, co.). Significant for his innovated understanding of religion is its inextricable connection with human nature: being a moral virtue, religion is inherent in human nature; it regards all human beings in as much as they are human, and concerns their relationship with the divine, with that which everybody calls God (though different peoples may have different names for this reality). From the perspective of the Philosophy of Religion, this paper wishes to contribute to contemporary philosophical discussions on religion through an examination of Aquinas's original and profound doctrine on the essence of religion and how religion, for Aquinas, is intrinsic to human nature. Highlighting Aquinas's indebtedness especially to Cicero in his thinking on religion and its unassailable grounding in human nature, it explores the essential definition proffered by Aquinas and his justification of the virtuous character of religion on account of which religiosity enters the defining character of the human being. In the end it sheds light on the relevance of Aquinas's doctrine for contemporary philosophical reflections on religion.

Keywords

Religion, Nature, Aquinas, Philosophy, Virtue

Aquinas on Religion and Human Nature

0 *Introduction*

An investigation into religion raises many of the most difficult questions in philosophy. A systematic and careful analysis of human history reveals that in all places and times, the human being has always been religious¹. But does religion really constitute an essential feature of the human being or is it something invented? What is the relationship between religion and human nature? While the pervasive presence of religion in all stages of human history, from the most primordial times to our time, might constitute sufficient index that the human being is intrinsically religious, there are not a few thinkers in the history of human thought who have sustained that religion is an entirely human invention whose universal presence can only be traced to a collective illusion engulfing human beings and from which they inevitably ought to be delivered. The common tendency among such thinkers is to reduce religion to a set of elements that are ultimately not religious, with the intention of unmasking its inherent hypocrisy and denouncing its essentially alienating scope². Nevertheless, among those who have seen and have shed luminous light on an intrinsic connection between religion and human nature is the renowned Medieval luminary, Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas's discussion of human nature is encapsulated in Questions 75 -- 89 of the first part of his epoch-making *Summa Theologiae*, and when he talks of human nature, he means the essential features of the human being, in other words, those things that make us human, or in Aristotelian terminology, what it is to be a human being³. Of course, it is not our intention here to go into Aquinas's discussion of human nature. Rather, we only wish to show how religion, in his thinking, is among those things that go into the defining character of human beings, in other words, those things that constitute the human being's essential features. In the same *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas presents religion as a moral virtue connected to the cardinal virtue of justice, underscoring that what properly defines religion is to be found in that connatural and inalienable relation which every human being has with the divine: "*ordo ad Deum*"⁴. Significant in this innovated understanding of religion is its inextricable connection with human nature: being a moral virtue, religion is inherent in human nature; it regards all human beings in as much as they are human, and concerns their relationship with the divine, with that which everybody calls God (though different peoples may have different names for this reality).

This paper wishes, from the perspective of the Philosophy of Religion, to contribute to contemporary philosophical discussions on religion through an examination of

¹ Cf. A. AGUTI, *Filosofia della religione. Storia, temi, problemi*, Editrice La Scuola, 2013, 83.

² Cf. A. ALESSI, *Sui sentieri del sacro. Introduzione alla filosofia della religione*, LAS, Roma 20163, 83.

³ Cf. R. PASNAU, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, 7.

⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, co.

Aquinas's original and profound doctrine on the essence of religion and how religion, for Aquinas, is intrinsic to human nature. The paper will be developed in four moments. First, it shall look at the great influence of Cicero on Aquinas's doctrine on religion and its inexorable connection to human nature. This is significant because, among the different thinkers who influenced Aquinas's thinking on religion, especially regarding its foundation on human nature, Cicero remains distinctive. Next, we shall explore Aquinas's essential definition of religion. In other words, that which for Aquinas constitutes the essence of religion. Third, we shall examine Aquinas's understanding of the virtuous character of religion and its relation to human nature. It is precisely from the virtuous character of religion that its grounding on human nature unambiguously emerges. And finally, we shall shed light on the relevance of Aquinas's doctrine for contemporary philosophical reflections on religion.

1 *The Influence of Cicero*

Aquinas's terminology for religion is "*religio*", and philosophical reflection on its meaning and on what it is concerned with certainly did not begin with him. Aquinas's thought on religion was deeply influenced by earlier thinkers, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, etc., who we may refer to as his intellectual ancestors and whose insights he absorbed through a variety of sources. As Jean-Pierre Torrell aptly remarks, "Thomas Aquinas was not like Melchizedek of the Bible -- without ancestry. He had a history that was both personal and intellectual. He drew from a number of other authors: writers inspired by the Bible or by the ancient world; pagans and Christians; Greek, Jewish, and Arab philosophers; theologians of the Latin tradition that earlier preceded him or were contemporaneous with him; as well as eminent theologians of the Greek and Eastern churches. Aquinas's strong personality brought unity to all these sources, as a great river united its numerous tributaries"⁵. However, the greatest influence on Aquinas's thinking on religion is the renowned Roman thinker, Cicero, and to appreciate the inextricable connection Aquinas makes between religion and human nature, we have to go back to the insight offered by Cicero.

In his youthful treatise, *De inventione rhetorica*, Cicero, discussing the origin of law, which, according to him, "seems to be in nature",⁶ defines the law of nature as "something which is implanted in us not by opinion, but by a kind of innate instinct".⁷ He lists religion, duty, gratitude, revenge⁸, and truth as some of those elements that are grounded on the law of nature. In other words, their principles arise from something that is connatural to man, innately implanted in us. He defines religion as "the term applied to the fear and worship of the gods".⁹ Going further, in the context of his discussion of the rules of deliberative oratory, Cicero outlines three kinds of things

⁵ J-P. TORRELL, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, & Reception*, trans. by B.M. Guevin, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 2005, ix.

⁶ CICERO, *De inventione rhetorica*, II.iii.159 (Eng. trans. H.M. HUBBEL, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge -- London 1949).

⁷ Ibid., II. xxii. 65.

⁸ It might appear strange that Cicero lists revenge among those elements grounded on the law of nature. However, his definition of revenge might help to clear his position. According to him, "Revenge is the act through which by defending or avenging we repel violence and insult from ourselves and from those who ought to be dear to us, and by which we punish offences": Ibid., II. xxii. 66. It is more of a sort of self-defence. Aquinas would later as well include it in his consideration of virtues annexed to the virtue of justice.

⁹ Ibid., II. xxii. 66.

that are to be sought to which correspond also on the opposite side three kinds of things to be avoided: first, there are things to be sought because of their intrinsic merit, not because of any prospect of gain, but because of their inner value; second, there are things sought not because of their inner merit or natural goodness, but because of some advantage or profit accruing from them; third, there are things for both reasons, that is, on account of their intrinsic merit and the prospect of deriving some advantage from them. Whereas the things in the first and last classes are termed honourable (*honestia*), things of the second category are termed advantageous (*utilitia*). Honourable things are further distinguished into two types, things sought wholly for their own sake and things sought partially for their own sake.

Cicero gives the name virtue to everything sought wholly for its own sake and defines it as "a habit of the mind in harmony with reason and the order of nature".¹⁰ He identifies four parts of virtue: wisdom (*prudentiam*), justice (*iustitiam*), courage (*fortitudinem*) and temperance (*temperantiam*). He defines justice as "a habit of the mind which gives every man his desert while preserving the common advantage"¹¹. He lists *religio* as part of the virtue of justice and defines it as "that which brings men to serve and worship a higher order of nature which they call divine"¹². By so defining *religio*, Cicero clearly establishes three significant points about religion: the guiding norm of the law of nature, the indispensable role of reason, and its dependence on the virtue of justice. Being a virtue, it is a habit of the mind in harmony with reason and the order of nature. As such, it is something to which every human being is naturally disposed, but then, it needs an adequate guidance of reason, since if the habit is not adequately guided, if it is not in accordance with reason and with the law of nature, it will lead to the opposite direction, to vice, which, according to Cicero, is among the things "to be avoided for their own sake"¹³.

2 *Aquinas's Essential Definition of Religion*

Aquinas's definition of the essence of religion is encapsulated in question 81 of the IIaIIae of his *Summa Theologiae* which he dedicates to religion considered in itself. The central article that defines religion here is article 1 of the question. Aquinas asks whether religion directs man to God alone. Five possible objections are raised citing different authorities, to which Aquinas in his usual style would later proffer perspicacious replies. It is however in his *respondeo* that Aquinas's novelty and originality regarding the essential meaning of religion most luminously shine out. Gathering different etymological derivations of "*religio*", he strikes the heart of what for him constitutes the essence of religion. Here the three classical derivations of *religio* are recognized: *relegere*, which goes back to Cicero, as Isidore reports, that is, to reread, since he is considered religious who often meditates or reads meticulously the things concerning the worship of God; *re-elegere*, which goes back to Saint Augustine and means to choose again, since having lost God through our own negligence, we need to seek him and find him; and *religare*, which also goes back to Saint Augustine and

¹⁰ Ibid., II.Iiii.159.

¹¹ Ibid., II.Iiii.160.

¹² Ibid., II.Iiii.161.

¹³ Ibid., II.Iiv.165.

means to reunite, since, having lost our primordial union with God, religion reunites us to him.

By connecting the three possible roots of the terminology, *religio*, Aquinas offers his original understanding of its meaning, stating: "However, whether religion take its name from frequent reading, or from a repeated choice of what has been lost through negligence, or from being a bond, it denotes properly *an order towards God*"¹⁴. This is because, according to Aquinas, "it is He to Whom we ought to be bound as to our unfailing principle; to Whom also our choice should be resolutely directed as to our last end; and Whom we lose when we neglect Him by sin, and should recover by believing in Him and confessing our faith"¹⁵. Therefore, what essentially defines *religio*, in the thought of Aquinas, is that it is properly an "*ordo ad Deum*". In fact, it can be said that the different objections earlier raised, and the answers later proffered to them somewhat respectively point to and reinforce this essential core of religion, that is, *order towards God*.

Joseph D'Amécourt offers an excellent analysis of the profound and complex meaning of the term "*Ordo*" in the thinking of Aquinas who makes use of the concept in several parts of his writings, accentuating its important and irreplaceable role¹⁶. In the *Summa Theologiae* alone, he uses it in his account of various crucial questions such as in his treatise on the Trinity where he discusses the notion of order in relation to the divine processions (I, 42, 39); in his treatise on divine government where he uses order in relation to the concept of hierarchy (I, 108); and in his treatise on charity (II-II, 26) where he sheds light on the ordering of charity to the three material objects of charity: to God, to oneself and to the neighbour. Here the Aristotelian notion of priority and posterity is brought to bear: "As the Philosopher says (Metaph. V, text. 16), the terms *before* and *after* are used in reference to some principle. Now order implies that certain things are, in some way, before or after"¹⁷. In the order of charity, the love of God is prior to both the love of self and the love of neighbour. The love of neighbour on the other hand presupposes the love of oneself and so is posterior to both the love of God and the love of oneself. The question of the common notion of goodness also implies the concept of "*ordo*", since, according to Aquinas, "the essence of goodness, so far as it consists in perfection, consists also in mode, species and order" (I, 5, 5). Finally, the gradation of virtues and precepts also constitutes an "*ordo*", as Aquinas writes "*Ordo autem praeceptorum proportionatur ordini virtutum*", that is, "the order of precepts is proportionate to the order of virtues"¹⁸.

The fundamental sense of "*ordo*" in its use by Aquinas, however, is that it is always connected to some principle. As Aquinas affirms in his discussion of order in relation

¹⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, co (Eng. trans. Fathers of the English Province, Benziger Bros., New York, NY 1948: Though this translation uses "a relation to God", I have chosen to translate "an order to God" to be more faithful to the original text).

¹⁵ *Ivi*.

¹⁶ Cf. N.J. D'AMÉCOURT, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, 152-168. Cf. also A.N. Woznicki, *Being and Order: The Metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas in Historical Perspective*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 1990; A. de Siva Tarouca, "L'idée d'ordre dans la philosophie de saint Thomas", in *Revue néoscholastique de philosophie* 40 (1937), 341-384.

¹⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 26, a. 1, co.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 81, a. 6, s.c.2).

to the Trinity, "Order always has reference to some principle"¹⁹. Also, in his treatise on the order of charity, he reiterates that "wherever there is a principle, there must needs be also order of some kind"²⁰. The concept of *ordo* is thus a corollary to the concept of principle. Principle is that from which (*a quo*) something comes. A principle implies an order, and an order presupposes a principle. You cannot have one without the other; but the concept of order is based on the concept of principle and not vice versa. In defining religion as *Ordo ad Deum*, it seems certain that this fundamental meaning of *ordo* is what is implied, that is, *ordo* understood with reference to a principle. In other words, religion orders man to God in so far as God is the principle of man and of everything that exists.

But there are many senses in which we can speak of principle. And since order always presupposes some principle, there are correspondingly many senses in which we may speak of order. According to Aquinas, "Wherefore since there are many kinds of principle (...) so are there many kinds of order"²¹. A principle can either be immanent or transcendent. In the same way, an order can be either immanent or transcendent. The principal part (*pars principalis*) of a whole, for instance, is an immanent principle of the whole, and the order of the parts among themselves is an immanent order. There are also extrinsic principles as well as intrinsic principles. The first of all beings, that is, the principle from which every other being has its origin, is an extrinsic principle to every being that proceeds from it. But apart from being extrinsic, it is also a transcendent principle in the sense that it is pure actuality and is not in any way affected by potentiality, privation or limitation. It ontologically surpasses every being composed of actuality and potentiality.

Thus, just as there is transcendent principle, there is also transcendent order of every being to the transcendent principle of its existence. It is precisely in this sense that religion is defined as order towards God. God is the transcendent principle of every being (*ens*) in so far as every being owes its existence (*esse*) to Him; He is ontologically transcendent with respect to all other beings, that is, He ontologically surpasses every being. The relationship of every created being to God is that of total ontological dependence; all created beings have the relation of participation to the *ipsum esse per se subsistens*²². As Aquinas makes clear, "It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially"²³. For Aquinas, God has the fullness of perfection and is the cause of all beings which possess perfection in varying degrees so as to be more or less perfect. It is therefore in the sense of man's ontological dependence on God as the transcendent principle of human existence that religion is defined by Aquinas as essentially implying *ordo ad Deum*.

3 *The Virtuous Character of Religion and its Relation to Human Nature*

¹⁹ Ibid., I, q. 42, a. 3, co.

²⁰ Ibid., II-II, q. 26, a. 1, co.

²¹ Ibid., I, q. 42, a. 3, co.

²² Cf. N.J. D'AMÉCOURT, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, 160.

²³ Ibid., I, q. 44, a. 1, co.

Aquinas considers this man's ordering to God a moral virtue. In fact, his consideration of *religio* a moral virtue in line with Cicero seems already taken for granted since its discussion falls within the ambit of the potential parts of the cardinal virtue of justice introduced by the singular article constituting q. 80 of the IIaIIae. This question explicitly asks "whether the virtues annexed to justice are suitably enumerated?". In answering to the different objections which refer to discrepancies in the enumeration made by different authors and which would thus make it seem that the virtues annexed to justice are not suitably enumerated, Aquinas clarifies the factors that qualify the inclusion of a virtue among the virtues annexed to a principal virtue. In Aquinas's thinking, virtues may be annexed to a principal virtue on two grounds: "The first is that these virtues have something in common with the principal virtue; and the second is that in some respect they fall short of the perfection of that virtue"²⁴. With regard to the virtues annexed to the virtue of justice, since it has to do with the relation between two subjects, "all the virtues that are directed to another person may by reason of this common aspect be annexed to justice"²⁵. However, since it is in the nature of justice to render to another what is his due according to equality, Aquinas also underlines two ways in which these virtues may be considered as falling short of the virtue of justice: "first, by falling short of the aspect of equality; secondly, by falling short of the aspect of due"²⁶.

Since religion, following the definition offered by Cicero, consists in offering service and worship to a superior nature called divine²⁷, religion is annexed to the virtue of justice on account of the relation it establishes between two subjects: the human subject and the superior being of a divine nature. However, religion falls short of the perfection of justice on account of the aspect of equality, since, "whatever man renders to God is due, yet it cannot be equal, as though man rendered to God as much as he owes him"²⁸. Other virtues annexed to justice which fall short of the perfection of the virtue of justice on the basis of equality include piety and observance. One notes here a clear distinction in terminology between religion and piety. Following Cicero's distinction, piety is restricted here to the rendering of service and reverence to one's kindred and the well-wishers of one's country. It falls short of the perfection of the virtue of justice since, in the thinking of Aristotle, "it is not possible to make to one's parents an equal return for what one owes to them"²⁹. Both religion and piety also differ from observance which is the honour and reverence reserved for those who have excelled in worth. This latter also falls short of the perfection of the virtue of justice on the basis of equality because, as also taught by Aristotle, "man is unable to offer an equal meed for virtue"³⁰. The virtues annexed to justice which fall short of the perfection of the virtue of justice on account of what is due include such virtues as truth, gratitude, revenge³¹, liberality, friendship and *epikeia* or equity.

²⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 80, a. 1, co.

²⁵ *Ivi.*

²⁶ *Ivi.*

²⁷ Cf. CICERO, *De invenzione rhetorica*, II.iii.161.

²⁸ *Ivi.*

²⁹ *Ivi.*, cf. ARISTOTLE, *Ethic.* vii, 14.

³⁰ *Ivi.*, cf. ARISTOTLE, *Ethic.* iv. 3.

³¹ Aquinas cites Cicero explicitly in recognizing revenge as a virtue annexed to the cardinal virtue of justice: "to justice is annexed *revenge*, whereby, as Tully states, we resist force, injury or anything obscure by taking vengeance or by self-defence" (THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa*

In q. 81, art. 2, Aquinas defends the virtuous character of religion, and in doing this, he goes back to Aristotle's characterization of virtue as that which renders good both the acting subject and the acts of the subject. The question is whether man's ordering to God renders man and his actions good; if it does, then religion is a virtue, otherwise it is not. Aquinas justifies the virtuous character of religion, asserting fundamentally that the appropriate way of man's being is being ordered to God made manifest in giving due honour to him: "Now it is evident that to render anyone his due 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, just as mode and species, according to Augustine (*De Nat. Boni* iii). Since then it belongs to religion to pay due honor to someone, namely, to God, it is evident that religion is a virtue"³². In fact, as Michel Labourdette clarifies, if religion is a virtue, it is that it puts us in the order of what must be done towards God, that is, rendering to God the honour which is his due (*reddere Deo honorem debitum*)³³. This also indicates that religion as a virtue has to be a kind of justice, because it disposes us to the fulfilment of what duly belongs to God in relation to us, that is, paying him rightful honour. Aquinas thus places religion, not just in a merely legal and external, but in a deeply internal and moral relationship with the cardinal virtue of justice³⁴.

Aquinas thus justifies the moral goodness of religion. He makes it clear that religion is not a theological but a moral virtue. This, according to him, is because, whereas the theological virtues have God both as their direct object and end, religion, since it gives due worship to God, has worship as its direct object and God as its end. Religion is therefore not a theological virtue, but a moral virtue connected to the cardinal virtue of justice. By identifying religion as a moral virtue, Aquinas brings out the intrinsically human character of religion; it is something connatural with the human being and not something invented. Religion is inherent in human nature. In other words, as R. Jared Staudt puts it, "the just ordering of one's life to God arises from the natural law that has been instilled into Creation"³⁵. Religion thus belongs to all human beings in so far as they are human and concerns their relationship with the divine with that which everybody calls God (though different peoples may have different names for this reality). Being a virtue, following Cicero's classical definition of virtue, it is "a habit of the mind in harmony with reason and the order of nature".³⁶

What it means then is that religion is not a result of convention (*opinio*), education or positive legislation, but something woven into the very structure of human nature. As J.A. Berry perspicuously clarifies, for Aquinas, religion "embraces the complete essence of a person, extending beyond their sensory and emotional dimensions to actively

Theologiae II-II, q. 80, a. 1, co). In answer to the objection which claims that revenge should rather be included among the species of commutative justice and not be reckoned as a virtue annexed to justice, Aquinas answers that "The revenge taken by authority of a public power, in accordance with a judge's sentence, belongs to commutative justice: whereas the revenge which a man takes of his own initiative, though not against the law, or which a man seeks to obtain from a judge, belongs to the virtue annexed to justice". In any case, revenge is recognized as a virtue belonging to the cardinal virtue of justice (ivi., ad. 1).

³² THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 81, art. 2, co.

³³ M. LABOURDETTE, *La Religion*, 36.

³⁴ Cf. A. STRUMIA, *Che cos'è una religione?*, 125.

³⁵ R.J. STAUDT, *The Primacy of God: The Virtue of Religion in Catholic Theology*, Emmaus Academic, Steubenville, OH 2022, 9.

³⁶ CICERO, *De invenzione rhetorica*, II.iii.159.

involve their intellectual faculties. This signifies that engaging in religion necessitates a deliberate application of rationality"³⁷. In fact, in responding to one of the objections claiming that religion is not a virtue, Aquinas also brings out very clearly how religion is inherent in human nature. The third objection, alluding to Aristotle's *Ethic* ii. 1, had claimed that since religion offers ceremonial worship to God, it is not a dictate of natural reason and is therefore not a virtue. In answer to the objection, Aquinas makes it clear that "It belongs to the dictate of natural reason that man should do something through reverence for God. But that he should do this or that determinate thing does not belong to the natural reason, but it is established by Divine or human law"³⁸. If religion belongs to the dictate of natural reason, then it belongs to human nature and is not a fruit of convention.

The same thesis is highlighted by Aquinas in his discussion of sacrifice, which is one of the elicited though exterior acts of religion. According to Aquinas, "Natural reason tells man that he is subject to a higher being, on account of the defects he perceives in himself, and in which he needs help and direction from someone above him: and whatever this superior being may be, it is known to all under the name of God. Now just as in natural things the lower are naturally subject to the higher, so too it is a dictate of natural reason in accordance with man's natural inclination that he should tender submission and honour, according to his mode, to that which is above man (...) Now this is what we mean by sacrifice, and consequently the offering of sacrifice is a natural law"³⁹. Sacrifice belongs properly to religion, and it is a dictate of human reason. Being a dictate of human reason, therefore, religion belongs intrinsically to human nature and constitutes an essential feature of the human being.

4 *Relevance for Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*

What is the relevance of all this for contemporary philosophical reflection on religion? We can think of the contemporary relevance of Aquinas's teaching from two perspectives: from the material and from the formal perspectives, that is, both from the point of view of the contents of his doctrine and from the point of view of his paradigmatic methodology. First, from the material point of view, Aquinas categorically recognizes a common essence of religion and relates it inextricably to human nature. He defines the essence of religion as *Ordo ad Deum*, underscoring that what properly defines religion is to be found in that connatural and inalienable relation which every human being has with the divine, with that which everybody calls God (though different peoples may have different names for this reality). In his definition of religion, Aquinas has been able to capture elements of undeniable universality. As Berry testifies, "Aquinas not only ropes in diverse religions but also investigates the universal concept of 'religion', offering a definition and presenting a philosophical and theological doctrine"⁴⁰. The anthropological dimension in his understanding of religion is very significant: being a moral virtue, religion has its necessary foundation in the natural law and regards all human beings in as much as they are human. We can talk of religion only in relation to man, a rational creature, and not in relation to other

³⁷ J.A. BERRY, "Aquinas's Understanding of Religion", in *Religions* 2023, 14(7), 855; <<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070855>>

³⁸ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 81, art. 2, ad. 3.

³⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 85, art. 1, co.

⁴⁰ J.A. BERRY, "Aquinas's Understanding of Religion".

animals. However, against different anthropological reductionisms, which find in man the origin and end of religion, as we find, for example, in the views espoused by such philosophers as Feuerbach and Nietzsche, Aquinas's definition makes it explicit that religion must have God or the Divine as its ultimate end and destination.

Equally emblematic and of undeniable relevance for contemporary philosophical reflections on religion is Aquinas's distinction of religion from the theological virtues, especially from the theological virtue of faith. Aquinas is clear in his clarification that whereas the theological virtues have God as both their object and end, religion, a moral virtue, does not have God as its object, God is the end of religion. But because religion comes closer to the theological virtues than other moral virtues, since it tends to unite man more closely to God than the others, it holds primacy over the rest of the moral virtues. In fact, as Aquinas wrote in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* regarding the relation of faith and religion, for instance, every religion is "a certain manifestation of faith"⁴¹. So, faith and religion are not interchangeable. Being a theological virtue, faith is a supernatural gift of grace, and its horizon opens to the horizon of revelation. Religion, on the other hand, being a moral virtue connected to the cardinal virtue of justice, has a moral dimension which is common to every human being since it derives from a law inherent in man's very being, that is, the natural law, the rational awareness of which is common to every human being.

Besides the material aspect of Aquinas's teaching on religion, the relevance of his contribution from the formal point of view can hardly be overestimated; Aquinas's methodology, not only regarding his discussion of religion, but regarding his entire intellectual enterprise, remains paradigmatic. As a seasoned philosopher, Aquinas never shied away from the confrontation and dialogue of ideas in search of truth. He would streamline various ideas on whatever theme he is examining, both those congruent with his personal conviction and those which pose as objections to his own position, both those of his predecessors as well as those held by his contemporaries, and through critical scrutiny argue out his own points. He would confront ideas posed by Christians, pagans, Muslims, Jews, heretics, etc., and from the cross-fertilization, fermentation and reciprocal purification of these ideas in the light of reason, bring out his own original contribution. It is instructive that the most significant authority in the development of his thought on religion is Cicero, a pagan philosopher. As Berry rightly testifies, "Aquinas finds his most authoritative source in Cicero, a philosopher and jurist, whose comprehensive vision of religion aligns with a universal definition"⁴². For Aquinas, the common ground of confrontation was reason; it was indeed philosophy that offered a common language to the dialogue partners, a language with which the different parties in the dialogue were very conversant. In fact, this offers also very interesting clue to the question of intercultural, interreligious and inter-philosophical dialogue very much spoken of in our time. Aquinas was convinced that "*omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto est*", which means that every truth, no matter by whom it is said, comes from God; what mattered for him is arriving at the truth, and this truth can come from anybody. In the same light, it is also remarkable how Aquinas values tradition and past thoughts. We can think of the number of centuries that separated Aquinas from Aristotle, Cicero, etc. Yet he treasured the thoughts of all these people

⁴¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, IV Sent., d. 13, q. 2, a. 1 ad 4um.

⁴² J.A. BERRY, "Aquinas's Understanding of Religion".

and from them arrived at his own original synthesis. Of course, we know that the time distance between Aristotle and Aquinas surpasses that between Aquinas and our generation, yet he was able in his time to achieve stupendous intellectual *tour de force* relevant for his time building on the patrimony of Aristotle. Aquinas' methodology of treasuring the intellectual imprints of past generations sounds an eloquent lesson to our time.

Remarkably, different contemporary thinkers, following in the footsteps of Aquinas, have also treasured his thought in their reflections on religion from different perspectives. In 2018, Michel Labourdette published his *La Religion*, part of his ambitious "*Grand cours de théologie morale* taught between 1960 and 1961, which offers a systematic, article-by-article exposition of Aquinas's doctrine of the virtue of religion. From the perspective of contemporary Catholic moral theology, he articulates a very complete, pedagogically structured, and historically informed Thomistic treatment of the virtue of religion. In a similar vein, John Anthony Berry's recent article, "Aquinas's Understanding of Religion", contributes to theological discussions on religion by offering a very comprehensive, text-driven reconstruction of Aquinas's concept of *religio* -- not merely as a moral virtue, but as a unified anthropological, philosophical, and theological account of religion⁴³. He perspicaciously underlines how Aquinas offers a universal, rational, and virtue-based account of religion -- rooted in justice, expressed in public worship and grounded in human nature. From the same perspective of moral theology, R. Jared Staudt also in a recent publication, *The Primacy of God: The Virtue of Religion in Catholic Theology*, argues that the virtue of religion, as articulated by Aquinas, must be restored to its central place in theology, culture, and moral life. His fundamental thesis is that the virtue of religion, understood as justice towards God, has to be restored to the centre of Catholic theology, since it orders all human action, grounds true worship, and provides a framework for addressing modern theological and cultural challenges. "Religion", Staudt sustains, "provides witness, even within theology, that God should remain the focus and that human life finds its deepest meanings by coming into right relation with him" ⁴⁴.

On his own part, from the perspective of moral philosophy, Nicolas Joseph de Pontin d'Amécourt dedicated his doctoral dissertation to offering the first sustained, developmental, and philosophically oriented analysis of why and how worship is morally good according to Aquinas. Through a developmental study of Aquinas's thought on worship, a reinterpretation of religion as a moral virtue and a fresh interpretation of the acts of worship, he egregiously shows how Aquinas grounds the goodness of worship in the moral virtue of religion, understood as a form of justice, and how this framework allows for a nuanced evaluation of both Christian and pagan worship. One of the most striking insights of the dissertation is that Aquinas's reframing of religion allows him to recognize the possibility of moral goodness in pagan worship while still distinguishing Christian worship as the fullest realization of the virtue of religion. Though a constructive contribution to the philosophy of religion, D'Amécourt was however clear that his "dissertation attempts to be a contribution to the careful reading and interpretation of Aquinas's texts on the moral goodness of worship, that is, on *latria* and *religio*, and not an expression of what has been called an

⁴³ Cf. *ivi*.

⁴⁴ Cf. J.R. Staudt, *The Primacy of God: The Virtue of Religion in Catholic Theology*, 13.

'adequate philosophy of religion'".⁴⁵ Another decisive and still-valuable contribution comes from Mailhiot's 1946 article, "The Place of Religious Sentiment in Saint Thomas"⁴⁶ which makes a meticulously documented comparison of Aquinas's treatise on religion with Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige*, clarifying how Aquinas understands "religious sentiment" -- especially in contrast to modern phenomenological and experiential theories and accounts of religion, such as that advanced by Otto in his work -- and showing that Aquinas does not ground religion in feeling, but in reason, will, and in fact, in the virtue of religion. Mailhiot's main argument is that Aquinas does not base religion on sentiment or irrational experience, but on the rational virtue of religion, while still giving emotion a subordinate and ordered role.

Even though he does not explicitly acknowledge his indebtedness to Aquinas, Adriano Alessi's essential definition of religion in his recent work, *Sui sentieri del sacro. Introduzione alla filosofia della religione*, evidently draws inspiration from Aquinas's essential definition of religion in his *Summa Theologiae*. Alessi defines religion in the following terms: "*religio est essentialiter conscia et recta ordinatio hominis ad divinitatem*"⁴⁷. Just as Aquinas defined religion as *Ordo*, Alessi uses the word *ordinatio*, both affirming the correlation between two interlocutors implied in religion. Alessi highlights that "this relationship turns out to be congenital both on a structural level and on pure potentiality (religious attitude) and on an interior level (religious experience) and on an operative level (religious conduct)"⁴⁸. It is the correlation of the human being with the divine, to show that it is only the rational creature that can enter dialogue with the divine; every other reality of inferior order is incapable of religion. Granted the fact that Aquinas does not explicitly state that the *Ordo* is of men (*hominis*) to God, as explicitly found in Alessi's definition, but that the human dimension of religion is highlighted by Aquinas is the fact that he considers this *Ordo ad Deum* a human virtue annexed to the cardinal virtue of justice: it regards all human beings and concerns their correct relationship with that which everybody (though with different names) calls God. Of course, we can only talk of virtue with respect to human beings and not with respect to stones, trees or animals. Implied also in the virtuous character of religion are the consciousness and the correctness of the *Ordo ad Deum* which are explicit in Alessi's definition. Ordinarily, an unconscious act is a non-moral act and so can neither be considered virtuous nor non-virtuous. Regarding the correctness of man's ordering to God, already in an earlier work, *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boetius*, Aquinas maintaining that "religion consists in an operation by which man honors God by submitting to Him", affirmed explicitly that "this operation ought to be in harmony with Him who is honored, and with the one offering homage"⁴⁹. In other words, man's *Ordo ad Deum* has to be respectful of the reality of God and the reality of man.

Of utmost significance in Alessi's definition is that he replaces *Deum* in Aquinas with *Divinitatem*. This is because of the problem which, for several scientists and historians of religions, is raised in the consideration of God as the object towards which man's religious acts are directed. The first difficulty, in Alessi's thinking, emerges from the

⁴⁵ D'AMÉCOURT, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, 4.

⁴⁶ Cf. M.-B. MAILHIOT, "The Place of Religious Sentiment in Saint Thomas", *Thomist* 9(1946), 31-36.

⁴⁷ A. ALESSI, *Sui sentieri del sacro*, Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, Roma 2016³, 252.

⁴⁸ Ivi (Eng. trans. is mine).

⁴⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boetius*, Q. 3, art. 2, co.

semantic and philological analysis of the term God which does not seem to offer many clues, since it appears to be a common name, even if in religions and cultures it is originally and properly used as a proper name. He observes that, from a historical point of view, the term God seems rather dry and is as well linked to a less divine divinity like *Zeus*. The noun God is in fact the alteration of the Greek name Zeus, *Diós*. It is on account of this that Van der Leeuw affirms that "When we say that God is the object of lived religious experience, we must keep in mind that God is often a very imprecise notion"⁵⁰. Alessi points out that from an etymological point of view, there are indications that the word God refers to an Indo-European root *deivos* (sky or daylight, as in the Latin *dies*) from which the nouns *deus* (Latin), *deva* (Sanskrit), *div* (Iranian), *diemas* (Lithuanian), *tivar* (ancient Germanic) derive. The word God (English) or *Gott* (German) seems related to *bud* (to worship). In his thinking, therefore, it can be seen that the concept of God is connected to light and celestial sacredness to express transcendence and the idea of sovereignty. The etymology of the Greek *theós* seems to have the same root but instead refers to the radical sense that indicates the soul or spirit of the dead, as evidenced by the Lithuanian *dwesiu* (to breathe) or the ancient Slavic *duch* (breathing) and *dusa* (soul). Another difficulty consists in the fact that there are religions, as is evident in some forms of Buddhism, where the notion of "God" does not seem to play any explicit role. In fact, for Alessi "a conception of religion that explicitly refers to the term God (understood as a transcendent and personal reality) risks excluding from the sacred sphere experiences (such as Buddhism and other forms of pantheistic religiosity) whose religious value is difficult to contest"⁵¹. It is precisely on account of these difficulties with the term "God" that the sacred gained more currency among phenomenologists of religion. But as we have seen, Alessi has reservations even with the utilization of the term "sacred" and prefers to use the term "divinity" or "divine".

5 Conclusion

The foregoing, though not exhaustive, is sufficient to expose how Aquinas relates religion to human nature and how relevant his thinking on the theme is for contemporary philosophical reflection on religion. The human being is by nature religious. Religiosity remains an essential part of the human being, even if one claims to be atheist and denies any relationship with God, the "transcendent principle of our transcendence, absolutely absolute principle of the absolute that is in us"⁵². This is what Aquinas clearly tells us by presenting religion as a moral virtue. Religion for Aquinas has a clear anthropological dimension, even though that does not imply a reduction of everything about religion to the human being as if he were the origin and end of religion. Religion, for Aquinas, essentially expresses the relation of the human being to a superior, divine being who many people call God (though different people may have different names for this superior being). Religiosity enters the defining character of every human being in as much as he is human. Aquinas's ideas are as illuminating as they are perennially relevant, and different contemporary thinkers have, from varying

⁵⁰ G. VAN DER LEEUW, *Phenomenology of religion*, Bollati-Boringhieri, Turin 1975², 7.

⁵¹ A. ALESSI, *Sui sentieri del sacro*, 127-130.

⁵² J. DE FINANCE, *Due radici dell'ateismo odierno*, in AA.VV., *Psicologia dell'ateismo*, Università Gregoriana, Roma 1967, 94-94 (Eng. trans. is mine).

perspectives, beneficially borrowed from, expanded, and perpetuated Aquinas's legacy. It is such engagement, deepening and integrations that favour the growth and consolidation of human intellectual patrimony and this remains relevant for contemporary Philosophy of Religion.