

Thomas Aquinas for Evangelicals (Part 1)

Introduction



I first became acquainted with the writings of Thomas Aquinas when I was an undergraduate philosophy major. I became interested in Aquinas because I was interested in apologetics, and I thought that Aquinas would be helpful for doing things like providing arguments for the existence of God. I later shifted my academic focus from philosophy to theology, and have found Aquinas to be a lifelong companion on my theological journey. I am not a Roman Catholic but an Anglican, and I have often encountered a kind of discomfort when other Christians who stand on this side of the Reformation hear about my interest in Aquinas. Aquinas is considered to be the quintessential Roman Catholic theologian, and, accordingly, is regarded with suspicion by many non-Roman Catholic Christians – especially Evangelicals. My *ad hoc* response would be much like that of Christian Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas who, when he was first teaching at the University of Notre Dame, had to respond to concerns that a Methodist theologian was teaching about Thomas Aquinas. Hauerwas countered that Aquinas lived three hundred years before the Protestant Reformation, before there were any distinctions between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Aquinas was not therefore a Roman Catholic theologian, but a church theologian, and so a Methodist had just as much right to claim him as would a Roman Catholic. Recently D. Stephen Long,

another Methodist theologian, has argued persuasively that Protestants should recognize that Aquinas actually played a significant role in the history of Reformation theology, and needs to be reclaimed by Protestants. If Aquinas can be claimed by two Methodist theologians, I would argue that he certainly can be claimed by Anglicans. In what follows, I hope to provide an introduction to Aquinas's thought in a way that might be helpful for Reformation Christians, especially Evangelicals.

Who was Thomas Aquinas?

Thomas Aquinas was born sometime around 1224 or 1225 as the youngest son of lesser nobility, related to the Counts of Aquino, in the family castle of Roccasecca (in southern Italy, halfway between Rome and Naples). His family had hopes that young Thomas would enter the Benedictine order and would perhaps eventually become an abbot, but he had other ideas. There was a new kind of religious order at the time, the friars, who differed from traditional monks in that they were not cloistered – that is, they did not live in monasteries – but lived among the laity and engaged in mission in the everyday world. Friars came in two varieties, the Friars Minor (O.F.M.) or Franciscans (founded by St. Francis of Assisi) and the Order of Preachers (O.P.) or Dominicans (founded by St. Dominic). As their name suggests, the Order of Preachers focused on preaching, but also on study and teaching, so they had a more academic focus than did the Franciscans. Against his family's wishes, the young Aquinas joined the Dominicans in 1244. His family responded by having Thomas kidnapped and held him captive for a year or so. He eventually escaped, and in 1245 the Dominicans sent him to the newly founded University of Paris, a budding intellectual center, where he studied under Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great). In Paris, Thomas studied Aristotle's ethics – Aristotle's major works were now being translated into Latin for the first time – and the writings of the Eastern Christian mystical theologian

Pseudo-Dionysius.

In 1256, Aquinas received his Master in Theology (*magister in sacra pagina*); his responsibilities would have included (1) *legere* ("reading"), that is, to comment on Scripture; (2) *disputare* (disputation), to teach by responding to objections, the teaching method of scholastic theology; (3) *praedicare* (preaching). (Around 100 of Aquinas's sermons have been preserved.) From 1259 to 1274, Aquinas taught in various places, mostly in Paris and Italy. During this time, he wrote his major theological works, and, towards the end of this period, his two major works: the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*.

On the Feast of St. Nicholas (Dec. 6), 1273, Aquinas was celebrating mass and had some kind of unusual experience. Afterwards, he told his *socius* ("secretary") Reginald, "Everything I have written seems like so much straw in comparison to what I have seen." Speculations run the gamut from the theory that Aquinas had some kind of mystical experience to his suffering a stroke. Whatever its nature, after this experience, Thomas ceased to write, and the *Summa Theologiae*, his greatest work, remains unfinished. He got as far as discussing the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, but never finished writing on the other five Catholic sacraments, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, ecclesiology, or eschatology. (Nonetheless, enough exists from his other writings that scholars can at least speculate about what his views would have been. After Aquinas's death, dedicated followers put together a *Supplement* to the *Summa Theologiae*, creating a conclusion based on one of his earliest works, his Commentary on Peter Abelard's *Sentences*.)

In early 1274, Pope Gregory X summoned Aquinas to appear at the Council of Lyons, an attempt to reunite the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic churches. While traveling to the council, Aquinas struck his head on the branch of a fallen tree. He became ill, and was taken to a Cistercian monastery,

where he died shortly after on March 7. Although dying at the age of only 49, Aquinas's written works exceeded those of any other theologian until those of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, in the twentieth century. As with Aquinas, Barth's master work, the *Church Dogmatics*, was never finished, ending almost exactly where Aquinas had, with the discussion of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the church. (Barth got as far as the doctrine of baptism.)

Objections to Aquinas

Before making a positive case for Aquinas as a theologian, it would probably be helpful to address some of the numerous objections that have been and continue to be raised against Aquinas's theology. The following objections are raised often enough to list them as "standard," especially among Evangelicals. They are so prevalent that unless they are at least addressed, any positive discussion may not get off the ground.

First, it is claimed, Thomas Aquinas was not really a theologian at all, but primarily an Aristotelian philosopher, who imposed pagan philosophy on his theology. Another way of putting this would be to say that Aquinas was primarily a "natural theologian" who was interested in doing things like "proving the existence of God." (This is an objection often found among the "Reformed," especially among those influenced either by John Calvin or Karl Barth.)

Second, an alternative, but related, critique is to complain that Aquinas was a "classical theist" who believed in such things as divine "immutability," whose "static God" is distant from, does not interact with or respond to, and thus cannot love, the creation. Aquinas's embrace of "classical theism" shows again that he was more influenced by Hellenistic philosophy than the Bible. While the above objection would be found among Calvinists, this objection has been more characteristic of their opposite opponents, the "open

theists." Variations of the critique can also be found in the writings of theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann or Robert Jenson.

Third, Aquinas is said to have made a false split between the one God and the Triune God leading to a neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity. Aquinas's "Treatise on the One God" is a case of "natural theology" rather than a biblical doctrine of God. (Insofar as Aquinas writes about the Trinity at all, the doctrine amounts to a kind of afterthought. He had to say something about the Trinity, but it plays no significant role in his theology.) This criticism, raised also against Augustine of Hippo, reflects the revival of Trinitarian theology in the late twentieth century, and the rediscovery of not only Eastern patristic theologians like the Cappadocians, but also Karl Barth's placing of the starting point of theology in the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Church Dogmatics*. Not only Protestants (Moltmann) and Eastern Orthodox theologians have raised this criticism, but also Roman Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner.

Fourth, Aquinas's doctrine of "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*) placed God in the same category as creatures, reducing God to creaturely status. The "analogy of being" is the fundamental heresy, and the single reason why one cannot become a Roman Catholic (Karl Barth). Conversely, Aquinas's doctrine of "analogy" ends up in equivocity, meaning that ultimately we can know or say nothing about God. Unless some kind of "univocity" lies at the basis of our language of God, we will ultimately be reduced to skepticism.

Note that this objection against "analogy" actually accuses Aquinas of mutually incompatible errors, either reducing God to the level of creatures by embracing univocity, or, rather, of making God unknowable by refusing to embrace univocity. If the former was the accusation of Karl Barth, the latter has been more the complaint of contemporary analytical philosophers of religion.

Fifth, Aquinas was a “virtue ethicist,” showing once again that he owed more to Aristotle than the Bible. This objection would find its most ardent adherents among radical “Lutherans” who would suspect “virtue ethics” of being an example of “works righteousness.”

Sixth, Aquinas had an inadequate doctrine of the fall, believing that the fall did not affect the intellect. Moreover, Aquinas’s doctrine of grace was semi-Pelagian at best. He believed that we are justified by human merit (good works). This objection would be a standard Protestant objection raised by advocates of justification by faith alone.

Last, Aquinas was not interested in Scripture and shows little acquaintance with the Bible. Reflecting this lack of interest in the Bible, Aquinas does not have a whole lot to say about Christology. Finally, Aquinas’s eucharistic doctrine can be summarized in one word: “transubstantiation.” This last objection would be a typically Protestant objection of advocates of *sola scriptura*: Aquinas’s theology is not a theology based on Scripture, but is simply an uncritical repetition of Medieval Roman Catholic dogma.

How to Respond?

The first set of objections – that Aquinas was primarily an Aristotelian philosopher rather than a theologian – is partially justified insofar as it has been Catholic philosophers who were initially responsible for this misreading. Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), “On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy,” recommended Aquinas to Roman Catholics primarily for his philosophy. For much of the 20th century, a “Thomist” meant a certain kind of “Catholic philosopher” who did such things as defend Aquinas’s arguments for the existence of God (the *quinque viae* or “five ways”), the “analogy of being,” and Thomist realist epistemology over against modern secularism and skepticism. A classic example of this approach would be the twentieth-

century Roman Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. While Thomists like this still exist, the beginning of the collapse of "Thomist philosophy" likely began with the debate between "traditional" Thomists and historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson, who argued for something called "Christian philosophy." Contrary to Thomist advocates of a clear distinction between philosophy (natural theology) and (revealed) theology, Gilson argued that Aquinas was a Christian philosopher, that his philosophy was influenced by and only possible because of premises dependent on revelation. Toward the end of his life, Gilson recognized that even this claim did not go far enough. Gilson admitted that in his attempt to distinguish between Thomas's "Christian philosophy" and revealed theology, he had misread Aquinas. Aquinas was not a "Christian philosopher," but a theologian from beginning to end.

Where previous generations of "Thomist" scholars had focused on only a handful of "philosophical" texts in Aquinas's writings, in the last couple of generations, Aquinas has begun to be read for the theologian that he was. While working on my doctorate, I studied under David Burrell, who had chairs in both philosophy and theology at the University of Notre Dame, and taught what he called "philosophical theology." Burrell argued that the doctrine of creation from nothing (known by revelation not by philosophical speculation) was crucial for understanding Thomas Aquinas's thought. In the last couple of decades, scholars have begun studying not only Thomas's doctrine of creation, but his doctrine of the Trinity, his Christology and soteriology, and his doctrine of grace.

The additional claims that Aquinas was a "classical theist" or that he separated the doctrine of the One God from the Triune God are largely based on misreadings – at least insofar as the critics presume that the primary influence on Aquinas's thought here is Hellenistic (pagan) philosophy. Rather, as numerous scholars have shown in recent years, Thomas's primary

concern in his doctrine of creation is to preserve the unique distinction between Creator and creature implied in the Christian doctrine of creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). Again, far from peripheral, the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation are central to and pervade the *Summa Theologiae* from beginning to end.

The criticisms of Barth and analytic philosophers concerning “analogy of being” rather cancel each other out insofar as they accuse Aquinas of opposite errors. Barth’s criticism is certainly the most serious; however, in what is arguably still one of the best studies of Barth’s theology, Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar demonstrated that Barth had simply misread Aquinas on analogy. (“Being,” for Aquinas is not an overarching category in which Creator and creatures equally share.) As for the analytical philosophers, they might well read Barth’s own defense of an “analogy of faith”; if language for both God and creatures is univocal, then God does indeed seem to have been reduced to the level of the creature.

Was Aquinas a “virtue ethicist”? Yes, but one might well argue that this is a “feature,” not a “bug.” With the rediscovery of virtue ethics beginning with Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, there has been a renewed appreciation for “virtue ethics,” not only among Roman Catholics, but also for Protestant ethicists such as Stanley Hauerwas. When one reads a Reformed philosopher like James K. A. Smith writing about “spiritual formation,” and Evangelical ethicist Oliver O’Donovan placing what would be the traditional theological virtues of faith, hope and charity at the center of his recent *magnum opus* on Christian ethics, one wonders what the fuss is about. Of course, it must also be insisted that Aquinas’s “virtue ethics” is not simply a regurgitation of Aristotle. For Aquinas, the theological virtues – which are entirely gifts of grace – are at the heart of Christian ethics. Aquinas claimed that humility was a virtue; Aristotle thought that it was a vice.

Finally, the last set of objections are not so much objections to Aquinas's theology as they are an affirmation of Reformation understandings of the doctrine of justification and grace against those formulated at the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, and Protestant objections to Catholic understandings of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. There is a certain amount of anachronism here. Aquinas wrote three hundred years before both Luther and Trent. He cannot rightly be accused of either holding or rejecting positions that he never explicitly encountered or addressed. However, a more careful reading of what Aquinas actually wrote about such issues as justification and grace or the relationship between Scripture and tradition might be surprising. Certainly Aquinas was no Protestant, but neither was he a Tridentine Catholic.

One of the reasons for the neglect of a careful reading of Thomas Aquinas's own theology was the Neoscholastic "manualist" tradition of Roman Catholic theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Catholic theology was taught using "manuals" that consisted of series of set questions and answers to theological topics. The assumption behind the manuals was that Catholic theology was certain and unchanging, and there was thus no real need for careful historical investigation. The Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, and even the writings of important Catholic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, were not actually read for themselves, but rather presented through the "manuals." The "Thomism" of this manualist tradition was more influenced by late Medieval and Reformation era writers such as Thomas Cajetan, Francisco Suarez, Domingo Báñez, and John of St. Thomas than it was by Aquinas himself. In the mid-twentieth century, manualist methodology was challenged by Roman Catholic thinkers such as Marie-Dominic Chenu, Jean Daniélou, Yves Congar, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, who insisted that a fundamental task of theology consisted of a careful reading of the historical sources, especially the Bible and the Church

Fathers – a methodology they called “*Ressourcement*.” Perhaps most significant for the theological study of Aquinas in this movement was the work of the Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac and what was known as the *Nouvelle Théologie* movement. De Lubac initiated a radical change in the reading of Aquinas’s doctrine of grace which was at least as critical of late Medieval theologies of grace as the Reformers had been.

Finally, equating Aquinas’s understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition with what later Roman Catholics embraced over against the Protestant Reformers is not only an anachronism, but also a simple misreading.

Thomas Aquinas as Theologian

As noted above, Thomas Aquinas was primarily a theologian, not a philosopher, and a clear shift has taken place in interpretation of his writing over the last half century. As noted, this happened in several stages. First was the move from an apologetic reading of Aquinas as an advocate of “natural theology” to a proponent of “Christian philosophy,” one whose philosophy was influenced by principles derived from biblical revelation. Next advocates of the “Christian philosophy” reading came to recognize that the doctrine of creation played a significant role in Aquinas’s thinking. Around the same period of time, Henri de Lubac and others associated with the *Nouvelle Théologie* began examining Aquinas’s doctrine of grace and contrasting it with the “extrinsicism” characteristic of the late Medieval Scholasticism that dominated the period of the Council of Trent. In response to criticisms flowing out of the recent Trinitarian revival, theologians have been more carefully reading Aquinas’s trinitarian theology. Similarly, the revival of virtue ethics has led theologians to discover how central the theology of grace and Christian spirituality are to Aquinas’s Christian ethics. Again, in recent years theologians have begun to study other areas of Aquinas’s theology, e.g., his Christology and his doctrine of grace. Finally,

translations of Aquinas's numerous commentaries on Scripture have begun to appear for the first time in recent years, and this has led to a new appreciation for the central role that Scripture plays in his theology.

A new consensus has arisen that Thomas Aquinas was primarily a theologian, not a philosopher. Aquinas's primary teaching duties consisted of lecturing on Scripture. He wrote commentaries on books of the Bible. He preached sermons. While Aquinas did use Aristotle (and Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustinian Platonism) to articulate theology, he transformed or even "baptized" them in the process. For example, the doctrine of creation from nothing is central to Thomas's theology; yet Aristotle believed that the universe was eternal, and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover was unaware that the universe existed. Friendship is important for Aristotle's understanding of ethics, but Aquinas went beyond Aristotle to say that the most important kind of friendship is friendship with the triune God. For Aristotle, not only could we not be friends with the Unmoved Mover, the Mover was not even aware that we exist. When Aquinas discussed Aristotle's notion of "happiness," he suggested that Aristotle was talking about the "happiness of this life," but Aristotle did not believe in any other kind of happiness since he did not believe in an afterlife. To the contrary, for Aquinas, to be created in the image of God means to be created for the eternal happiness that we will only have when we see God face to face in the beatific vision. Finally, at the heart of Thomas's theology is the incarnation of God in Christ for the redemption of sinful human beings – something Aristotle never imagined!

I hope in the following essays to shed some light on what Aquinas actually wrote on these matters and why he might be helpful for Evangelicals.