

The Universal Mediation of Christ and Non-Christian Religions¹

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THE MODERN MAGISTERIUM of the Catholic Church, particularly at the Second Vatican Council, articulated in tandem two fundamentally interdependent principles, both of Biblical origin. First, Christ is the unique universal mediator of salvation for the entire human race (and with this: all salvation occurs through membership in the Catholic Church, or by being ordered toward it.)² Second, because Christ died for all human beings and does offer the possibility of salvation to all members of the human race, the practices and beliefs of non-Christian religions may contain elements of truth that the Holy Spirit may make use of for the purposes of the saving work of God in history.³ Note the twofold conditional character of this second statement. There may be elements of truth, and God may employ them. In documents such as *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dominus Jesus* the reflection on *Nostra Aetate* has been refined.⁴ The sacred writings of other religious traditions are not to be considered inspired in the profound theological sense of the

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the plenary session of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome, June 19–21, 2015.

² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964; hereafter, *LG*), §14–16. (All documents of the Magisterium can be found in English on the website of the Holy See: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>)

³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965; hereafter, *GS*), §22 and 45; Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (1965; hereafter, *NA*), §2.

⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990; hereafter, *RM*), §§28–30, 55–57; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter, *CDF*), *Dominus Jesus* (2000; hereafter, *DJ*), §4.

term.⁵ Their rites are not sacramental (instrumental *ex opere operato* causes of grace).⁶ Nor are their beliefs to be confused with the grace of supernatural faith.⁷ Such beliefs and practices may contain important elements of error or superstition, and may harm or delude the human person.⁸ At the same time, some human religious traditions do contain profound elements of the truth and reflect, in many cases, the depths of the human search for God.⁹ The Holy Spirit may work through elements of these traditions—including in their collective and historical nature—so as to communicate hidden forms of invitation to, or even habitual participation in, the grace of Christ.¹⁰ Here we find something akin to highly qualified version of sacramental occasionalism: God may, when he wishes, according to his wisdom and providence, make use of elements of the non-Christian religious traditions either to initiate, or even progressively to effectuate, the salvation of human beings who are not baptized and are not visible members of the Catholic Church.¹¹

The teaching of Thomas Aquinas regarding the headship or capital grace of Christ offers resources for thinking about this contemporary theological problem. I would like here briefly to reflect on three elements: (I) the capital grace of Christ as it pertains to our human salvation, (II) the various ways, according to Aquinas, that all human beings are potentially receptive to the work of grace by virtue of their intrinsically religious nature, and (III) the qualifications that are in order when considering the effective work of grace present outside the visible economy of the Catholic Church and her sacramental life.

⁵ RM, §36; DJ, §8.

⁶ DJ, §21.

⁷ Ibid., *Dominus Jesus*, §7.

⁸ RM, §55; DJ, §§8 and 21: “it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. 1 Cor 10:20–21), constitute an obstacle to salvation.”

⁹ RM, §28–29; DJ, §§2 and 14.

¹⁰ RM, §28; DJ, §12.

¹¹ See Benoit-Dominique de la Soujeole, “Etre ordonné à l’unique Eglise du Christ: l’ecclésiologie des communautés non chrétiennes à partir des données oecuméniques,” *Revue Thomiste* (2002): 5–41, in which he argues (at 33–37) that authentic truths and ethical practices embodied in the cultural forms of other religions may indeed be used in an “occasionalist” fashion by God’s providence. God may employ them *when He wills* as stable natural dispositions to the operation of and cooperation with grace. Consequently, they may be sign-expressions of persons who are motivated by grace, without in any way being *ex opere operato instruments* of the supernatural order. The latter order is “mediated” instrumentally uniquely through Christ’s sacred humanity, the sacraments, and through the mystery of the Church.

The Capital Grace of Christ

Aquinas famously considers the grace of Christ according to a tripartite distinction.¹² First, it is a “grace” for the individual human nature of Jesus that it should be the human nature of the Word Incarnate. This grace of the hypostatic union (or *grace of union*) is proper to Christ alone because he alone is God made man, the eternal Word subsisting in a human nature. Second, the *habitual grace* in Christ is that created grace that is present in his human soul, particularly manifest in his spiritual faculties of intellect and will, resulting in the plenary illumination of his human mind with supernatural wisdom and the influx of a plenitude of charity in his human heart.¹³ By extension, Christ possesses as man the plenitude of the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Third, there is the *capital grace* of Christ, that of his headship, by which he communicates his grace to the entire Church, to all those who partake of his grace visibly or invisibly. Aquinas underscores that this grace is not ontologically or essentially distinct from the habitual grace of Christ, but is distinguished only logically or notionally.¹⁵ This point is significant. The capital grace of Christ is his sanctifying grace *just insofar as it is shared with other members of the human race*. All who are given any participation in the life of God whatsoever participate in some way in the habitual grace of the Lord, who possesses this grace as the source or principle from which all human beings derive their salvation.

Here we should make four subjacent points that are of essential importance. First, according to Aquinas, Jesus possesses a unique plenitude of habitual grace and is the head of the Church fundamentally due to the ontological reality of the hypostatic union.¹⁶ As Jean-Pierre Torrell has observed, St. Thomas purposefully opposed himself to a common opinion held at his time (by Alexander of Hales among

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioan.* 2, lec. 6: “There is in Christ a three-fold grace: the grace of union (*gratia unionis*), the grace that is proper to him as distinct person, which is a habitual grace (*gratia habitualis*), and last of all, his grace as Head [of the Church] (*gratia capitis*), which is that of his graces of influence [upon others]. Each of these graces, Christ receives without measure.” This is my own translation from no. 544 in *S. Thomae Aquinatis Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, ed. R. Cai, 5th ed. (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1952).

¹³ *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) III, q. 7, a. 1. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the *ST* are from *Summa Theologica*, trans. English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947).

¹⁴ *ST* III, q. 7, aa. 11–12.

¹⁵ *ST* III, q. 8, aa. 1 and 5.

¹⁶ *ST* III, q. 7, aa. 1 and 13.

others) according to which the habitual grace of Christ given to his individual human nature should serve as an ontological disposition to the hypostatic union.¹⁷ It would be as if his humanity needed first to be proportioned by a grace of the kind other human beings receive so as to be capable of being united to the Word. Aquinas perceives there to be a relation between this idea and the *homo assumptus* Christologies that he labels quite strikingly as “Nestorian” in kind. These are theories of the hypostatic union derivative from the first theory of hypostatic union found in the Lombard. According to this theory, the human being Jesus is a man united to the Word by virtue of a habitual relation.¹⁸ In fact, Alexander goes so far as to speak of two hypostases or concrete substances, the man assumed and the Word assuming. They are united in one person (*persona*), but this union occurs by the disposition of the habitual grace that exists in the human nature of Christ.¹⁹ The “person” in question is one who is constituted by a habitual relation between the Word acting upon the *suppositum* of the humanity and the humanity being illumined and inspired by the grace of the Word. Aquinas is concerned rightly that this form of union (based on a relation, and therefore accidental rather than substantial) cannot be understood as specifically distinct in kind from that which we might find in the saints, created human persons who receive habitual grace like Christ himself, but to a lesser degree. His reflection is of a striking pertinence since one finds positions analogous to the one he criticizes in contemporary theorists of religious pluralism. Often such thinkers perceive in Jesus of Nazareth a figure of moral perfection, like other religious founders, differentiated from them more according to a degree of enlightenment (or “grace” equivocally speaking), than due to a distinc-

¹⁷ Alexander of Hales, *Glossa Alex* 3.7.27 (L), in *Magistri Alexandri de Hales Glossa in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, ed. PP. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 4 vols. (Florence: Quaracchi, 1960). See Walter H. Principe, *Alexander of Hales' Theology of the Hypostatic Union* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), 163–165 and 171–173. Philip the Chancellor holds this view even more overtly in *De Incarn.* 2.19; See Walter H. Principe, *Philip the Chancellor's Theology of the Hypostatic Union* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1975), 116–117.

¹⁸ *ST* III, q. 2, a. 6. The teaching of Aquinas on this matter has also recently been reexamined quite helpfully by Jean-Pierre Torrell in *Le Verbe Incarné* I (Paris: Cerf, 2002), Appendix II, 297–339.

¹⁹ Principe, *Alexander of Hales' Theology of the Hypostatic Union*, 123. Principe shows how Alexander can consider the human nature of Christ to be a distinct hypostasis while not having a unique personhood, since the latter is a characteristic that the assumed humanity acquires from the divine hypostasis.

tion of personal identity insofar as Jesus alone is the God-man.²⁰

Aquinas posits, by contrast, then, that the human nature we possess does not require any grace to proportion it to personal union with the Word, but is naturally open to the possibility of the Incarnation by virtue of our spiritual nature.²¹ In principle, God could become incarnate in any individual human nature. The humanity of Christ therefore needs no dispositive habitual grace in order to make the hypostatic union possible. Indeed, no such grace would suffice for this purpose! No habitual grace, however intensive, could adequately dispose the created human nature in such a way that it could effectively receive the infinite, uncreated gift of the hypostatic union. Instead, the order must be inverted in order to be properly understood. *Because* Christ is the Word made flesh—God who subsists in a human nature composed of body and soul—*therefore*, he possesses the plenitude of habitual grace as a proportionate *effect*.²² God incarnate fittingly possesses the perfection of grace in himself *as man*, due precisely to the fact that his humanity is the humanity of God. In turn, it is this grace that he can share with us as the head of the Church. Here we rejoin the soteriological principle of Athanasius that Aquinas was quite familiar with. Christ alone, among all men, is the mediator of salvation because Christ alone is truly God. Since God has united himself to our human nature in Christ, we are assured the possibility of being united to God by grace.²³

A second point concerns the relation of the habitual grace of Christ to atonement, which is accomplished especially by virtue of Christ's obedient suffering even unto death by way of crucifixion. When Aquinas considers the principles of the atonement (*satisfactio*) in article 2 of question 48 of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa*, it is interesting to note that he interprets Anselm's teaching in the *Cur Deus homo* in light of the mystery of Christ's capital grace. Aquinas gives three reasons that Christ's passion is meritorious of our salvation: first, due to the plenitude of charity by which he obeys the Father in our stead; second, due

²⁰ For prominent examples, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821–1822); *The Christian Faith*, 2 vols., eds. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 2:385–424 (§94–99); and Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 270–71, where the influence of Schleiermacher is apparent.

²¹ *Summa contra gentiles* (hereafter, *SCG*) IV, ch. 41, no. 13; from *Summa contra gentiles IV*, trans. C. O'Neil (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956).

²² *ST* III, q. 2, a. 10; q. 6, a. 6; q. 7, a. 13.

²³ *SCG* IV, ch. 54, no. 2; trans. O'Neil.

to the infinite dignity of the person who suffers; and third, due to the intensity of his suffering. Some commentators emphasize the second of these reasons as the essential reason for our salvation. Christ's merits of love and obedience are infinite in kind due to the fact that he is God.²⁴ Other commentators emphasize the first reason—Christ's habitual grace of charity is the formal principle of our salvation.²⁵

A balanced interpretation should insist on both principles, but in a given order.²⁶ The Son of God crucified acts "formally," or essentially, as mediator of our salvation as man by virtue of his human obedience and love, which he "substitutes" for our actions of gracelessness and disobedience. Just because this is the case, we must say that the habitual grace of Christ (and particularly his actions of charity or love) is the formal principle by which he as man atones universally for all sins of the human race. However, this human action is rooted in the *person* who acts and whose dignity is infinite, since the person is God the Word. This principle is not formal, but foundational, or hypostatic. Fundamentally, the subject who acts humanly to save us is God, and so his actions and sufferings are of a mysterious, infinite worth or dignity.²⁷

Aquinas sometimes casts this mystery in terms of the *virtus divinitatis* of Christ. Because Christ is the Lord, his human self-offering is unique as an offering of reparation for human sin. Christ has the *power as the Lord incarnate* to communicate the fruits of his passion to all human beings.²⁸ Here we see what Aquinas calls the *effective* dimension

²⁴ See, for example, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Jesus the Savior*, trans. B. Rose (London: Herder, 1957), 577–588; Jean-Hervé Nicholas, *Synthèse Dogmatique; de la Trinité à la Trinité* (Fribourg and Paris : Éditions universitaires Fribourg and Éditions Beauchesne, 1991), 363–366, 511–12, and 547–548. However, both Garrigou-Lagrange and Nicholas maintain the traditional Thomist view that habitual sanctifying grace in the human soul of Christ stems necessarily from the mystery of the hypostatic union.

²⁵ See, for example, Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Verbe Incarné* II (Paris: Cerf, 2002), Appendix II, 396–409.

²⁶ See in this respect the balanced analysis of Domingo Bañez, *Tertia partis divi Thomae Aquinatis commentaria*, q. 1, a. 2, nos. 16–27, in *Comentarios ineditos a la tercera parte de Santo Tomas*, vol. I, *De Verbo Incarnato* (qq. 1–42), ed. V. Beltran de Heredia (Salamanca: Biblioteca de Teólogos Españoles, 1951).

²⁷ ST I, q. 48, a. 2, obj. 3, ad 3: "Christ did not suffer in His Godhead, but in His flesh....[However,] the dignity of Christ's flesh is not to be estimated solely from the nature of flesh, but also from the Person assuming it—namely, inasmuch as it was God's flesh, the result of which was that it was of infinite worth."

²⁸ ST III, q. 49, a. 1, ad 2: "Passio Christi, licet sit corporalis, sortitur tamen quondam spiritualem virtutem ex divinitate, cuius caro ei unita est instrumentum."

of Christ's saving mediation.²⁹ Christ as man is able to communicate effectively to all the members of the mystical body, the Church, the grace by which they might be conformed progressively from within to his Paschal mystery. He does this principally as God, of course, insofar as he is the author of grace, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, he also does so instrumentally as man, since the sacred humanity of the Word is the conjoined instrument of his divinity. The Lord wishes, in his human reason and will, to give grace to the world in accord with his sacred will as God, which he shares in with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

We may note two conclusions of contemporary significance that each derive from this last point. First, any work of grace that occurs within salvation history and that derives from the Holy Trinity is also a work of the man Jesus. When the Holy Spirit gives grace previous to the time of the Incarnation, this grace is given in view of the merits of Christ crucified.³⁰ When the Holy Spirit gives grace subsequent to the age of the Incarnation, this is always mediated instrumentally (according to Aquinas) through the human mind and heart of the incarnate Lord.³¹ Second, the theory of the *virtus divinitatis* offers at least one profoundly reasonable way to respond to the famous objection of Gotthold Lessing: how can the contingent singular life of one figure in history (to whom we have no empirical access) be the basis for a universal science of explanatory knowledge and moral behavior that affects the whole human race?³² Well, this is possible because that

Secundum quam quidem virtutem passio Christi est causa remissionis peccatorum." This Latin text is from *Summa Theologiae* (Torino: Edizioni San Paolo, 1988). See also *ST* III, q. 48, a. 6, ad 2; and q. 56, a. 1, ad 3.

²⁹ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 6.

³⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 7; *ST* III, q. 26, a. 1, ad 2; q. 61, a. 3.

³¹ *ST* III, q. 22, a. 5; q. 26, aa. 1–2.

³² Gotthold Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. H. Chadwick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53–54: "If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is: *accidental* [i.e., contingent] *truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason*. . . . It is said: 'The Christ of whom on historical grounds you must allow that he raised the dead, that he himself rose from the dead, said himself that God has a Son of the same essence as himself and that he is this Son.' This would be excellent! If only it were not the case that it is not more than historically certain that Christ said this. If you press me still further and say: 'Oh yes! this is more than historically certain. For it is asserted by inspired historians who cannot make a mistake.' But, unfortunately, that also is only historically certain, that these historians were inspired and could not err. That, then, is

person alone is God who is the transcendent universal cause of all reality and who, *by virtue of the divine power that resides within him*, is able not only to merit salvation for the whole human race, *but also to communicate this grace of salvation to all effectively, not only by virtue of his divinity, but also by virtue of his conjoined humanity*.³³

The Religious Dispositions of the Human Person

How does the capital grace of Christ come to non-Christian persons? In the second part of this essay let me simply note some principles offered by Aquinas.

A. Implicit Faith. Aquinas is well aware of the problem of salvation for non-baptized persons. His theology of the non-baptized Jews of the Old Testament serves as a primary evidence of his belief that non-Christians can be saved and that their salvation orders them in various ways toward the mystery of Christ.³⁴ Here the concept of *implicit faith* plays a central role. Those in the ancient covenant of Israel prior to the time of Christ who believed explicitly in the God of Israel by supernatural faith were oriented implicitly toward the mystery of the Lord incarnate as the culminating work of the God of Israel in history.³⁵ Aquinas extends this same line of thinking to those “holy pagans” mentioned in Heb. 11, who are given as exemplars of faith from former times: Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Rahab.³⁶ Interestingly, Heb. 11:6 states that “without faith it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (RSV). Salvation comes by way of supernatural faith alone, but that supernatural faith, Aquinas notes, may be present in those who believe that God exists and who expect good to come from his universal providence.³⁷ There is clearly an overlap here with Aquinas’ treatment of the *praeambula fidei*: there are basic truths of faith that may also be grasped in another way by natural reason.³⁸ The knowledge that there exists some kind of unitary transcendent cause of reality and that

the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.”

³³ See the argument to this effect in *ST* III, q. 48, a. 6, and q. 56, a. 1, ad 3.

³⁴ *ST* I-II, q. 100, a. 12; q. 102, a. 2.

³⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 2, aa. 7–8.

³⁶ *Super Heb.* 11, lec. 2; from *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. by C. Baer (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2006), esp. nos. 575–579.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, esp. no. 576.

³⁸ *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 1; from *Commentary on Boethius’ De Trinitate*, trans. A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987).

there exists some kind of universal providence is not something wholly inaccessible to human beings.³⁹ Aquinas thinks that natural knowledge of God is available to all ordinary people in an imperfect way.⁴⁰ Indeed, he even thinks this knowledge is available to children who attain the age of reason and that grace is offered to children who are aware of God even outside of the realm of sacramental baptism, grace that they can resist or refuse, as well as accept.⁴¹ Inchoate stirrings of supernatural faith, then, *can* be at work in and through the imperfect religious perceptions of human beings. We find implicit faith in at least some non-Christians.

Aquinas gives several examples of this idea in his writings. One pertains to his treatment of the Magi discussed in Matthew 2:1–12. In his commentary on the *Gospel of Matthew*, Aquinas claims that these pagan sages did in fact possess the “zeal of faith” and that, when they found Christ, they adored him with proper worship, thus prefiguring the Gentile nations that eventually would be adopted by God into the new covenant of grace.⁴²

A second example pertains to the Sybil, the supposed Roman prophecies of the birth of Christ, which were commonly taken to be authentic in the high middle-ages. What is striking about Aquinas’ treatment of the question is that, although he does seem to prefer the theory of a prophetic inspiration to account for the Sybil, he clearly does not distinguish it very radically from pre-Christian religious traditions in which there was no authentic revelation. In fact, Aquinas suggests that, insofar as Gentile peoples predicted that God would intervene in some way for their future benefit through an appointed mediator, there might exist within this vague and perhaps opaque human religious hope a deeper instinct of grace at work in ways hidden from the ordinary sight of men.

³⁹ SCG III, ch. 94; from *Summa contra gentiles* III, vols. 1 and 2, trans. V. J. Burke (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956).

⁴⁰ SCG III, ch. 38; trans. Burke.

⁴¹ ST I-II, q. 89, a. 6: the terminology employed strongly suggests that Aquinas is referring to people who are born in original sin and not baptized, who have the possibility of receiving the grace of justification once they reach the age of reason.

⁴² See *In Matt.*, II, lec. 2 and 3. These are nos. 176–204 in *S. Thomae Aquinatis Super Evangelium S. Matthaei Lectura*, ed. R. Cai, 5th rev. ed. (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1951). Paragraph numbers in all references to Thomas’s *Lecturae* on Matthew are from this edition.

Many of the gentiles received revelations of Christ, as is clear from their predictions. Thus we read (Job 19:25): "I know that my Redeemer lives." The Sibyl too foretold certain things about Christ, as Augustine states (*Contra Faust.* 3.15). Moreover, we read in the history of the Romans that at the time of Constantine Augustus and his mother, Irene, a tomb was discovered wherein lay a man on whose breast was a golden plate with the inscription: "Christ shall be born of a virgin, and in Him, I believe. O sun, during the lifetime of Irene and Constantine, thou shall see me again." If, however, some were saved without receiving any revelation, they were not saved without faith in a Mediator, for, though they did not believe in Him explicitly, they did, nevertheless, have implicit faith through believing in Divine providence, since they believed that God would deliver mankind in whatever way was pleasing to him, and according to the revelation of the Spirit to those who knew the truth, as stated in Job 35:11: "Who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth."⁴³

A third example pertains to Cornelius the Roman centurion, found in Acts 10:1–2, who clearly professed faith in Christ prior to his baptism by the apostles. In article 4 of question 69 of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa*, Aquinas considers the question of whether baptism is necessary for salvation and gives, as an objection, the observation that grace and infused virtues were communicated by God to Cornelius prior to his baptism. His response is that "man receives the forgiveness of sins before Baptism insofar as he has Baptism of desire, explicitly or implicitly; and yet when he actually receives Baptism, he receives a fuller remission, as to the remission of the entire punishment. So also, before Baptism, Cornelius and others like him receive grace and virtues through their faith in Christ and their desire for Baptism, implicit or explicit: but afterwards when baptized, they receive a yet greater fullness of grace and virtues." We should note that the reflection is not qualified by a temporal consideration. Aquinas seemingly believes this kind of dynamic to be at work in the actual dispensation of the divine economy after the coming of Christ. There are non-baptized persons drawn to Christ imperfectly but truly who are implicitly animated by the supernatural grace of faith, hope, and charity, as well as infused virtues.

⁴³ ST II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 3.

B. Natural Religious Inclinations. This is not to say that human religiosity is something *supernatural* as such for Aquinas. Rather, he treats the virtue of religion as a potential part of the virtue of justice, and therefore as something pertaining to human nature.⁴⁴ Furthermore, our human nature is fallen and subject to vices as well as virtue. Consequently, any theological consideration of non-Christian religion has to be qualified carefully.

On the one hand, it is clear that there are fundamental natural inclinations of the human intellect and will toward God as the first truth and cause of reality and as the sovereign good.⁴⁵ The human intellect is structured so that it may naturally desire to know the primary cause of all that is, and the human will is likewise made for love of the universal good that is God.⁴⁶ The inclinations toward natural knowledge and love of the Creator, then, are latent capacities of the human person.⁴⁷ These are not eradicated by the consequences of original sin in the human person. They are, however, seemingly weakened greatly.⁴⁸ Aquinas says as much. It is difficult for fallen human beings to come to know God rightly by the use of unassisted natural reason in any sophisticated fashion, and if persons do come to do so, it is after a long time, they are few in number, and their doing so is admixed with error.⁴⁹ More poignantly, Aquinas states baldly that the fallen human being cannot love God above all things naturally by his own powers, though this would have been possible prior to original sin. To assure genuine love of God (and therefore authentic worship of God) in the fallen world, the healing activity of grace is required.⁵⁰ It is clear that St. Thomas thinks that to affirm otherwise is overtly Pelagian, as it would suggest that the fallen human being can keep the Decalogue by his own powers, without the healing work of grace.⁵¹

Human nature is wounded, then, by ignorance and malice (selfishness) in regard to God, and unsurprisingly we see the admission of this present in Aquinas' treatment of the vices that afflict human religion: superstition, idolatry, and religious indifference.⁵² The human being

⁴⁴ ST II-II, q. 81, a. 5.

⁴⁵ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

⁴⁶ ST I, q. 12, a. 1.

⁴⁷ SCG III, ch. 37; ST I-II, q. 109, a. 3.

⁴⁸ ST I-II, q. 85, aa. 1–3.

⁴⁹ ST I, q. 1, a. 1.

⁵⁰ ST I-II, q. 109, a. 3.

⁵¹ ST I-II, q. 109, aa. 4–5.

⁵² ST II-II, q. 92–95.

finds itself in a liminal state: a fundamentally religious being by nature, it is unable to heal itself of the plights that maim or fragment its best religious inclinations and leanings. So, if there is a true religious foundation in man from which or in which grace may act, it does so in a humanity torn in many ways by error and moral compromise, and this enters into the very composition of the non-Christian religions themselves.

Aquinas gives concrete examples. He speaks of sacrifice as a practice that pertains to the natural law as a dimension of justice and atonement for human sin.⁵³ However, when speaking of examples of religious actions as “natural” in the treatise on religion, he gives the example of human sacrifice practiced among the ancient Romans!⁵⁴ The example is not intended ironically. It is meant to illustrate poignantly that, while religion is natural to man, all religious acts need not spring from the work of charity in the human person and can be vitiated by superstition or error. Analogously, Aquinas can identify good aspirations present in the midst of erroneous religious doctrines of other religions. He spends a great deal of space in chapter 2 of the *Summa contra gentiles* arguing that the theory of reincarnation is metaphysically incoherent and unreasonable.⁵⁵ However, he also notes that the theory, which he knows to be common in pre-Christian religion, hints opaquely at a deep truth: the need for reunion of soul and body. Reincarnation is not a feasible theory of human eschatology, but by its insistence on the fitting reconciliation of the separated soul with a physical body, it points negatively and obliquely toward the truth of the resurrection.⁵⁶

⁵³ ST II-II, q. 85, a. 1.

⁵⁴ ST II-II, q. 82, a. 1. See also q. 81, a. 1.

⁵⁵ SCG II, ch. 83; from *Summa contra gentiles II*, trans. J. Anderson (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956). See also ST I, q. 90, a. 4.

⁵⁶ *Super I Cor.* 15, lec. 2: “If the resurrection of the body is denied, it is not easy, yea it is difficult, to sustain the immortality of the soul. For it is clear that the soul is naturally united to the body and is departed from it, contrary to its nature and *per accidens*. Hence the soul devoid of its body is imperfect, as long as it is without the body. But it is impossible that what is natural and *per se* be finite and, as it were, nothing; and that which is against nature and *per accidens* be infinite, if the soul endures without the body. And so, the Platonists positing immortality, posited re-incorporation, although this is heretical. Therefore, if the dead do not rise, we will be confident only in this life. In another way, because it is clear that man naturally desires his own salvation; but the soul, since it is part of man’s body, is not an entire man, and my soul is not I; hence, although the soul obtains salvation in another life, nevertheless, not I or any man. Furthermore, since man naturally desires salvation even of the body, a natural desire would be frustrated” (trans. D. Keating, unpublished manuscript;

Only when the latter mystery is revealed can the truth and error of the pre-Christian theory be adequately discerned.

C. Sacraments of the Natural Law. Finally, we should say a word about the sacraments of the natural law. Aquinas distinguishes the sacraments of the Old Law from those of the New. The rites of the Torah are instituted by divine inspiration, but they do not communicate grace *ex opere operato*.⁵⁷ Rather, they are signs or expressions of supernatural faith present in their ancient Hebrew practitioners, and they signify a reality that is to come: the unique atoning sacrifice of Christ.⁵⁸ The sacraments of the New Law, by contrast, signify the mystery of Christ, but also effectuate what they signify as instrumental causes of grace.⁵⁹ They communicate effectively the capital grace of Christ (or he communicates his grace through them) to all who partake of them with a genuine good will.

Aquinas needs to posit a third category, however: sacraments of the natural law.⁶⁰ Why so? In fact, this category is necessary in particular to talk about the religion of the patriarchs as well as that of the “holy pagans” mentioned above: Abel, Noah, and so on, who clearly perform non-covenantal religious actions and do so in ways pleasing to God.

Aquinas thinks these are something both unlike and like the ancient rites of the Old Law. They are unlike them because they are not instituted by God and bear within them no guarantee of a relationship to God. Rather, they are the products of natural human culture. After all, it is natural to be religious, and so human beings generate external rites of various kinds. Even in cases where grace may be at work, then, the rites in question are conventional and man-made. However, while such sacraments are not causes of grace in any way, they may be the *outward expressions of the inward work of grace* in the human person.⁶¹

from *In Omnes St. Pauli Apostoli Epistolas Commentaria*, vols. 1 and 2 (Turin: Marietti, 1929), no. 924).

⁵⁷ ST III, q. 62, a. 6.

⁵⁸ ST I-II, q. 101, a. 2.

⁵⁹ ST III, q. 62, aa. 1–5.

⁶⁰ *In IV Sent.* d. 1, q. 2, a. 6, qc. 3, corp.; ST I-II, q. 103, a. 1.

⁶¹ *In IV Sent.* d. 1, q. 2, a. 6, qc. 3, corp.: “...illa sacramenta legis naturae non erant ex praecepto divino obligantia, sed ex voto celebrabantur, secundum quod unicuique dictabat sua mens, ut fidem suam aliis exteriori signo profiteretur ad honorem Dei, secundum quod habitus caritas inclinabat ad exteriores actus; et sic dicimus de caritate, quod sufficit motus interior; quando autem tempus habet operandi, requiruntur etiam exteriores actus. Ita etiam quantum ad adultos in lege naturae sufficiebat sola fides, cum etiam modo sufficiat ei qui non ex

They *can* be signs or indications of the grace of God present in the world acting in and through the human inclinations of human beings, purifying them and elevating them. St. Thomas mentions overtly the possibility of charity at work in the religious actions of persons outside the visible covenant who have offered their lives to God in authentic worship.⁶² He is probably thinking of people like Abel, mentioned in the Roman canon.

Aquinas clearly thinks that all grace is ecclesiologicaly oriented. This is evident in his consideration of the effects of the grace of the Eucharist. He says that the Eucharistic sacrifice ultimately effectuates the mystical body of Christ, the Church, as its *res tantum*, or most inward purpose.⁶³ Thus, anyone who receives any grace whatsoever is oriented implicitly toward the Eucharist as the one saving sacrifice of Christ present at the heart of the Church and her communion. All salvation takes place in the Church or as ordered toward visible membership in her, including in her sacramental communion.⁶⁴

Grace and Justification Outside the Visible Catholic Church

The reflections we have made up to this point have sought to maintain in harmony two core teachings of the Catholic Church. First, Christ is the unique universal mediator of salvation, the One who died for all human beings. Second, then, in some mysterious way, all human beings are offered the real possibility of participation in the redemptive economy of salvation. The grace of Christ may address humanity in its natural religion dimension. However, the work of grace is only ever implicitly ecclesiological in kind, and causes its participants to tend, in however indirect or hidden a fashion, toward inclusion in the one mystical body of Christ, the Catholic Church.

Here, then, we should also specify that this participation in Christ by those who are non-Catholics or non-Christians takes place only under certain conditions. It therefore has to be understood by reference to various theological qualifications that are significant.

contemptu sacramenta dimittit; sed ipsa fides, quando tempus habebatur, instigabat ut se aliquibus signis exterioribus demonstraret” (emphasis added; 1856 Parma edition found at <http://corpusthomicum.org>).

⁶² ST I-II, q. 103, obj. 1, corp. and ad 1.

⁶³ ST III, q. 73, a. 3. See on this subject, Gilles Emery, “The Ecclesial Fruit of the Eucharist,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 2, no. 1 (2004): 43–60.

⁶⁴ Consider the treatment of this subject by Charles Journet in *L’Église du Verbe Incarné*, vol. 6: *Essai de théologie de l’histoire du salut* (Paris: Saint Augustin, 2004).

A. Operative Actual Grace and Cooperative Justifying Grace. The explicit distinction between operative and cooperative grace has its origins in the mature work of St. Augustine, who fashioned the distinction in order to respond to the Pelagian controversy.⁶⁵ Augustine sought to underscore the unequivocally Pauline New Testament teaching that grace is at work in the human person prior to conversion and as a precondition for the possibility of conversion. Furthermore, this initial work of “operative” grace that precedes all human efforts or merits is oriented toward the justification of the human being, a subsequent effect of grace that in turn permits the active cooperation of the human being with God. Such cooperation is itself a gift, and so one must posit a subsequent effect of grace that follows from justification, one that is “cooperative” in kind. Operative grace that is *prevenient* (prior to justification) leads the recipient toward justification and to cooperative grace, a process of sanctification that is subsequent to justification.

This distinction between operative and cooperative effects of grace was a theological common-place in medieval and early modern Catholic theology. Aquinas employs the distinction meaningfully in order to suggest the universality of *operative grace*, since all human beings may be offered a participation in the mystery of redemption.⁶⁶ However, one need not infer from this that the operative help of grace must lead necessarily into the justification, sanctification, and salvation of all. On the contrary, as Aquinas makes clear, operative grace can be refused, and indeed may be much of the time.⁶⁷ Such resistance to grace compounds the guilt of the recipient. Consequently, while it may be the case that many are called, it does not follow that many or all are justified or glorified (Mt 22:14; Rom 8:30). This perspective on grace emphasizes both the reality of the universal offer of salvation and the real threat (and seeming reality) of eternal loss. Such was the commonly transmitted teaching in modern Roman Catholic theology prior to the Second Vatican Council.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, influential theories regarding the theology of grace that arose in the mid-twentieth century sought to re-envision the

⁶⁵ See, for example, Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, ch. 33, trans. P. Holmes and R. Wallis, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887).

⁶⁶ *ST I-II*, q. 111, aa. 2–3.

⁶⁷ On the resistance to grace, see especially *SCG III*, chs. 161–162 (trans. Burke); *Super Ioan.* 15, lec. 5 (Marietti ed., no. 2055).

⁶⁸ See the articulation of this view offered by Charles Journet, for example, in *The Meaning of Grace*, trans. A. V. Littledale (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1996).

subject without overt reference to the Augustinian paradigm that had been dominant in traditional western theology: prevenient operative grace, justification, and the subsequent cooperative grace of sanctification. Without disregarding the important questions raised by Henri de Lubac concerning the natural desire for God and the subsequent re-envisioning of his hypothesis by Karl Rahner in his theology of the “supernatural-existential,” it must be stated that both of these theologies and that of their analysts and critics turned the subject of the study of grace away from any overt consideration of the topic of operative and cooperative grace.⁶⁹ As a result, that classical Augustinian way of analyzing the work of God in history, which is of clear biblical origin, has been largely eclipsed. This has the following result: where one affirms that grace is at work universally in all of humanity, it is frequently presumed (following what are in fact contestable interpretations of Rahner) that the grace in question must result in the justification and salvation of the person or community in question. The effects of grace are conceived of in rather univocal, virtually ahistorical terms. Accordingly, the affirmation of the universal offer of grace has frequently become confused with a vague, implicit presumption of soteriological universalism. Or the inverse of the equation is believed: if it is stated that there may be persons who are not saved, or that particular non-Catholic or non-Christian religious communities are at an objective disadvantage with regard to those who know Christ explicitly and receive the sacraments, then God does not offer those outside the Catholic Church any authentic possibility of salvation. Once there is no longer any sufficient distinction of the analogically diverse effects of grace and the economic ordering among them, a dialectic tends to emerge between Jansenism and universal salvation. This follows almost necessarily from the *absence* in recent Catholic theology of any effective employment of the distinction between operative and cooperative grace, or of the distinction between grace that is offered prior to justification and that offered posterior to it.

B. Justification by Hope, Charity, and Repentance of Grave Sin. Consideration of the issue of the distinct effects of grace has direct bearing on a second one: the nature of justification and the need for effective repentance of grave sin as a condition for the possibility of salvation.

⁶⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946); Karl Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations IV*, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 165–188.

As each one knows, the traditional Catholic theology of justification insists on the ontological requirement not only of supernatural faith (which affects the human mind), but also of supernatural hope and charity, infused virtues that transform the human will or heart.⁷⁰ This Catholic dogma has clear precedents in the teaching of Aquinas, who treats justification itself as an *operative habitual* grace, something God does in us through a unilateral gift on his part (though not without our consent). This particular gift of justifying grace moves the will to detach from grave sin effectively and to turn toward God, under the influence of the infused habit of charity.⁷¹ This is why justification is the proximate preparation for works of *cooperative grace*: it disposes the heart supernaturally to live habitually in friendship with God and to keep the commandments of Christ by the grace of charity (Jn 14:15).⁷²

Of course, Aquinas recognizes that many baptized Christians sin gravely after Baptism, and that they consequently forfeit the state of justification by destroying in themselves the habit of supernatural charity (and possibly that of hope or faith as well). The restoration of the state of grace normally can take place for any baptized Christian, then, only by recourse to the valid celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation (confession).⁷³ This is the normative teaching not only of the medieval theologians, but also of the Council of Trent and the modern magisterium of the Catholic Church.⁷⁴ Aquinas does consider the real possibility of repentance for sins that is merely intentional or internal and certainly affirms the possibility of making (by consent to the work of grace) a “perfect act of contrition” outside of the sacrament of confession, especially when the latter is not available.⁷⁵ However, the Catholic Church traditionally underscores that the person who understands the faith of the Church rightly must have recourse to the sacrament of confession at such time as he or she is able, even in the

⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter, CCC), §§1987–1995; Council of Trent, Degree on Justification (1547): “Justification . . . is not only the remission of sins but the sanctification and renewal of the interior man through the voluntary reception of grace and of the gifts,” no. 1528 in *Compendium of creeds, definitions, and declarations on matters of faith and morals* (hereafter, Denzinger), 43rd ed., ed. H. Denzinger P. Hünermann, trans. R. Fastiggi and A. Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

⁷¹ ST I-II, q. 113, prologue and aa. 1–6.

⁷² ST I-II, q. 114, prologue.

⁷³ ST III, q. 84, aa. 5–6.

⁷⁴ CCC, §§1425–70; Council of Trent, Decree on the Sacrament of Penance (1551), (Denzinger, nos. 1667–1693).

⁷⁵ ST III, q. 86, aa. 1, 2 and 6.

wake of the attempt to make a perfect act of contrition outside of or apart from the sacrament.

The reason all of this is significant for our discussion is that it suggests that the movements of grace that take place in Christians who are not Catholic, in monotheists who are not Christian, or in religionists who are not monotheists must all be oriented in some way toward participation in the habit of infused charity, *if they are to be justifying and saving works of grace*. And yet, these same individuals or communities of persons do not possess the objective mean of reconciliation that is the sacrament of reconciliation.⁷⁶ Consequently, according to the inexorable logic of a Catholic and truly biblical doctrine of justification and of salvation, such persons (to be justified and eventually saved) must be transformed inwardly in their human hearts by grace to the point of renouncing grave sin and of repenting effectively of their attachment to it.

The relationship between the theoretical beliefs and moral decisions of non-Catholics and non-Christians and their possible inward state of grace remains somewhat opaque, due to the limitations of our human observational knowledge. In addition, there are difficult theoretical questions that remain. Can a person be in a state of grace and yet at the same time (due to the consequences of invincible ignorance) remain in an objective state of gravely morally deformed conduct? It would seem not. Might they have some partial awareness, however, of their need for mercy from God, over and above their own limitations of understanding? Most certainly they might. Is it possible for a person who decidedly believes that Christ is not the Word incarnate to pray truly (if imperfectly) to the living God and to love God truly above all things *by virtue of a supernatural infused virtue of faith*? Perhaps this is so. However, even if we find a way to answer some or all of these questions positively by appeal to the possibility of inspired adherence to truths about God *imperfectly grasped*, there still remains the fact that the intellectual and moral errors of the person who is not Catholic mitigate (sometimes severely) against the plenary reception of the salvation and grace of Christ. One may rightfully hope that God's grace might progressively triumph in the lives of non-Christian persons, in

⁷⁶ I am leaving to one side here the consideration of the Eastern Rite non-Catholic Churches. Their practice raises a separate set of theological questions, since they do practice sacramental confession and have a validly ordained episcopate. On this topic, see the helpful reflections of Charles Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*. Vol I: *La hiérarchie apostolique* (Paris: Saint Augustin, 1998), 1025–1030.

and through their lives of moral and religious seeking and in their confrontation with God in death. However, this hope should not be confused with the presumption of universalism. History offers sobering illustrations of what seem to be clear counter-alternatives to the free acceptance of the Gospel.

C. The Real Possibility of Eternal Loss and the Ordinary Means of Salvation. This leads us to a third and final consideration. The Catholic tradition rightly insists theologically that the “ordinary means of salvation” are to be found in the Catholic Church alone. As John Paul II wrote in 1990 in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*,

although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is “the way, and the truth and the life.” . . . The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God’s grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people. Indeed Christ himself “while expressly insisting on the need for faith and baptism, at the same time confirmed *the need for the Church*, into which people enter through Baptism as through a door” (*Lumen Gentium*, §14). Dialogue should be conducted and implemented with the conviction that *the Church is the ordinary means of salvation* and that *she alone* possesses the fullness of the means of salvation (c.f. The Second Vatican Council’s *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §3).⁷⁷

This viewpoint is not based on any form of triumphalism, but on a realistic acceptance of the plenary truth of the Gospel as proclaimed within the context of the Catholic tradition. Fidelity to divine revelation requires that one assert that the objective truth of divine revelation in its most explicit mode and the rightly oriented practice of the sacramental life operate together as the best and most preeminent guarantors of salvation, those established by God himself. It is the revealed truth and sacramental life of Christ in the Catholic Church that serve as the most effective vehicles for the transmission of the grace of eternal salvation.

⁷⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), §55.

What follows from this is not a despair regarding the possibility of salvation for non-Catholic persons, but a sober realization of the imperative of evangelization as the correlate to the affirmation of the universal work of God's operative grace. Such grace, due to the fact that it is present in all the world and does orient human beings toward Christ and the Church, is answered or completed by the proclamation of the Gospel.

Understood in this context, theologies of *apokatastasis* do little to assist the Church as she is immersed in the trials of a distinctively secular age. The claim or expectation that all might be saved can function in practice as a form of denial of the sociological condition of the Church in the current epoch. Theologians may understandably wish to assert the inevitable acceptance of Christ that is going to occur in each person's life, either in hidden ways in this world (by way of the secret workings of the supernatural-existential dynamic of grace) or in an eschatological epiphany that is reserved to the next (in a theology of Christ's descent into hell that serves by a kind of seeming inevitability to eventually conform all to Christ). Such universalism is attractive, and even triumphalistic. However, it also poses great risks. Yes, the error of Jansenism—with its latent despair of the salvation of non-Catholics—is seemingly avoided, but that does not mean that despair as such has been evaded. Despair can also manifest itself under its contrary—that is to say, in a presumption that is spiritually complacent and that refuses (out of latent resignation) to confront with clarity the objective configurations of reality.

On the one hand, theologies of *apokatastasis* seemingly refuse to acknowledge the real possibility of enduring human tragedy and the fact that there are perennial consequences to human acts of personal evil. That is to say, that there is eternal loss. Instead, acts of personal evil are explained against the backdrop of a more determinate “fundamental option” for the good, or in light of the eventual determination of God eschatologically to overcome each human reaction against the good. Accordingly, if salvation is lacking, this is seen to be primarily due to the absence of an initiative on the part of God (whose innocence now deserves to be questioned!), and not due fundamentally to the responsibility of the spiritual creature. On the other hand, such theologies also function as a numbing salve on the conscience of the Church, one that lulls ecclesial members into resignation or complacency in the face of a non-Christian world. Our defeat in the face of the progress of secularization can be accepted with equanimity, given what we know about the reality of the *eschaton*. Behind the mask of soteriological

universalism, we find the hidden face of our own spiritual *acedia*.

Hope is the virtue that guides the soul to persevere with true confidence in God, even in the midst of adversities, and to count on the promised assistance of the grace of God in all circumstances. To understand and to cultivate this virtue, however, requires an adequate sense of real risk and of real responsibility. Our own age, marked by the progress of religious ignorance, is one laden with real risks and with real possibilities. Hope requires that we live the Gospel in this age in such a way that we are willing to accept the full demands of the Catholic faith ourselves and to find ways to communicate clearly to others its plenary truth. Hope in the capacity of God's grace to save one's self requires a habitual recourse to the "ordinary means" of salvation instituted by Christ in the Church, including the sacraments of baptism, reconciliation, and communion. Hope in the capacity of God's grace to save others requires that one seeks not only to respond to, but also to incite the hidden work of operative grace in them through evangelization, by way of the outward proclamation of the Catholic faith in its plenary ecclesial form. For, God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14)

Conclusion

How may we conclude? What is the contribution of Aquinas' theology to the modern problematic regarding Christ and non-Christian religions? We may summarize by thinking about the relationship of grace and nature from a twofold viewpoint. First, natural religious instincts do not suffice. Christ alone is the savior of our human religiosity, for he alone is God made man and possesses, accordingly, the fount principle of sanctifying grace for the human race. This grace is the source of redemption of the religious dimension of the human person, and it is within the sphere of the Catholic Church that we find religion healed and elevated into its most noble and true form. Against all contemporary temptations to a neo-Pelagianism that would see in every religious instinct of man an intrinsic avenue toward salvation, we should say that natural religious activity outside of the sphere of the grace of Christ not only is not intrinsically salvific, but can enter readily into the world of superstition and irrational fanaticism. The biblical and Christological critique of human religion should be deeper than that of secular liberalism!

On the other hand, the grace of Christ is universal in horizon. Against the modern error of Jansenism, classical Thomism and the modern magisterium affirm that the grace of God may be at work in the natural, social, and historical experiences of non-Christian humanity. God can indeed work graciously in more or less discrete ways, in and through the natural religious structures of human persons and societies. We see this most unambiguously when non-Christians seeking God find avenues from within their own religious traditions by which they arrive at the doorstep of the Church.

What results from this brief portrait is a complex vision. All salvation takes place from and through the mediation of Christ in his capital grace and from the unique atoning sacrifice of the Cross. Salvation has an ecclesiological character or horizon. Natural religious inclinations in human beings are not inimical to the work of salvation, but integral to it. Other religious traditions can embody elements of profound truth in this regard, as well as serious falsehood.⁷⁸ We need to practice a careful discernment in the face of other religious traditions: one that is simultaneously philosophical, theological and spiritual.⁷⁹ “By their fruits you will know them” (Mt 7:16). “We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). If we wish to follow these Dominical and Apostolic adages in the twenty-first century, we will profit greatly from recourse to the perennial wisdom of Thomas Aquinas. **N V**

⁷⁸ DJ, §14: “The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: ‘the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source’ (*Lumen Gentium*, §62). The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ’s unique mediation: ‘Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ’s own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his’ (*Redemptoris Missio*, §5). Hence, those solutions that propose a salvific action of God beyond the unique mediation of Christ would be contrary to Christian and Catholic faith.”

⁷⁹ See the helpful principles enunciated by the document of the International Theological Commission, *Christianity and the World Religions* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).