

Unbelief and Sin in Thomas Aquinas and the Thomistic Tradition

THOMAS M. OSBORNE JR.
University of St. Thomas
Houston, Texas

DURING the last twenty years some theologians have supported their understanding of how unbelievers might be saved by appealing to Thomas Aquinas and the development of his thought by sixteenth-century Dominicans at Salamanca.¹ These Salamancan Dominicans applied Thomas's thought in the context of the New World's discovery. These recent theologians attribute two claims to this tradition: first, that not every unbeliever is guilty of unbelief; and second, that unbelievers can perform good acts which in some strong manner enable them to receive grace. I shall argue that although the first claim about the culpability of unbelief is held by the Thomist tradition, it has no historical or logical connection to the salvation of unbelievers. I shall argue that the second claim was not held by the tradition and that the contemporary misinterpretation results from a confusion over the relationship between moral goodness and merit. Whereas the first claim is historically accurate but irrelevant to the contemporary views for which it is invoked, the second claim is historically false if attributed to Thomas Aquinas or the Dominican tradition at Salamanca.

Francis Sullivan and Thomas O'Meara argue that the first claim that not every infidel is guilty of unbelief is connected with the view that

¹ Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 235–41; idem, "The School of Thomism at Salamanca and the Presence of Grace in the Americas," *Angelicum* 71 (1994): 321–70; Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 47–62, 69–76. J. A. DiNoia focuses on Thomas himself in his *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 94–103.

God wills to save all men.² Neither Thomas nor any of the major commentators make this connection. It is hard to imagine what the connection could be, unless the suggestion is that those who lack faith might be saved if they are not guilty of unbelief. But Thomas and the commentators explicitly reject this view. On their view, although not every unbeliever has sinned through unbelief, every unbeliever has committed mortal sin for which he will be damned if he does not repent.

In the *secunda secundae pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas distinguishes between three ways in which someone can lack or could have lacked explicit faith in Christ.³ There are those who deliberately reject faith, those who lack faith and yet have not explicitly rejected it, and those before Christ who lacked explicit faith but had implicit faith. The first category includes those who have been exposed to preaching but have not believed, whereas the second category includes those who have not been exposed to preaching and also have not responded to grace. Such persons must be distinguished from those who belong to the third category, which covers those who have not been exposed to preaching but nevertheless have responded to grace and made an act of implicit faith.⁴ These persons who have implicit faith must explicitly believe in God and providence at least. Unlike some later Thomists, Thomas apparently denies that it is possible after the coming of Christ for someone to be saved with only an implicit faith in Christ. Moreover, Thomas thinks that before Christ's coming there were many Gentiles to whom the Incarnation was revealed.⁵ Consequently, although only implicit faith in Christ was necessary for many pre-Christian Gentiles, many others had explicit faith.

In his discussion of whether unbelief is a sin, Thomas focuses on the distinction between the first two categories. The first kind of unbelief belongs to those who explicitly reject the faith, whereas the second kind of unbelief is purely negative. Thomas describes the latter unbelief, since it is involuntary, as more of a punishment of sin rather than a sin.⁶ Although

² O'Meara, "School of Thomism," 363; Sullivan, *Salvation*, 70–76.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 2, aa. 7–8; q. 10, a. 1.

⁴ See also Thomas Aquinas, 1 *Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 5 in *Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, ed. Pierre Mandonnet and M. F. Moos, 4 vols. (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929–1947), vol. 1, 777; 3 *Sent.*, d. 25, q. 2, a. 1, sol. 1–3 (Mandonnet, vol. 3, 796–98); *De veritate*, q. 14, aa. 11–12 (Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia*, Leonine ed. [Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1884–], vol. 22, 469–73); *Super epistolam ad Hebraeos lectura*, cap. 11, lect. 2, n. 576, in *Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, 8th ed., ed. Raphael Cai, 2 vols. (Turin: Marietti, 1953), vol. 2, 463.

⁵ "[D]icendum quod multis gentilium facta fuit revelatio de Christi." *ST* II–II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 3.

⁶ Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 34, a. 3, ad 2.

this purely negative unbelief is not sinful in itself, Thomas emphasizes that those who die in such unbelief will be damned. Thomas states that no one without faith can be saved. He writes, "But those who are unbelievers in this way are damned on account of other sins, since without faith they are not able to be forgiven: but they are not damned on account of the sin of unbelief."⁷

If Thomas thinks that all unbelievers are damned, why does he distinguish between those who commit a sin of unbelief and those who are unbelievers in a merely negative sense? The key issue here is over the responsibility of the agent. He is not addressing the question of whether every unbeliever is guilty of mortal sin, but rather whether every unbeliever is guilty of that particular mortal sin which is unbelief. Many of his colleagues and predecessors at the University of Paris assumed that everyone is offered faith and concluded that every unbeliever has rejected faith. This position was held by William of Auvergne (d. 1249), William of Auxerre (d. 1231), the *Summa Halesiana*, and in a way even by Bonaventure (d. 1274).⁸ They argue that if someone has not been exposed to Christian preaching then God will send someone to him or at least instruct the individual interiorly. Since they hold that everyone is offered faith, they also hold that there is no purely negative unbelief. In their view, every unbeliever is guilty of the mortal sin of unbelief.

It is important to recognize that Thomas does not reject their view that every unbeliever is in some way culpable. In some passages Thomas even states that God would send a preacher to someone whom he

⁷ "Qui autem sic sunt infideles damnantur quidem propter alia peccata, quae sine fide remitti non possunt: non autem damnantur propter infidelitatis peccatum." *ST II-II*, q. 10, a. 1.

⁸ William of Auvergne, *De Fide*, cap. 2, in *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (Paris: Pralard, 1674; repr. Minerva: Frankfurt am Main, 1963), vol. 1, 7–13, but esp. 11–12; idem, *De Legibus*, cap. 21, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, 57–59; William of Auxerre, *Summa Aurea*, lib. 3, tract. 7, cap. 7, q. 4, in *Spicilegium Bonaventurianum*, 16–20, 5 vols (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1980–1987), vol. 3.1, 229–31; *Summa Halesiana*, II-II, inq. 3, tract. 5, sect. 2, q. 2, n. 679 in Alexander of Hales, *Summa Theologica*, 3 vols. (Quarrachi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae), vol. 3, 659–70; Bonaventure, 3 *Sent.*, d. 25, a. 1, q. 2, ad 6, in *Opera Omnia*, 10 vols. (Quarracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902), vol. 3, 541; cf. idem, 3 *Sent.* d. 25, a.1, q. 3, ad 5 (vol. 3, 545). These are the best examples that I could find. For a discussion and other references, see Francis Suarez, *Commentaria in Secundam Secundae*, disp. 17, sect. 1, n. 2, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. M. André and C. Berton, 28 vols. (Paris: Vivès, 1856–1878), vol. 12, 424; Dominic Bañez, *In II-II*, q. 10, a. 1, in *Scholastica commentaria in secundam secundae* (Douai: Peter Borremans, 1615), vol. 3, p. 241, col. 2 D–E.

inspires with his grace to act well.⁹ In the *secunda secundae* Thomas states that someone might not have been exposed to faith on account of merely original sin.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he assumes that the individual in fact commits a mortal sin. Anyone without faith has committed a mortal sin even if it has not been a sin of unbelief. In addition, Thomas may suggest that those who have not been baptized can respond to grace in their first moral act in which they can choose or reject God at least implicitly as their ultimate end.¹¹ But this order to God would require some sort of faith.¹² The implication is that an agent could be justified and consequently receive all of the graces which belong to baptism, including faith, in this first act. Nevertheless, even though someone who sins mortally in this first act may not explicitly reject faith, he will still lack faith. He is indirectly responsible for this lack of faith because he has committed mortal sin and not been offered faith. But he is not responsible for a sin of unbelief. Thomas resembles the other theologians in his belief that every unbeliever has mortally sinned. He differs from the others in that he does not think that every unbeliever has sinned against the virtue of faith. The difference is not over whether unbelievers can be saved, but the reasons for which unbelievers will be damned. Indeed, some theologians

⁹ "Si qui tamen eorum fecissent quod in se est, Dominus eis secundum suam misericordiam providisset, mittendo eis praedictorem fidei. . . . Sed tamen hoc ipsum quod aliqui faciunt quod in se est, convertendo se scilicet ad Deum, ex Deo est movente corda ipsorum ad bonum." Aquinas, *Super epistola ad Romanos lectura*, cap. 10, lect. 3, n. 849 (Marietti, vol. 1, 158). Thomas's early writings are less clear about the necessity of grace. See 2 *Sent.*, d. 25, q. 2, a. 1, sol. 1 and ad 1; *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 11, ad 1. For a discussion, see Sullivan, *Salvation*, 52–55. For the scholarship on the increasing Augustinianism of Thomas's position, see Joseph P. Warykow, *God's Grace and Human Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 34–55.

¹⁰ "[T]alis ignorantia divinorum ex peccato primi parentis est consecuta." *ST* II–II, q. 10, a. 1. See also q. 4, a. 5, ad 1. Sullivan (*Salvation*, 54) suggests that this view may be incompatible with Thomas's statement that faith is given to the agent who does what is in him (*faciens quod in se est*). I do not see why this would be the case. For Thomas's understanding of this dictum, see Santiago Ramirez, *In I–II*, q. 112, a. 2, I, nn. 313–17, in *De Gratia: In I–II Summae theologiae divi Thomae expositio*, in *Opera Omnia* (Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1992), vol. 9, 822–26. He states (822–23): "[F]acienti quod in se est viribus gratiae actualis, Deus non denegat gratiam habitualement seu homini se praeparanti ad gratiam habitualement ex gratia actuali, Deus non denegat gratiam habitualement." See also Dominic Bañez, *In I–II*, q. 109, a. 6 in *Comentarios a la Prima Secundae de Santo Tomás*, ed. Vincente Beltran de Heredia (Salamanca, 1932), vol. 3, 97–101.

¹¹ *ST* I–II, q. 89, a. 4. For the use of this passage in the context of salvation outside the Church, see Sullivan, *Salvation*, 61–62.

¹² *ST* I–II, q. 62, a. 4; II–II, q. 4, a. 7; II–II, q. 17, aa. 7–8.

are unclear on this point because they do not make such a distinction. It is clear that on their view every unbeliever is culpable, but they are not clear whether this culpability involves an explicit rejection of faith.¹³

Although Thomas's view eventually became the common view by the end of the sixteenth century, it had many opponents in the late Middle Ages.¹⁴ For example, John Gerson (d. 1429), Gabriel Biel (d. 1495), and Hadrian Dedel—later to become Pope Hadrian VI (d. 1523)—argued that all unbelief is culpable as unbelief.¹⁵ These figures were not concerned about salvation in the New World. Later Thomists such as Vitoria (d. 1546) and Bañez (d. 1604) explicitly refer to this earlier tradition.¹⁶ Consequently, their defense of purely negative unbelief is a response to an earlier medieval debate and not some new development which opens the possibility that unbelievers in the New World might be saved without faith.

Vitoria does make the point about purely negative unbelief in the context of the debate over whether the Native Americans can be conquered because they are unbelievers. Nevertheless, he refuses to make a connection between purely negative unbelief and the salvation of the Native Americans.¹⁷ Indeed, he explicitly states that his opponents erroneously draw this conclusion in their attempt to refute the Thomist distinction with a *reductio ad absurdum*: "But in this these teachers are deceived,

¹³ Although many Thomists cite Hugh of St. Victor as holding the rejected view that every unbeliever is guilty of unbelief, it seems to me that Suarez's interpretation is more accurate (*In Secundam Secundae*, disp. 17, sect. 1, n. 2, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 12, 424): "[S]i attente legatur, solum dicit hos infideles non salvari, non vero dicit propter proprium et speciale peccatum infidelitatis condemnari." See Hugh of St. Victor, *De sacramentis*, lib. 1, p. 7, cap. 32 (PL 176, col. 302). It is hard to tell if Suarez is discussing this chapter.

¹⁴ "Nihilominus contraria sententia communis est hodie, et fere ab omnibus recepta." Suarez, *In Secundam Secundae*, disp. 17, sect. 1, n. 2, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 12, 424.

¹⁵ Jean Gerson, *De vita spirituali animae*, lectio secunda (in principio) and lectio 4, corr. 3, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Palemon Glorieux, 8 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1962), vol. 3, 128–33, 159–60; Gabriel Biel, 2 Sent., d. 22, q. 2, a. 3, dub. 1 in *Collectorium circa quattuor libros sententiarum*, ed. U. Hofman, W. Wilbeck, et al., 4 vols (Mohr: Tübingen, 1973–1984), vol. 2, 460–61; Hadrian VI, Quod 4, q. 1, in *Quaestiones quodlibeticæ* (Venice, 1522; repr. Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg Press, 1964), 20r–23r, esp. 21v–22r.

¹⁶ Francis de Vitoria, *De Indis* II, 2, 12, in *Relectio de Indis*, Corpus Hispanorum de Pace, 5, ed. L. Perena and J. M. Perez Prendes (Madrid: Consejo Superior De Investigaciones Científicas, 1967), 57–59. For Bañez, see *In II–II*, q. 10, a. 1, in *Scholastica commentaria in secundam secundae*, vol. 3, p. 241, col. 2 D–E.

¹⁷ Vitoria (*De Indis* II, 2, 12 [Perna and Perez, 57]) cites Thomas, *ST II–II*, q. 10, a. 1: "damatur quidem propter alia peccata, sed non propter peccatum infidelitatis."

because they think that if we hold that there is invincible ignorance concerning baptism or faith in Christ, it follows that someone is able to be saved without baptism or faith in Christ; but it does not follow.”¹⁸ Other theologians reject the Thomistic view because they think that it leads to the view that Native Americans can be saved without faith. Vitoria is in total agreement concerning the absurdity of the position that unbelievers can be saved. Vitoria differs from the others in denying that this position is a consequence of the Thomistic view that there can be purely negative unbelief among the Native Americans. His point has nothing to do with the salvation of the Native Americans, but is more narrowly about whether they are guilty of the sin of unbelief. If other theologians could show that the Thomistic distinction between kinds of unbelief leads to the conclusion that unbelievers can be saved, then the Thomistic distinction would be proven false.

Vitoria’s understanding of this issue does not depart significantly from that of Thomas or other Thomists. An exception to this approach might be Domingo Soto (d. 1560), who at one time in his life did argue that someone who is not exposed to the faith might be saved without eliciting any supernatural act of faith.¹⁹ But he very quickly and in print corrected this view precisely because it is incompatible with the wider Christian tradition. Bañez regarded it as heretical or close to heresy. It is important that on this point Soto briefly departed not only from those who think that all unbelief is itself a sin but also from Thomas, other Thomists, and the Catholic tradition. With this brief exception of Soto, the disagreement between Thomists and others is not over the salvation of unbelievers, but over who is offered faith. All sides to this debate think that God gives faith to everyone who does what is in them. But the Thomists deny that God offers faith to everyone.

It is important to recognize that for Thomists it is impossible to have charity without faith, and that the distinction between the sin of unbe-

¹⁸ “Sed in hoc decipiuntur isti doctores, quia putant quod si ponamus ignorantiam invincibilem de baptismo aut fide Christi, quod statim consequitur quod possit aliquis salvari sine baptismo aut fide Christi; quod tamen non sequitur.” Vitoria, *De Indis* I, 2, 14, p. 61.

¹⁹ “Haec sententia profecto aut haeresis est, aut haeresi proxima: quamvis eam sequutus fuerit Magister Sotus lib. 2, de natura et gratia, c. 11, in impressione facta Venetiis. Postea tamen illam retractavit ut patet in impressione facta Salmanticae in fine quarti Sententiarum.” Dominic Bañez, *In II–II*, q. 2, a. 8, in *Scholastica commentaria in secundum secundae*, vol. 3, p. 187, col. 2 D–E. For the change in the Paris edition, see Dominic Soto, *De natura et gratia*, lib. 2, cap. 11 (Paris: Foucher, 1549; repr. Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg, 1965), 143. See O’Meara, “School,” 347–49, esp. 348, n. 55.

lief and purely negative unbelief makes no difference with respect to the lack of charity. Consequently, unbelievers of either stripe are equally unable to perform meritorious acts even though they are capable of performing good acts. The unbeliever's good act is both truly good and yet, strictly speaking, irrelevant to his salvation. J. A. DiNoia confuses goodness and merit when he writes:

The choice of the particular, real human good (for Aquinas, the choice of the moral good) is always a confirmation of the human orientation toward enjoyment of the fullness of goodness in God. In the concrete order of salvation, there is no such thing as moral goodness—or moral defect, for that matter—as an ingredient of a purely natural order of things apart from grace.²⁰

He is not far from holding that for Thomas every morally good act, including those of unbelievers, is in some way meritorious. O'Meara is similarly confused when discussing the Dominican Salamancans on the salvation of unbelievers.²¹ Following Thomas and most of the Catholic tradition, the Dominicans at Salamanca do insist that unbelievers can perform morally good acts. Following Thomas as opposed to some other traditions, these Dominicans hold that such good acts in no way merit eternal life.

Thomas's distinction between goodness and merit merely reflects a common medieval position that whereas believers can perform meritorious acts, unbelievers can perform acts which are good but not meritorious. Thomas differs from some of his contemporaries in his denial that any particular human act can be indifferent to moral goodness or badness.²² Nevertheless, he does not depart from their position that some acts can be indifferent to merit or demerit. For Thomas, the only such acts are the good acts of someone who does not have charity. Since faith is required

²⁰ DiNoia, *Diversity*, 97. See also Sullivan, *Salvation*, 61–62; O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas*, 239.

²¹ O'Meara, "School," 360, 363–65, 367.

²² *ST* II–II, q. 10, a. 4. The *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, q. 2, a. 5, ad 7 focuses on someone who lacks charity. I use the Leonine edition as reprinted in Richard Regan and Brian Davies, *The De Malo of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168. For a discussion of Thomas's position in its historical context, see my forthcoming "Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus on Individual Acts and the Ultimate End," in *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages: A Tribute to Stephen F. Brown*, *Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* (Leiden: Brill). For the Thomistic development, see my "The Threefold Referral of Acts to the Ultimate End in Thomas Aquinas and His Commentators," *Angelicum* 85 (2008): 715–36.

for charity, all of an unbeliever's good acts would fall into this category. Thomas repeatedly makes this point throughout his writings.²³

It is important in this discussion to be clear on the distinction between moral goodness and merit. In general, evil is the privation of a due good, and, in particular, moral evil is a privation of the due order in a voluntary act. The primary measure of moral goodness is the rule of reason, or God's eternal law.²⁴ Moral goodness belongs to a voluntary act in which nothing is lacking with respect to the order of reason in its object, end, and circumstances.²⁵ Any defect with respect to object, end, or circumstances takes away from the act's goodness.²⁶ A morally evil act lacks something that is due to the act itself. In contrast, a morally good act that lacks merit does not lack a due good, but merely something superadded to it. Thomas illustrates this point by using an example from the non-moral order.²⁷ A horse that lacks sight or legs is defective since it lacks what a horse should have. However, a horse that lacks rationality is not defective, since rationality does not belong to a horse by nature. Similarly, a naturally good act that lacks merit is not defective in the natural order, since merit is not due to it. It lacks only the extra goodness of merit which God would give to it if the agent possessed charity. Moral evil is a privation in the act itself, whereas the lack of merit is only a deficiency in the goodness which the act could have in the supernatural order that God has freely established. A morally good but not meritorious act implies a disorder in the agent who lacks charity.

Whereas moral goodness belongs to the act, merit requires an order to another through justice, whether it be in the context of the political community or in respect to God.²⁸ For theologians, "merit" strictly

²³ Aquinas, 2 *Sent.*, d. 40, q. 1, a. 5, sol. (Mandonnet, vol. 2, 1026); 2 *Sent.*, d. 41, q. 1, a. 1, sol. (vol. 2, 1038). See also 4 *Sent.*, d. 39, a. 2, ad 5 (Parma, vol. 7.2, 1025); 2 *Sent.*, d. 41, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2 (Mandonnet, vol. 2, 1039); *Super epistolam ad Romanos lectura*, cap. 14, lect. 3, n. 1141 (Marietti, vol. 1, 213); *Super epistolam ad Titum lectura*, cap. 1, lect. 4, n. 43 (Marietti, vol. 2, 310).

²⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 21, a. 1. David M. Gallagher, "Aquinas on Goodness and Moral Goodness," in *Thomas Aquinas and His Legacy*, ed. David M. Gallagher, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy, 28 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press), 37–60, esp. 55.

²⁵ *ST I-II*, q. 18, a. 5. See also *De malo*, q. 2, a. 4, corp. (Regan/Davies, 152–54)

²⁶ *ST I-II*, q. 18, a. 5, ad 3.

²⁷ "[E]t ideo non oportet quod omnis eorum actus sit malus, sed solum quod deficientis bonitatis; sicut quamvis equus deficiat a rationalitate quam homo habet, non tamen ideo malus est, sed habet bonitatem deficientem a bonitate hominis." Aquinas, 2 *Sent.*, d. 41, q. 2, a. 1, sol. (Mandonnet, vol. 2, 1038). See my "Three-fold Referral," 721–23.

²⁸ *ST I-II*, q. 23, a. 3.

speaking refers to that merit which is in reference to eternal life or punishment.²⁹ An act must be morally good in order to be meritorious with respect to God, but moral goodness is not sufficient. Strictly speaking, we cannot merit anything from God, since God cannot be in debt to us.³⁰ Nevertheless, for those who have charity, there is a kind of merit and proportion. This possibility of merit is a result of God's free decision and is not owed to humans. Someone who has charity performs acts which proceed not merely from his own intellect and will, but also from the work of the Holy Spirit within him. Consequently, the morally good acts of someone in charity can be considered in two ways.³¹ First, insofar as the act comes from the agent's own free choice, the act has a congruous merit (*meritorium ex congruite*). Second, insofar as the act is a work of the Holy Spirit, the act has a stricter condign merit (*meritorium ex condigno*). Both kinds of merit belong to one and the same act, and differ insofar as the one act proceeds from the two distinct principles. The first kind of merit is based loosely on a certain congruous proportion by which God rewards the agent, whereas the second kind of merit is based on the way in which someone with charity has been made a sharer of the divine nature. The Holy Spirit himself acts through the agent.

Denis Janz suggests that although Cajetan (d. 1534), in his earlier commentary on Thomas's *Summa theologiae*, emphasizes that merely natural good works are not meritorious in any sense, in his later polemic against Luther, Cajetan seems to say that they are meritorious *de congruo*.³² It seems to me that although Cajetan does say that some such acts are useful (*utile*), he is not talking about merit or even about the moral value of all good acts. In addition to other good works, Cajetan's examples include prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, which are acts by which a sinner traditionally obtains mercy.³³ In general, Thomists have held that

²⁹ "Sed quia iustitia reddit unicuique quod ei debetur et in bonis et in malis; bona autem simpliciter sunt ea quae ad vitam aeternam pertinent, et mala simpliciter ea quae ad miseriam aeternam; inde est quod secundum theologos meritum proprie dicitur respectu horum." Thomas Aquinas, 3 *Sent.*, d. 18, a. 2 (Mandonnet, vol. 3, 559).

³⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 1.

³¹ *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 3.

³² Denis R. Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), 146–51.

³³ "Vere benignissimus erga nos est Deus, providendo, ut quam in statu peccati, mereri non possumus, remissionem peccatorum, impetrare oratione, ieiunio, eleemosynis, aliisque bonis operibus valeamus." Thomas de Vio Cajetan, *Tractatus undecimus de fide et operibus adversus Lutheranos*, 10, in *Opuscula Omnia Thomae de Vio Caietani* (Lyons, 1581; repr. Zurich: Hildesheim, 1995), 291.

merely naturally good acts can contribute in some way to obtaining grace, but they differ about and can be unclear concerning the exact nature of this contribution.³⁴ Nevertheless, both Thomas and the Thomistic tradition are clear that the good acts of unbelievers and even sinners generally do not have even *de congruo* merit.

The only problematic passage for this interpretation of Thomas is in the *ST* I-II, q. 21, a. 4, in which he discusses the meritoriousness of good actions without a special reference to grace. How does this passage fit in with Thomas's many statements that merit requires grace? There are at least two ways of addressing this issue. First, Cajetan points out that this article is concerned with the act itself and not the disposition of the agent.³⁵ The acts which are described in this passage as meritorious are those acts which would be meritorious if the agent were in the state of grace. Cajetan finds support for this interpretation in the article itself, in which Thomas states that he is discussing merit "insofar as it is from the nature of the act."³⁶ I would also add that Thomas makes a similar distinction between the act and the agent in his *Sentences* commentary, and states that those good acts which are performed without charity can be said to merit only in a loose sense (*improprie*).³⁷ Consequently, Cajetan rightly suggests that Thomas is using a wider notion of "merit" here, one which is less proper and refers to the act apart from the agent's possession of charity. Second, Joseph Wawrykow writes, "[T]hese articles cannot be read on their own and they do not constitute Thomas's major discussion of merit; this discussion is found in 114, 1–10."³⁸ In this later discussion Thomas denies the view that moral goodness is sufficient for merit.

Although Catholics denied that salvation is possible without faith, some non-Thomistic theologians were in certain respects closer to one view which O'Meara, Sullivan, and DiNoia attribute to Thomas and/or

³⁴ The necessity of some sort of actual grace as a preparation for habitual grace is made by Thomas. In such a case, there can be acts which have some sort of salvific value even if they are not meritorious. See Ramirez, *In I-II*, q. 109, a. 6, nn. 362–89 (vol. 9, 363–78); q. 114, a. 5, nn. 606–15 (vol. 9, 1016–22).

³⁵ Cajetan, *In I-II*, q. 21, a. 4 (Leonine, vol. 6, 167)

³⁶ "[Q]uantum est ex ipsa ratione actus." *ST* I-II, q. 32, a. 4, ad 3.

³⁷ "Actio autem proportionata ad vitam aeternam est actio ex caritate facta; et ideo per ipsam ex condigno meretur quis ea quae ad vitam aeternam pertinent. Opera autem bona quae non sunt ex caritate facta, deficiunt ab ista proportionem; et ideo per ea ex condigno non meretur quis vitam aeternam, sed improprie his dicitur aliquis mereri, secundum quod habent similitudinem aliquam cum operatione informata caritate." Thomas Aquinas, 3 *Sent.*, d. 18, a. 2 (Mandonnet, vol. 3, 559).

³⁸ Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 163, n. 32. Wawrykow also argues that there is considerable development between the early *Sentences* commentary and *Summa theologiae*.

the Thomistic tradition, which is that merely natural good works in some sense merit or make salvation possible. Many theologians, especially those who belonged to the Franciscan tradition, held that although good acts without charity do not have condign merit, they do have a certain congruous merit.³⁹ This congruous merit should not be confused with the congruous merit of the Thomist position, which results from the free choice of someone who already has charity. Instead, they regard it as a kind of merit which prepares the way for charity. This Thomistic emphasis should be disconcerting to those theologians who attribute to Thomas the position that unbelievers can contribute to their salvation through good works. Gabriel Biel, a fifteenth-century theologian who was not a Franciscan even though he was influenced by this tradition, provides a good example of this alternative approach. He suggests that someone who performs certain naturally good acts will be given grace by God by which he can be justified.⁴⁰ On this view, the congruous merit in the present order leads to the reception of charity. It is hard to find a starker contrast with Thomas and the Thomistic tradition.⁴¹ But this view does not entail the further position, which is incompatible with the Catholic tradition, that salvation is possible without implicit or explicit faith.

The Dominicans at Salamanca are conspicuously notable for their rejection of the view that the good acts of unbelievers require grace. Although John Capreolus (d. 1444) may not have held the view that grace is necessary for any morally good act, Francis Vitoria and Bañez interpret him as in some way holding this view.⁴² But they explicitly reject this interpretation. Thomas O'Meara writes that according to Bañez, "Human actions based on the moral law would be, however, in their realizations influenced by grace."⁴³ But Bañez himself considers and rejects this position when he states: "Whether he is a believer or an unbeliever, a sinner

³⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109–19.

⁴⁰ Gabriel Biel, *Collectorium* 3, dist. 27, q. 1, a. 2 (vol. 2, 517–18) and dub. 4 (vol. 2, 523–24). See Heiko Obermann, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and late Medieval Nominalism*, 3rd ed. (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 166–90.

⁴¹ See Ramirez, *In II–II*, q. 14, a. 5, nn. 605–21 (vol. 9, 1014–23). For the contrast between Biel and Thomas on this point, see especially John Farthing, *Thomas Aquinas and Gabriel Biel: Interpretations of St. Thomas Aquinas in German Nominalism on the Eve of the Reformation*, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 19 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 150–80.

⁴² Vitoria, *In II–II*, q. 10, a. 4, nn. 4 and 6, in *Comentarios a la Segunda Secundae de Santo Tomás*, ed. Vincente Beltran de Heredia (Salamanca, 1932), vol. 2, 172–73, 174–75; Bañez, *In I–II*, q. 109, a. 1, n. 4 (vol. 3, 23); art. 10, n. 7 (vol. 3, 120).

⁴³ O'Meara, "School," 360.

can do many morally good works without any supernatural help.”⁴⁴ It is hard to see how O’Meara could arrive at his interpretation. O’Meara does cite a passage in which Bañez is considering the importance of the first moral act in which someone who arrives at the age of reason accepts or rejects grace. It is true that for Bañez, and indeed many Thomists, someone who makes such a good choice will have at least implicit faith. But this point has no implications for the good actions of unbelievers.

The important point is that merit belongs to the supernatural order, whereas moral goodness does not. Bañez writes, “Therefore with only the general help of God, the author of nature, which is always presupposed, a man is able to work some good which is proportionate to rational nature.”⁴⁵ Just as Thomas does, Bañez preserves the distinction between nature and gratuitous merit. Bañez does not think that difficult good acts can be performed consistently over a long period without God’s special help, but he does think that at least some such acts are possible.⁴⁶ Moreover, Bañez rejects the view of those theologians who hold that some sinners can merit charity through acts which are meritorious in a condign sense: “And the reason is because even congruous merit presupposes friendship, or at least excludes enmity with God himself . . . no aspect (*ratio*) of congruity can be received on the side of the rational creature which is in sin, so that God could pay him a reward belonging to a supernatural order, such as is grace, which is the root of eternal life.”⁴⁷

Some of the confusion over the significance of an unbeliever’s good acts may rest in a confusion over the scope of the previously mentioned discussion in the *prima secundae*, q. 89, art. 6, in which Thomas discusses an agent’s first moral act in the context of whether it is possible for someone to have merely venial sin along with original sin. Thomas argues that an agent’s original sin is remitted if through grace he orders himself to God through this first act. Both O’Meara and DiNoia interpret this

⁴⁴ “Peccator sive fidelis sive infidelis potest multa opera moraliter bona facere absque auxilio supernaturali.” Bañez, *In I–II*, q. 109, *In Scholastica commentaria in secundum secundae*, vol. 3, p. 59, a. 2, n. 49 (Beltran, vol. 3, 59). See also *In II–II*, q. 10, a. 4 (Douai, 256–58).

⁴⁵ “Ergo cum solo generali auxilio Dei auctoris naturae, quod semper praesupponitur, poterit homo bonum aliquod naturae rationali proportionatum operari.” Bañez, *In I–II*, q. 109, a. 2, n. 49 (Beltran, vol. 3, 60).

⁴⁶ Bañez, *In I–II*, q. 109, a. 4, nn. 9–12 (Beltran, vol. 3, 90–96).

⁴⁷ Bañez, *In I–II*, q. 114, a. 5, n. 12 (vol. 3, 332): “Et ratio est quia meritum etiam de congruo praesupponit amicitiam, vel saltem excludit inimicitiam ipsius Dei . . . nulla ratio congruitatis potest accipi ex parte creaturae rationalis quae est in peccato, ad hoc quod Deus reddat illi praemium ordinis supernaturalis, qualis est gratia, quae radix est vitae aeternae.”

passage as stating that the reception or rejection of grace in an individual's first moral act is also a discussion of an unbeliever's every act.⁴⁸ But the text makes no such claim, and such an interpretation conflicts with Thomas's many statements that there are good acts which are indifferent to merit, and that the unbeliever's good acts belong to this group.

Their interpretation might seem to have some support in a position commonly attributed to Capreolus, namely that grace is required for every moral act. But aside from the question of whether Capreolus holds such a position, Capreolus himself says that the unbeliever's good act has no merit and is irrelevant to the agent's salvation.⁴⁹ Indeed, whether we describe God's assistance in such acts as "grace" or not, such assistance has merely a causal role in the action and is entirely different either from the assistance which is given to a meritorious act or that assistance which is given to an act which prepares the agent for justification.

Although the Franciscan understanding of merit and Biel's understanding of salvation could be invoked in support of O'Meara, Sullivan, and DiNoia, such views are foreign to both Thomas and the later Thomist tradition, including that of the Dominicans at Salamanca. They are most probably mistaken in attributing to Thomas the view that all good actions require grace, and those who attribute this view to Bañez and Vitoria are certainly mistaken. Moreover, even if Thomas held such a view, it would not have the implications which contemporary theologians would wish.

For Thomists, the distinction between unbelief as a sin and unbelief as purely negative does not affect the statement that faith is necessary for charity and merit. Only those with explicit or implicit faith can perform

⁴⁸ O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas*, 239; DiNoia, *Diversity*, 97. For a discussion of the issues involved in the interpretation of this text, see Lawrence Dewan, "Natural Law and the First Act of Freedom: Maritain Revisited," *Études Maritainiennes/Maritain Studies* 12 (1996): 3–32.

⁴⁹ "Illa tamen non fiunt sine speciali Dei auxilio, non quidem habituali, sed se habente per modum motionis, et cujusdam passionis. Et hoc sufficit ad salvandum mentem Augustini." Capreolus, 2 *Sent.*, d. 28, q. 1, a. 3, n. 2, ad 14 (vol. 4, 307). Janz understands Capreolus to hold that every morally good act requires an *auxilium divinum*, which is grace. Nevertheless, Capreolus writes "[H]umana natura, in statu praesenti, per peccatum non est totaliter corrupta. Igitur potest in aliquod bonum opus sibi proportionatum, sine superadditione novae formae; tale autem velle vel agere est actus virtutis acquisitae." 2 *Sent.*, d. 28, q. 1, a. 1 (vol. 4, 284). This issue does not seem to bear directly on the question of whether there can be morally good acts without referral to the natural and supernatural ultimate end. For the different interpretations and uses of the *auxilium divinum* in Thomas, see Janz, *Luther*, 46–48. For my somewhat different account of Capreolus, see "Threefold Referral," 724–27.

meritorious actions, although even unbelievers can perform good actions. This distinction is important in itself and historically because it explains why some unbelievers have not committed mortal sins of unbelief or referred sins to the end of unbelief. Vitoria describes average sixteenth-century Native Americans as belonging to this category, since the faith was not adequately preached to them. Just as other unbelievers, they can perform good but not meritorious acts. Their lack of faith indicates that they have mortally sinned. Vitoria's position, along with the other developments, has no clear implication for the salvation of unbelievers. Contemporary attempts to apply his views to this end are historically mistaken and conceptually confused. N·V