

Vetera Novis Augere et Perficere: Thomas Aquinas and Christian–Muslim Dialogue

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Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris*, issued on August 4, 1879, sought to address many issues that were challenging nineteenth-century Catholic scholarship and academic life. In proposing the thought of Thomas Aquinas as a model of Catholic teaching, the Pope intended, in his own words, “to strengthen and complete the old by aid of the new,”¹ not only by reviving the study of the works and teachings of the Angelic Doctor, especially in the realm of philosophy, but also to uphold as perennial his method of engaging with his contemporaries within and without the Catholic faith.² It is within this context that we are called upon to reflect upon this appeal: “*vetera novis augere et perficere*.”

The thirteenth century was indeed a time of intellectual upheaval, following the introduction of Aristotle and, later on, the translations into Latin of the Arabic commentaries on Aristotle by Ibn Rušd (Lat. Averröes; d. 1198). This event was met within the ecclesiastical world with apprehension, if not outright fear. Neo-Platonic philosophy and its interpretation by Ibn Sīnā (Lat. Avicenna; d. 1037) was already perfectly acceptable to Mediaeval Christian scholars. The latter was in fact considered an essential tool for understanding the illuminationist thought of St. Augustine. Étienne Gilson even spoke of *Augustinisme avicennisant* (Avicennized

¹ *Aeterni Patris* (1879), §24.

² It was the same pope who a year later, through a brief entitled *Cum Hoc Sit* promulgated on August 4, 1880, declared Aquinas “Patron of Catholic Schools and Universities.”

Augustinianism).³ The problem was Aristotle and his renowned commentator Ibn Rušd: a pagan commented on by an infidel.

One must also note, however, that mediaeval Western intellectuals and institutions were able to encounter and adapt the Islamic legacy, because they already possessed a sufficient scientific base (with of course the contribution of translations of Greek together with Latin works) with which to understand, assimilate, and build upon this new knowledge that appeared from the East. In sum, mediaeval Christendom created living, vibrant societies, constantly searching, always discovering something new.

In dealing with the specific (and delicate) subject of Aquinas's dialogue with Islamic thought, it would be necessary to reflect in particular upon two key works of his: the *Liber de Veritate Catholicae Fidei contra Errores Infidelium* (A Book on the Truth of the Catholic Faith against the Errors of Unbelievers),⁴ popularly known as the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], together with his *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos, Græcos et Armenos ad Cantorem Antiochenum*, better known simply as *De rationibus fidei*.

At this point it would be necessary to articulate the term "Islamic thought." Of itself it should not be identified with Islam as a religion. Rather, it should be considered as embracing classical Greek philosophy as interpreted by the Neo-Platonic movement and disseminated through Oriental Christian and Jewish schools of thought. Islamic civilization absorbed these teachings and built its own proper edifice upon these foundations.

A Model for Interreligious Dialogue?

Proposing Thomas Aquinas as a model for engagement with Islamic thought may also raise a few eyebrows. Hence, it would be appropriate to pose an essential question: "What type of dialogue existed in mediaeval times?" One should begin with an a priori exclusion of dialogue as it is understood today, given the fact that there existed neither the motive nor the means to implement it.

In fact mediaeval society was aware of only three religions: the pagan, which had been replaced by Christianity; the Jewish, founded upon the precepts of the First Covenant which "Christ fulfilled by his actions and

³ Étienne Gilson, "Pourquoi Saint Thomas a critiqué Saint Augustin," *Les archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 1 (1926): 5–126.

⁴ This is the earliest title given to this work. See René-Antoine Gauthier, *Somme contre les gentils* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1993).

by his teaching”⁵ and which was also believed to prefigure the everlasting New Covenant sealed by Jesus on the Cross; and finally, the Christian, which believed in Jesus as the final revelation of God to humanity.⁶ With such a vision in mind it is obvious that any doctrine that is not situated within these parameters, or which proposes some form of belief or conduct which was different from, if not contrary to, the Christian vision of God, the cosmos, and society, would be considered as heretical and its promoter an impostor.⁷

When Islam made its appearance in the Christian world, it carried with it a book that it considered of divine provenance, and therefore sacred, and which included narratives parallel to those present in the Bible, some of which were similar and some very different. The book also included a denial of the two fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith dating back to the first centuries of Christianity—the Trinity and the Incarnation—although one has to add here that the Trinity that is being rejected is by no means that espoused by the Christian faith.⁸ Therefore, it was obvious

⁵ *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 107, a. 2, corp. All citations of the ST are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars Latin-English ed., with notes and introductions, 61 vols. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; and New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–1980).

⁶ The Letter to the Hebrews states in fact: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the ages” (Heb. 1:1–2). Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, 2nd Catholic ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

⁷ Richard Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 158.

⁸ It is necessary to recall that every single Muslim is conscious of this exclusive right of God to be worshipped by his creatures (Qur’an 51:56; the Qur’an will henceforth be abbreviated as “Q.” in citations), which implies an outright rejection of all “association” (*shirk*; see Q. 4:48.116) and, therefore, of all idolatry. In discussing the Christian belief in the Trinity, the Qur’an refers to *three* (*ṭalāṭa*) as a cardinal number indicating *three things* or *individuals*, and therefore a *triad*: “Those people who say that God is the third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only One God. If they do not stop what they are saying, a painful punishment will afflict those of them who persist” (Q. 5:73). One is further led by the Qur’an to understand that the Christian exposition of the Trinity denotes God (as father), Jesus (as son), and Mary (as mother, thereby implying that she is God’s consort), thereby giving the impression that what Christians believe involves God in the carnal generation of a son through a human mother: “When God says, ‘Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, ‘Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God’?’ he will say, ‘May you be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say—if I had said any such thing You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You. You alone have full knowledge of things

that Islam was initially considered a heresy and its prophet (whose second claim to notoriety was that of having practiced polygamy) a lustful and ambitious deceiver or even the antichrist.⁹ Hence mediaeval Christendom's hostility toward Islam as a religion. It is therefore no small wonder that Dante's encyclopaedic masterpiece *La Divina Commedia* went on to place Muḥammad in the eighth circle of hell in the company of those who sow discord (*Inferno*, canto 28, lns. 22–26).

Furthermore, it is necessary to underline the fact that in those times the existence and dissemination of heresy was not understood as an exercise in freedom of expression, but rather as the cause of social upheaval that could threaten political, social, and cultural harmony, which was expected to mirror the harmony of the celestial realm.

Aquinas was undoubtedly a scholar of his times, and the way he expressed himself with reference to Muslims from a purely religious point of view would today be considered shocking and unacceptable. A cursory glance at what Thomas has to say in his *SCG* and in *De rationibus fidei* about Islam and Muḥammad can be disheartening to those who choose to take the path of Muslim–Christian dialogue. Certainly, his position concerning Muḥammad in chapter 6 of *SCG* I is, to say the least, brutal. But this is just one aspect of his multifaceted scholarship. We need to recall that the mediaeval thinker was also a person who had a passion for knowledge; he was always prepared to initiate an exchange of ideas in order to arrive at the truth. Saint Thomas Aquinas was one of the major proponents

unseen—I told them only what you commanded me to: “Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.” I was a witness over them during my time among them. Ever since You took my soul, You alone have been the watcher over them: You are witness to all things”” (Q. 5:116). It is quite possible that contemporary Christian fringe groups thought in terms of a Trinity of God the Father, God the Mother, and God the Son. Already, in the fourth century, pre-Islamic Arabia had been described by Eusebius of Caesarea as *Arabia haeresium ferax* (“Arabia, a land fertile in heresies”). Whereas for the Qur’an Christians remain “People of the Book” (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), there always remains a certain hesitation as to whether they should be deemed *monotheists* (see, for example, Q. 2:62; 3:110–15; 4:55; 5:69.82), *unbelievers* (*kuffār*; see Q. 5:17.72–73; 9:30), or *associators* (*mušrikūn*; see 5:72). The same hesitation is to be found amongst Muslim exegetes. The renowned mediaeval Muslim exegete Fahr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) recognizes that no Christian of his time believes that the Trinity includes Mary; to his mind, this was perhaps the belief of a sect which has disappeared. Concerning the denial of the Incarnation, see Q. 4:171; 5:72; 19:35–37; see also Q. 9:30. The above-quoted verses of the Qur’an in English are taken from *The Qur’an: An English Translation*, by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹ See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Islamic Surveys 9 (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1972), 73.

of such discourse, and it is precisely within this context that we discover in him a man of dialogue, not only with the philosophical currents of his time, but also with the religious, including Islam.

The main concern of Aquinas was that of learning from them in his search for the truth. In this respect he epitomized the mediaeval respect for learning, with its conviction that "truth was where one found it." Thus, in the words of David Burrell, "he was more inclined to examine the arguments of thinkers than their faith, trusting in the image of the creator in us all to search out traces of the divine handiwork."¹⁰

The *Summa contra gentiles*: Some Preliminary Considerations

Our point of departure, however must be the period and the circumstances within which the *SCG* was written. According to Marie-Dominique Chenu, in the 1250s Arab-Islamic culture was already considered "the strongest exponent of ancient Greek science and philosophy; it represented both a threat and a temptation for the Latin West." To his mind, the missionary effort triggered by the *Reconquista* almost two centuries after the event thus "evolved into a new style because Islam showed itself to be not only a military menace, but also a culturally superior civilization."¹¹ As already stated above, the works of Aristotle that were meticulously commented by Ibn Rušd opened up for Christian scholars "a scientific view of the universe apart from the Bible's religious imagery,"¹² a view that necessitated an urgent response on their part. Thus, the Christian missionary spirit could not be separated from the learning that was being disseminated in the intellectual milieu of the time. Consequently, the *SCG* "saw itself as rather a defence of the whole corpus of Christian thought in the face of the Arab-Greek scientific conception of the universe that was henceforth to be a part of the Western mentality."¹³ Here, of course, Chenu is speaking of engagement with Islamic thought.

Burrell suggests that Aquinas's own geographic and social origins could well have predisposed him to a closer relationship with thinkers representing the Islamic world than his contemporaries, in Paris at least, could

¹⁰ David B. Burrell, C.S.C., "Thomas Aquinas and Islam," in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jim Fodor and Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 68.

¹¹ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, trans. Paul Philibert, O.P. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 65.

¹² Chenu, *Aquinas*, 65.

¹³ Chenu, *Aquinas*, 66.

be presumed to have had. For his provenance from Aquino in the region of Naples, itself part of the kingdom of Sicily, reflected a face of Europe more open to the Islamic world.¹⁴ This is corroborated by the fact that, following his initial education with the Benedictines in the monastery of Montecassino, he continued his studies at the University of Naples, which had just been established by Emperor Frederick II, a distant relative of his; this was prior to his entering the Order of Preachers. Furthermore, in his later years, when his Dominican province asked him to direct a theological *studium*, Aquinas expressly chose Naples for its strategic location.¹⁵

Cyrille Michon appears to corroborate Chenu's assertion when he states that "Aquinas is in dialogue with Averröes and Maimonides¹⁶ through large parts of *Contra gentiles* I–III, while he engages in further debates with pagan philosophers (about God's immateriality at Book I ch. 20, about the intellect in Book II, and implicitly about conceptions of happiness in Book III)."¹⁷ Therefore, "the objective of *Contra gentiles* I–III is quite clear: reason alone, correct philosophy, including and based on correct reading and interpretation of Aristotle, leads to a large part of the catholic faith and sometimes establishes truths that are proper to it."¹⁸ These two affirmations lead him to conclude that "the whole of the *Contra gentiles* appears as a massive argument or a body of arguments for the truth of the catholic faith. Most of them (I–III) take as premises naturally knowable truths (both empirical and rational ones), but those of Book IV rely on revelation and defend its correct interpretation and articulate conclusions drawn from it."¹⁹ Furthermore, Michon draws a very interesting distinction between the goal of the *Summa theologiae* [ST] and that of the SCG. Whereas the aim of the first "is not so much to settle disputes over the truth as to reach understanding," the aim of the second is that of "making the truths of faith

¹⁴ Burrell, "Thomas Aquinas and Islam," 65.

¹⁵ Burrell, "Thomas Aquinas and Islam," 65.

¹⁶ Here it is useful to refer to what has been judiciously pointed out by Mark Jordan as one of the fundamental differences in approach between Aquinas and the rabbi from Cordoba, in that "Maimonides writes obscurely for the just; Thomas writes publicly for a community of believers" ("The Protreptic of *Against the Gentiles*," in *Debates in Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings and Contemporary Responses*, ed. Jeffrey Hause [New York: Routledge, 2014], 248–70, at 259).

¹⁷ Cyrille Michon, "To Make the Truth Known: The Aim and Structure of the *Contra Gentiles*," in Hause, *Debates in Medieval Philosophy*, 271–84, at 280.

¹⁸ Michon, "To Make the Truth Known," 280.

¹⁹ Michon, "To Make the Truth Known," 281. This is confirmed by what Aquinas himself states in the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 9, no. 3.

understood. What is reached is not so much truth, the truth of faith *per se*, but the *intellectus fidei*.²⁰ He therefore concludes:

They both synthesize the Christian doctrine, but one aims at making the truth known [*SCG*], the other [*ST*] at making it understood. The first one relies as much as possible on natural knowledge and philosophy and is philosophy made theology, the second proceeds only through rational arguments and is theology made philosophy or, better, philosophy of faith.²¹

That having been said, one must take caution in categorizing the first three books as philosophical and the fourth as theological. In the world of Aquinas, philosophy was not as independent a science as it became in the wake of the nominalist movement. As Matthew Kostecky has rightly affirmed, the first part of this work (i.e., the first three books) “proceeds according to a theological method while restricting itself to the way of reason.” This *modus procedendi* leads to what he describes as “tensions that result from restricting the human truths about God to the natural capacities of the intellect within an explicitly theological endeavour.”²²

In spite of what might have been the reason behind its composition, the *SCG* speaks to a vast audience of scholars and intellectuals hailing from a variety of cultures, religions, and schools of philosophy throughout the ages.

Approaching the *Summa contra gentiles*

It can be safely assumed that Aquinas began writing the *SCG* some time prior to June 1259 when both he and Albert the Great were present at the Dominican General Chapter at Valenciennes. It was probably completed and revised by the autumn of 1265, just as Thomas was about to embark upon the *ST*.²³

The main focus of Aquinas in the *SCG* is on truth and error in general. Taking his cue from the Fathers of the Church, he addresses three classes of interlocutors:

²⁰ Michon, “To Make the Truth Known,” 281–82.

²¹ Michon, “To Make the Truth Known,” 283.

²² Matthew Kostecky, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa contra Gentiles: A Mirror of Human Nature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 5.

²³ Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Contra Gentiles: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8–9. See Gauthier, *Somme Contre les Gentils*.

1. Heretics, that is to say, those who claim to be Christian but do not in fact embrace Orthodox beliefs;
2. Jews, to and through whom the Old Testament was revealed, but who, contrary to Christian belief, do not acknowledge its Christological culmination;
3. Muslims and pagans who, though religious, acknowledge neither the Old nor the New Testament in their canonical form.²⁴

As for the relevance of Aquinas, especially through his *SCG*, as a methodological guide in our quest for a fresh and renewed encounter with Islamic thought, the late Joseph Kenny has left us this interesting observation:

The arguments used in the Christian *summās* and the Muslim books of *kalām*²⁵ are highly philosophical, but guided by what each tradition holds as revelation. They are at the same time books of apologetic theology and philosophy of religion. . . .

[The] first three of the four volumes [of the *SCG*] build carefully the shared vision held by Christians and Muslims alike. They bring supportive insight from Christian reflection which has been foundational for the development of Western culture. In the present developments of interchange between East and West these insights attained by reason in a context of deep faith can constitute a veritable treasure chest for Islamic thinkers as they build toward the future.²⁶

Kosteletzky is correct in assuming that the *SCG* “is directed to one goal: an elucidation of the human knowledge of God.”²⁷ But he also went on to state that its investigation about God “is also an inquiry into the nature of the human being who investigates God,”²⁸ thereby corroborating what he

²⁴ *SCG* I, ch. 2, no. 3.

²⁵ *Kalām* is Muslim theology broadly speaking.

²⁶ Joseph Kenny, *Christian-Islamic Preambles of Faith: An Exercise in the Philosophy of Religion or Kalām for Our Day, Modelled after Thomas Aquinas*, Summa contra Gentiles, Books I–III (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1999), v.

²⁷ Kosteletzky, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.

²⁸ Kosteletzky, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa contra Gentiles*, 217.

had already affirmed earlier that “Thomas’s understanding of human nature is itself manifested in his account of the operation and power of the human intellect to know God (the intellect’s most perfect object).”²⁹ The one who embarks upon such a mission is regarded by Thomas as being a “wise man.” In the *SCG* the term “wise” (*sapientes*) is attributed to those “who order things rightly and govern them well”³⁰ (*qui res directe ordinant et eas bene gubernant*). However, the appellation “absolutely wise man” (*nomen autem simpliciter sapientis*) is “reserved for him whose consideration is directed to the end of the universe, which is also the origin of the universe.” In this perspective, truth becomes “the ultimate end of the whole universe, and the consideration of the wise man aims principally at truth.”³¹ That truth of Thomas is, of course, Jesus Christ, whose own words he quotes from John 18:37 (“For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice”). He further elucidates his thought by first detailing his *terminus ad quem*. The wise man has a twofold office:

To meditate and speak forth of the divine truth, which is truth in person (wisdom touches on this in the words *my mouth shall meditate truth*) and to refute error (which wisdom touches upon in the words and *my lips shall hate impiety*).³² By impiety is here meant falsehood against the divine truth.³³

He later explains his rationale as to his assuming the mission of the wise man, this being that “among all human pursuits, the pursuit of wisdom is more perfect, more noble, more useful, and more full of joy.”³⁴ In fulfilling such a mission, Aquinas would be making extensive use of sources that were not necessarily Christian. Certainly, Sacred Scripture and the Fathers of the Church figure prominently in this work, and they did play a significant role in shaping his thoughts. There is, however, another element which is equally important, and that is his abundant use of the Aristotelian corpus together with the works of Islamic philosophers such as the eclectic Ibn Sīnā and “the Commentator” par excellence of Aristotle, namely Ibn Rušd.

Here I wish to make a very brief digression whose purpose will become

²⁹ Kostelecky, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.

³⁰ *SCG* I, ch. 1, no. 1.

³¹ *SCG* I, ch. 1, no. 2.

³² See Prov 8:7.

³³ *SCG* I, ch. 1, no. 4.

³⁴ *SCG* I, ch. 1, no. 4.

clear as we proceed. Some sixty years before Thomas embarked upon the *SCG*, Ibn Rušd had formulated a very interesting description of philosophy in the robust defense of the study of philosophy and logic, which he penned under the title *Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl* (Decisive Treatise). He described it as “nothing more than reflection upon existing things and consideration of them insofar as they are an indication of the Artisan—I mean insofar as they are artefacts, for existing things indicate the Artisan only through cognizance³⁵ of the art in them, and the more complete cognizance of the art in them is, the more complete is cognizance of the Artisan,”³⁶ that is, God, as the Creator.³⁷ *Falsafa* thus becomes *theodicy*, aiming to prove the existence of the Creator and to provide a better understanding of God. In all this, it is necessary to point out that the full title of Ibn Rušd’s treatise is *Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl wa taqrīr mā bayn al-Šarī’a wa ‘l-Ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl* (The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between Šarī’a and Wisdom). The title applies the term *ḥikma* (Wisdom) to philosophy. One of the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names of God is in fact *Al-Ḥakīm* (the All-Wise).³⁸ He is therefore implying that philosophy flows from divine wisdom.

The fundamental difference between the approach taken by Ibn Rušd and that of Aquinas lies in the fact that the former was fighting for the survival of philosophy in the Islamic world,³⁹ whereas when Thomas

³⁵ Here the translator is rendering into English the term *ma’rifā* found in the original text.

³⁶ Averröes, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth with introduction and notes (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2008), 1.

³⁷ It is interesting to note that Aquinas applies the same analogy in his commentary on the second book of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, wherein he discusses the act of creation through the Word at *In II sent.*, q. 1, d. 12, a. 5: “But activity is called an act of the thing, even if it does not pass into the external, as understanding is an activity of intellect and can be without motion; hence the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 7 that God takes enjoyment from one simple operation, but in this way God acts eternally in the Word, as the artisan fashions the forms of artificial things” (trans. from isidore.co/aquinas/english/Sentences2.htm). See also *In I sent.*, q. 2, d. 36, a. 1, corp.

³⁸ See: Q. 31:27; 46:2; 57:1; 66:2.

³⁹ The *Faṣl al-Maqāl* is presented as an official *fatwa* or juridical decision determining the canonical status of philosophy. In fact, the *status questionis* posed by Ibn Rušd at the beginning of his work reads as follows: “Now, the goal of this statement is for us to investigate, from the perspective of Law-based reflection (*al-naẓar al-šar’ī*), whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is permitted (*mubāḥ*), prohibited (*maḥẓūr*), or commanded (*ma’mūr bihi*) – and this as a recommendation (*‘alā ġihat al-nadab*) or as an obligation (*‘alā ġihat al-wuġūb*) – by the Law (*bī ‘l-šar’*)” (Averröes, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise*, 1).

Aquinas is posing the question in the *ST* of “Whether, besides philosophy, any further doctrine is required?,”⁴⁰ he is implying that the existence of philosophy in Latin Christendom was a statement of fact. His question is whether another science is necessary *besides* philosophy. He therefore advances the argument in favor of *reason enlightened by revelation*.

The *De rationibus fidei*

If we are to consider the method of Aquinas as a basis for a renewed engagement with Islamic thought in our times, then it is necessary to read the *SCG* in conjunction with the other work which he penned toward the end of this one or almost immediately after its completion, which is his short treatise entitled *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos ad Cantorem Antiochenum*.⁴¹ This *opusculum* was written during Aquinas’s sojourn at Orvieto and directed at a much more limited audience. It is of itself a short work and was intended to reply to the objections and criticisms to the fundamental principles of the Catholic faith put forward mainly by some Muslim authorities. These objections were brought to the attention of Thomas by a “cantor,” probably an official of the Church at Antioch, by way of a letter in which he sought advice as to how one could give clear, concise, and convincing replies.⁴²

The period in which Thomas lived was marked by separation from and

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1.

⁴¹ For a translation of the text into English see *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos ad Cantorem Antiochenum*, trans. Joseph Kenny, O.P., as “Reasons for the Faith against Muslim Objections,” *Islamochristiana* 22 (1996): 31–52. The translation was based on the 1968 Leonine edition of the work, vol. 40/B.

⁴² Given the presence of so many religions within its territory, the city of Antioch, like the region of Al-Andalus (Spain), became a venue of regular disputes between Christian and Muslim interlocutors. Its population included Latin, Orthodox, and Armenian Christians, as well as indigenous Muslims. That being said, the situation in Antioch during the time in which the cantor to whom the treatise is addressed wrote the letter was indeed precarious. The city was already for quite some time under siege from the Mamluks under the leadership of the fearsome Baybars. This fact alone rendered the Muslim inhabitants bolder and more hopeful that the city would shortly fall into their hands. The Orthodox (that is to say, the Greeks) on the other hand were, to say the least, distrustful of the Latins, owing to the humiliations suffered by their co-religionists at Constantinople, when it fell into the hands of the Latin armies headed by the Venetians during the Fourth Crusade. The Armenians, for their part, were attempting to forge a secret alliance with the Mongols, who were settled in northern Syria and in neighboring Iraq, in the event of Antioch falling into the hands of Baybars, as it in fact did in May 1268, resulting in the ferocious slaughter of the entire Christian population.

relative ignorance of the Muslim religion. He himself admitted that he was not versed in its doctrines.⁴³ The only exception concerned the situation of Christians in Muslim territories which is clearly reflected in the comprehensive replies to the questions posed by the "Cantor of Antioch," in order to be better equipped when facing the objections raised against Christian doctrine on the part of Muslim scholars.

The objections listed by the cantor are quoted in the introduction to the text. To these objections Aquinas furnishes replies which he divides into ten chapters, two of which define the correct method to be undertaken as regards dialogue. Another addresses the objection raised by the Greeks and the Armenians, whereas the remaining seven address the objections raised by the Muslims.

Aquinas considers the questions posed as central to the Christian faith; the two fundamental dogmas being the confession of the Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation that led to the salvific suffering and death of Jesus Christ. These fundamental beliefs lead to the articulation of Christian hope in life everlasting and in divine grace that assists man in his journey toward salvation.

As Burrell remarks, in this short treatise, Thomas does not demonstrate any wish whatsoever to engage in polemics. Instead, he takes the opportunity to present a brief summary of Christian doctrine concerning those points identified by the cantor as being of particular importance to Muslims. He does not respond directly to the Muslim interlocutor. What he does is to furnish the cantor with a series of strategies in order to formulate an instructive and robust response that would take as a starting point the objections raised by Muslims in order to come up with an insightful presentation of the heritage of the Christian faith.⁴⁴ In undertaking this task, Thomas teaches us that, by taking as a point of departure the objections moved by Muslims, one might find better ways to come up with a clearer exposition of the principles of the Christian faith.

The chapters of this brief treatise are so structured because they are centred upon the exhortation of St. Peter (1 Pet 3:15): "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the faith and the hope that is in you [Parati semper ad satisfactionem omni poscenti vos rationem de ea quae in vobis est fide et spe]." This text is quoted by Thomas in the first chapter of the treatise. Contrary to the original Greek

⁴³ See *SCG I*, ch. 2.

⁴⁴ This succinct description captures the *modus procedendi* of St. Thomas wherein apologetics becomes also dialogue (see Burrell, "Thomas Aquinas and Islam," 82).

text of the New Testament, which mentions only hope, the version which he uses adds to it the virtue of faith. As Gilles Emery has observed, the version chosen by Thomas serves a particular purpose, given that for him the Christian faith is contained above all in the confession of the Trinity and in the glorification of the Cross. These two articles of faith contain the entire body of Christian doctrine.⁴⁵

He is concerned with placing particular emphasis on the Cross, which appears to have been the object of sarcasm among the Muslim interlocutors in Antioch. Furthermore, he wanted to demonstrate that faith in the humanity of Christ is inextricably linked to the profession of faith in the Cross.

And here one must turn to the time-tested practice of analogy applied both by Thomas and by the Fathers of the Oriental churches. Aquinas applies this method many times in the *De rationibus fidei* when he conveys the meaning of what Christians believe about the intra-Trinitarian relationship (word-intellect, chs. 3–4), the Incarnation (soul-body, chs. 5–6), the suffering and death of Jesus on the Cross (dignity of the one receiving the injury, ch. 7), and divine predestination (the point and the line, ch. 10).

Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue

From what has already been stated above, it is evident that the approach adopted by Aquinas in what concerns disputations with fellow scholars depended upon their beliefs and level of engagement. He refers to this approach in both the above-mentioned *SCG* I, chapter 2 (no. 3), and in chapter 2 of *De rationibus fidei*, as well as in the third article of question 9 of *Quodlibetales* IV, which Thomas wrote after having finished both of these works. In the last we are presented with his most comprehensive approach to the matter, one in which he expresses himself with the utmost clarity:

Each act should be performed in a way conducive to its end. Now, debates aim at one of two ends.

Some debates aim to remove doubt about whether this or that is the case. In theological debates of this kind, most use should be made of the authority accepted by both parties to the debate. In a debate with Jews, for example, appeal should be made to the

⁴⁵ See *Saint Thomas d'Aquin: Les raisons de la foi, Les Articles de la foi, et Les sacrements de l'Église*, Introduction, trans. Gilles Emery with notes [French] (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 21–22.

authority of the Old Testament. With Manicheans (who reject the Old Testament), only the New Testament should be used as an authority. With schismatics like the Greeks (who accept the Old and New Testament but not the teaching of our saints), we have to debate them using the authority of the Old and New Testament and the teachers they accept. With those who accept no authority, however, we have to rely on natural reason alone to convince them.⁴⁶

Other debates involve masters at schools, and are not about correcting errors, but about instructing the audience and helping them understand the truth they already believe. In this case, reason should be used to get at the heart of the truth and enable them to know just how it is true. If the master settles the question by mere authority instead, the audience will certainly be assured that this or that is the case, but they will not acquire any knowledge or understanding of it, thus going away empty.⁴⁷

It is obvious that the method adopted by St. Thomas sought first and foremost a common ground upon which a healthy debate could take place. Where Sacred Scripture (or part of it) was acknowledged by all those involved, then this could form a basis for discussion. Where Sacred Scripture was in no way accepted, then the sole use of natural reason was the only way forward. As stated already, Thomas had already espoused the same approach in the two previously mentioned works. Here perhaps it would be appropriate to discuss the meaning of the term “natural reason,” which he uses in these contexts in all three works. According to Brian Davies, this term denotes “philosophical insight” or “philosophy” or just “reason.” In fact, in the words of Davies, Aquinas “is referring to what we can figure out on our own by trying to think well and clearly and without recourse to anything that we might take to be divine revelation. More specifically, however, he is thinking of reason as able to demonstrate certain truths,” meaning that “he is going to try to demonstrate certain things about God, while adding that he will also be arguing that what he has demonstrated accords with orthodox Christian teaching.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ As we have seen above, this category refers to Muslims and pagans.

⁴⁷ *Thomas Aquinas's Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. Turner Nevitt and Brian Davies with introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 753–54.

⁴⁸ Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Contra Gentiles*, 11–12. Davies explains here that, in the mind of Aquinas, orthodox Christian teaching is “found in the Bible, in creeds such as the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, and in the teachings of church councils prior to his time.”

But then Thomas includes something else: instruction directed at helping others “understand the truth they already believe.” Here he advises the use of reason as a means for articulating divine teaching, thereby aiding the faithful toward deepening their faith. This is in fact the rationale suggested by the *SCG* and *De rationibus fidei*, to say nothing of the monumental *ST*. What remains to be considered is whether and, if so, how such a plan is relevant today in the ever-evolving debate between Christian and Muslim scholarship.

Certainly, in such encounters, one does not seek a winner or a loser. The principal and ultimate aim is that of achieving clarity of presentation through clarity in communication. Aquinas was occupied with removing misunderstandings about what both parties might hold to be true and about what they assume to be the fundamental beliefs of the other. It is incumbent upon all those involved to pose precise questions but also to provide clear answers. Undoubtedly, a level of agreement, albeit limited, can be achieved; one must, however, accept that much disagreement will occur. These cannot be brushed aside; they have to be accepted as an integral part of our human nature. However, such disagreement must be stated clearly and accurately by all parties involved.

Here it is paramount that Christian scholars offer the right understanding of what the Christian faith holds about the two fundamental dogmas upon which it stands: the Trinity (which, as stated above, is flatly denied by the Qur'an, due to its erroneous interpretation of the dogma) and the Incarnation.⁴⁹ Taking their cue from Thomas (and from the Fathers of the Church before him), Christian scholars are called upon to articulate the meaning of such dogmas in order to distinguish truth from falsity in the way they are understood. It involves understanding what an intelligent Muslim scholar thinks about what he or she knows regarding the Christian faith. It also involves responding to such concerns by applying concepts that he or she would understand.

However, it is also imperative to note another common thread that flows through all three above-mentioned works. Aquinas succeeds in formulating a robust defense of Christian dogma in the wake of criticism leveled by non-Catholic and non-Christian scholars, while sustaining a heightened awareness of the necessity to deepen one's Christian faith in the face of such challenges. He embraces the Dominican tradition in and through which study and contemplation become interchangeable. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has exquisitely portrayed this indissoluble bond

⁴⁹ See note 8 above.

in the life and works of Thomas when referring to the perennial validity of the *ST*:

In this reflection, in meeting the true questions of his time, that are also often our own questions, St. Thomas, also by employing the method and thought of the ancient philosophers, and of Aristotle in particular, thus arrives at precise, lucid and pertinent formulations of the truths of faith in which truth is a gift of faith, shines out and becomes accessible to us, for our reflection. However, this effort of the human mind Aquinas reminds us with his own life is always illuminated by prayer, by the light that comes from on high. Only those who live with God and with his mysteries can also understand what they say to us.⁵⁰

One must neither lose sight of the fact that Christian–Muslim encounters are essentially encounters involving *believers*. It is obvious that our knowledge of Islam as a religion and of the roots of its fundamental teachings has notably developed since the thirteenth century. And even during that period, the term “unbeliever” was not equivalent to “non-believer.” It simply meant somebody who denied the core beliefs of the other, without denying belief in the divine.

Whereas the passion of Thomas for the truth could in no way have been quashed or compromised, the methodology that he adopted was one of dialogue. His abiding principle was that one must consider not *who said what*, but *what was being said*. Such a maxim spurred him on to confront and refute all opposition against the use of pagan and non-Christian authors. He was open to the truth from wherever it arrived, precisely because, following the *glossa* of Ambrosiaster,⁵¹ he was convinced that “every truth, by whomever it may be said, is from the Holy Spirit in the sense that he imparts the natural light and that he moves the mind to understand and utter the truth.”⁵²

Thomas Aquinas paves the way for our journey when he affirms that “the good for man lies in knowing the truth, and his sovereign good lies,

⁵⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience of June 23, 2010.

⁵¹ See *PL*, 17:245.

⁵² *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 1. Aquinas reiterates this same concept when he stated that no spirit can be “so darkened as not to participate in some way in the divine light. In fact, every known truth from any source is totally due to this ‘light which shines in the darkness,’ since every truth, no matter who utters it, comes from the Holy Spirit” (*Super Ioan* 1, lec. 3, Mareitti no. 103 [commenting on v. 5; trans. mine]).

not in knowing any sort of truth, but the perfect knowledge of the supreme truth, as Aristotle shows.”⁵³

In today’s world and in the present circumstances, one might take Aquinas’s statement a step further and argue also for the need to honor human dignity in order to seek such Truth. This point was recently highlighted by Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, at the presentation of the book *The Promotion of Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue as an Instrument for Peace and Fraternity* that took place in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia).⁵⁴ In his speech delivered during the event he affirmed that:

Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God in their moral, spiritual, and intellectual and bodily composition. They are part of His plan and, therefore, must not be deprived in any way either of their humanity, which is the source of one’s dignity, or of their right to seek and express Truth. While human dignity is the premise that allows a dialogue among different cultures (also non-religious ones), the pursuit of Truth permits an authentic encounter between various religions confessions.⁵⁵

Aquinas’s engagement with Muslim scholars offers supportive insight for Christian reflection which has for centuries laid the foundations for Western culture in general and European culture in particular.

Today we are all the more aware of living in a multi-religious society that is constantly confronting and challenging the hitherto uncontested dogmas of secularist culture. In the present culture of globalization, the insights of Aquinas still constitute an invitation to clarify our positions as Christians and Muslims within our respective communities and a willingness to look forward toward a dialogue of cooperation rather than conflict.

N.V.

⁵³ ST II-II, q. 167, a. 1, ad 1. Cf. Aristotle, *Ethics* 10.7.1177a13 through 10.8.1178b27.

⁵⁴ The event took place on November 22, 2020.

⁵⁵ Catholic News Agency, “Vatican diplomat: ‘Pursuit of Truth’ necessary for inter-religious dialogue,” Catholic Sentinel, November 26, 2020, sentinel.org/Content/News/Pope-Francis-and-Vatican/Article/Vatican-diplomat-Pursuit-of-Truth-necessary-for-inter-religious-dialogue-/2/61/41266.