New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12070

Why Do We Still Need Aquinas?

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Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate the enduring importance of the teachings and methodologies of Thomas Aquinas to the theological project. The paper has three parts. The first part emphasises the importance of Aquinas' clarity in dealing with the question of God, emphasising how God is radically transcendent and yet sovereignly present to, and active in, creation. The second part addresses Thomas Aquinas' thought on human relatedness to God, especially in the area of prayer. The third part focuses on Aquinas' account of human flourishing as virtuous living. A no less goal of this paper is to demonstrate that, even if Aquinas had not said anything about a particular issue as perhaps the question we seek to address is of of our time, much is to be gleaned from his precise and clear, analytical and argumentative approach to all questions.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, God, Prayer, Virtue, Human Flourishing

In the early stages of the preparation of this paper a friend, not a theologian, asked me what precisely it was to be about, and I replied that it was about showing the necessity of Aquinas for theology, to which she replied . . . "I would have thought that was obvious". Over the centuries many have thought the same, for example Benedict XV (1914–1922) stated that "the eminent commendations of Thomas Aquinas by the Holy See no longer permit a Catholic to doubt that he was divinely raised up that the Church might have a master whose doctrine should be followed in a special way at all times."[1] Is this true? Can the teachings of anyone have enduring significance, or is Aquinas someone to be studied solely by those with an interest in the Medieval world?

[1] http://www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/popes-st-thomas Accessed 21/8/2013.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The title for this paper asks "why do we still need Aquinas?" The question is not why the works of Aquinas are simply helpful or useful, the question is why the teachings and methodologies of Thomas Aquinas are needed, eight centuries after his death, needed, and not simply helpful. One of those who articulate this claim particularly well is Timothy McDermott. In his contribution on Aquinas in the *How to Read* series, he writes:

> Aquinas never abandoned this criticism of Platonism, never abandoned his Aristotelian position, but he uncovered within Aristotle's emphasis on this-worldy individual existence and agency a far more potent pointer to God than Plato's emphasis on the other-worldliness of spirit. In Aquinas' view nature does not play second fiddle to supernature: God is in fact not supernatural but the source and author and end of the natural. For this reason Aquinas believed human reason has its own natural autonomy given it by God and respected by divine revelation; secular natural philosophy and sacred revealed theology must collaborate to build truth, aiming at harmony, not discord.[2]

McDermott continues, "It is not too much to claim that Aquinas's views redefined the relation of the sacred and the secular, and helped to change the history of western society".[3] This is indeed a huge claim. The world has changed greatly since the time of Aquinas. Newtonian mechanics have brought modern science to birth, we have had Descartes with his mechanical conception of the body, Darwin with his theory of evolution, which seemed to challenge the biblical understanding of the material world, and more recently people like Dawkins who see their mission in life as "not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented".[4] The confrontation between religion and science, between the sacred and the secular, continues. McDermott suggests that "Aquinas's Aristotelianism may be just the refreshing view we need to resolve this contemporary debate".[5]

While the constraints of time will not allow us to address all these issues specifically, this paper will demonstrate the foundational point that Aquinas, largely through his rediscovery of the Aristotelian texts, established the validity of the secular realm theologically, that is, he established that "secular natural philosophy and sacred revealed theology must collaborate to build truth, aiming at harmony, not discord".[6] This applies to that most theological of all concepts: God, as well as to theories of beginnings. This paper will begin with an

[2] Timothy McDermott, *How to Read Aquinas* (London: Granta Books, 2007), pp. 3, 4.
[3] McDermott, *How to Read Aquinas*, p. 4.
[4] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 36.
[5] McDermott, *How to Read Aquinas*, p. 5.
[6] McDermott, *How to Read Aquinas*, p. 4.

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exploration of how Aquinas thinks of God, and it will show that the question of God matters, and how the way we approach that question matters not just for internal debate but no less for debate with those for whom it seems that God does not matter. The second phase of the paper will discuss Aquinas' thoughts on how humankind is invited into relationship with God, specifically focusing on Aquinas and prayer. Finally, the paper will address, albeit briefly, Aquinas' thoughts on how humans might live well in the world. Whether we live in the thirteenth- or the twenty-first-century Aquinas' work on virtue, and virtuous living marks another enduring contribution of Aquinas to the theological articulation of human living.

Part One: *Deus non est in genere*[7]

The topic of God is where any theological discussion should begin, so Aquinas teaches. On this topic Aquinas is clear, *Deus non est in genere*. God cannot be caught in any category of human thought whatsoever. A major study by the historian Brad Gregory emphasises the importance of Aquinas' clarity. He states the Aquinas position as follows:

> God shares no genus in common with creatures – not even being – so utterly different is God's literally indefinable . . . reality from that of anything else, God is not a highest, noblest, or most powerful entity within the universe, divine by virtue of being comparatively greatest. Rather, God is radically distinct from the universe as a whole, which he did not fashion by ordering anything already existent but rather created entirely ex nihilo . . . . Although God is radically transcendent and altogether other than his creation, he is sovereignly present to and acts in and through it. There is no 'outside' to creation, spatially or temporally, nor is any part of creation independent of God or capable of existing independently of God.[8]

Gregory argues that this orthodox position has been obscured or lost completely in much subsequent western thought. Instead a contrary view [univocal metaphysics] was adopted, with widespread influence and seriously deleterious effect on western thought even to this day. This is the view that "God was an individual ens, an entity within being, or God was in some way coextensive with the totality

[7] 'In the case of God, you must deny that he belongs to the same genus as any other good thing, not [merely] that he belongs to a different genus. This is because he is outside any genus and is the origin of every genus. And so he is compared to other things only as transcending them (*per excessum*).' ST I q.6 a. 2 ad 3.

[8] Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation. How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. (Cambridge-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 30.

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of being.... Creatures were finite, limited natural beings; God was an infinite, perfect, supernatural being."[9]

Gregory's argument is that how we approach the question of God matters. This is one of the chief reasons why "theology still needs Aquinas" for there are very few who so lucidly articulate a theology of God.

Avoiding Misunderstanding

However, Aquinas needs careful attention. It is easy to get him wrong.[10] For example, Jürgen Moltmann, speaking of Aquinas' five ways, wrote:

> The cosmological proof of God was supposed by Thomas to answer the question *utrum Deus sit*, but he did not really prove the existence of God; what he proved was the nature of the divine.... Aquinas answered the question: 'What is the nature of the divine?', but not the question 'Who is God?'[11]

But this has to be wrong. In the introduction to question 3, On the simplicity of God, we are clearly told: "Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not."[12] So how can Moltmann say that what Aquinas proves is the nature of the divine?

Aquinas is clear. We cannot in this life know the essence of God, the nature of the divine. For Aquinas, "knowing the essence", seeking to talk sensibly about something, means giving an account of its *definitio*, in the Aristotelian sense of *definitio*. To know the *definitio* of something means we can give some account of the kinds of predicates appropriate to the particular topic. For instance, of an animal we can sensibly say that it is sick, or hungry, while of the human animal we can say it is making love or showing affection or being intelligent. None of these predicates would be appropriate if the topic of discussion was cement or a tree – unless of course we are speaking metaphorically. In other words, in order to talk sensibly about something, the appropriate language-game for the topic must be known. We must know the *definitio* in the Aristotelian sense. We

[9] Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, pp. 48, 49.

[10] As clearly shown in Mark D. Jordan, *Rewritten Theology. Aquinas after his readers*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[11] J Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1981), p. 12.

[12] Sed quia de Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit, non possumus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non sit. ST I q.3 Prol. http://www.corpusthomisticum.org

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are not in that position when we speak of God, for in Aquinas' view we cannot give a *definitio* of what God is.

> From this it is also plain that He has no genus nor difference, nor can there be any definition of Him; nor, save through His effects, a demonstration of Him: for a definition is from genus and difference; and the means of a demonstration is a definition.[13]

We have to come by a more roundabout route when we speak of God.

De Ente et Essentia – Existence and Essence in Creatures

When it comes to our knowledge of God's existence, Aquinas first wonders if it is self-evident to us that God exists – and to this he answers "no" (ST I q.2 a.1). He does admit that were we able to understand God as God understands Godself it would be clear to us that God cannot but exist, but "because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition [God exists] is not self-evident to us; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature – namely, by effects" (ST I q.2 a.1 c). The only knowledge we can have of God has to be derived from causal reasoning based on what God has brought about.[14] Human knowledge begins with our senses and, normally speaking, we know something exists because of direct experience. We cannot know God in this way.[15] But we do come to a certain knowledge of God from our sensory experience of what God has brought about. Any knowledge we have of God as the Creator "is an inference from what are taken to be effects. In particular, it is an inference based on the notion that there is in creatures a distinction between essence (*essentia*) and existence (*esse*)."[16]

This distinction between essence and existence in creatures is crucial. It distinguishes the creature from the Creator – that is, it points to the dependent nature of our very existence. There is a source of my existence which is not in me. Dependency, gratuity, one might say, is inscribed in our very existence.

[13] 'Et ex hoc patet quod non habet genus neque differentias, neque est definitio ipsius neque demonstratio nisi per effectum, quia definitio est ex genere et differentia, demonstrationis autem medium est definitio.' Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars ed., vol. 2, trans Timothy McDermott (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York; McGraw-Hill, 1964), I q. 3, a.5 p. 36.

[14] See also *Summa contra Gentiles* Bk 1 chapt. 11, 12.

[15] He does speak of Moses and Paul having a direct awareness of God, seeing God's essence (ST II-II q.174 a.4), but this he regards as a miraculous occurrence.

[16] Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil*, (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 41.

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The foundational role this distinction plays in Aquinas' theology is indicated by Aquinas' decision to articulate this teaching in the second question of the *Prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas' famed Five Ways are questions about the *esse* of things, their being over against their not being, that is to say the dependency or gratuitousness of existence itself. It is this gratuitousness of things that Aquinas calls their *esse*. As Herbert McCabe says, "not just their existence over against the possibility that they might not have been a part of the world . . . but their existence over-against the possibility that there might not have been any world at all".[17] McCabe continues, "In thinking of the *esse* of things we are trying to think of them not just in relation to their natural causes but in their relation to a creator".[18] The question for theology is thus not so much "What can be said about God?" but "How can anything be said about God?" Aquinas, reflecting on all that is in his world, wonders "why is there anything instead of nothing?" It is right to ask that question, Aquinas says, it is a real question, but we cannot provide an answer with our conceptual resources. The question points us to the incomprehensible mystery that we "label" God – *et hoc omnes dicunt Deum* (ST I q.2 a.3 c) – and God is incomprehensible mystery. Even when we are in the realm of revelation our engagement with God occurs in mediated or analogical or metaphorical ways:

> Although by the revelation of grace in this life we cannot know of God "what He is," and thus are united to Him as to one unknown.[19]

God's essence is God's existence, *ipsum esse subsistens*

This second question of the *Summa*, on the Existence of God, is perhaps the most often read part of the *Summa*. It is indeed of great importance to Aquinas' thinking, but perhaps not in the way it is oft times construed. Its importance lies not in what is too often perceived as Aquinas arguing toward an actual existing God but in his arrival at the conclusion that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*.

In article three of this question, popularly called the proofs of the existence of God, Aquinas shows that he is not satisfied with the argument for God's existence from the contingency of creatures. This idea that the big distinction between God and creatures lies in the noncontingent, necessary fact of God, and the contingent nature of all creatures was advocated by classical scholars such as Francisco

[17] Herbert McCabe, "The Logic of Mysticism" in *God Still Matters*, (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 13–28: 20.

[18] McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p. 20.

[19] Per revelationem gratiae in hac vita non cognoscamus de Deo quid est, et sic ei quasi ignoto coniungamur. (ST I q.12 a.13 ad 1)

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Suarez (*Disputationes Metaphysicae* 28)[20] and is found today in the many writings on the philosophy of religion. This is not Aquinas's teaching. Aquinas understands contingency and necessity as terms we may use to distinguish between creatures, some of which are contingent and some not. As he writes "We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be". (ST I q. 2 a.3) These he identifies as contingent things.

Rats and dogs and humans are thus contingent. Angels, on the other hand are necessary beings. They are nonmaterial, and so cannot be generated by material things, nor can they be obliterated by them leading them to perish. The distinction for Aquinas between God and creatures does not lie in the realm of contingency and necessity, rather "it lies in all creatures being such that their existence and essence (or nature) differ while such is not the case with God".[21] In Aquinas's thought knowing what a creature is (essence) does not mean that it necessarily exists. With God, there is no distinction, God's essence is God's existence, *ipsum esse subsistens* (ST I q.11 a.4 c; ST I q.44 a.1).

This conclusion is essential to explain the existence of the universe itself, a universe in which the existence of each thing is derived. There must therefore be an Origin, God, that has not received its existence from anything prior. "God as pure act, far from being an impairment to creating, is the absolute prolegomenon and, literally, *sine qua non* for creating."[22]

In the "Five Ways" God is not posited as a last link in a chain of causes: God is posited because the chain of causes works and the explanatory chain, that is to say scientific explanation, works. But the question remains why is there an explanatory scientific chain of explanation that works. Why is there something rather than nothing? According to Aquinas "that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing" (ST I q. 2 a.3 c). Herbert McCabe, writes: "there are movers, but God accounts for the movers being movers, he accounts for causes being causes, for necessary beings being necessary, for purposes being purposes".[23]

In his Five Ways Aquinas is seeking, using the categories of Aristotelian and to some extent Platonic thought, deeper knowledge of the Jewish God of Sacred Scripture. The metaphysics of being we

[20] Francisco Suarez, *The Metaphysical Demonstration of the Existence of God*, trans./ed. John P. Doyle (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004).

[21] Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil*, p. 42.

[22] Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1999), p. 133.

[23] McCabe, *God and Evil in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Edited and Introduction by Brian Davies. (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 97.

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are introduced to arises from the idea of a creator God which is a Jewish and not a Greek discovery. "To lose sight of the Jewish creation question is, it seems to me, to settle for worshipping an inhabitant of the world, to betray the biblical inheritance and to regress to a worship of the gods; it is a form of idolatry."[24]

Whose god "is not" God? Dawkins *et al*.

Viewed from this perspective, the current wave of modern atheism, epitomised by "The Unholy Trinity" of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, is actually serving God well, as the god(s) they reject is at times indeed the god of idolatry, who would be an inhabitant of the world. Since the Enlightenment a major argument for the rejection of God has been the violence committed in the name of God. Dawkins, in the opening pages of his *God Delusion*, asks us to imagine a world "with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers . . . no Crusades, no witch-hunts . . . no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers' . . . . Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues . . . ."[25] While there is some force to this rather simplistic view, the French (also atheist) philosopher André Comte-Sponville presents a wiser analysis. As he notes, it is not faith that leads to slaughter. Yes, it can be dangerous to believe in God, but likewise it can be dangerous not to believe in God, we need to just look at Stalin, Mao or Pol Pot. "There is so much horror, with or without God. Alas, this tells us more about humanity than about religion."[26]

While the Dawkins comment does indeed point us to a truth about humanity, the god that Dawkins is rejecting is not a Creator God but a designer god, an interfering god. For Dawkins if a follower of God does evil, then God is the cause of this evil. Aquinas' understanding of causality is different. Natural causes and God as First Cause are not antithetical concepts.

> When the same effect is attributed to a natural cause and to the divine power, it is not as though the effect were produced partly by God and partly by the natural agent: but the whole effect is produced by both, though in different ways, as the same effect is attributed wholly to

[24] Mc Cabe, "The Involvement of God" in *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), pp. 39–51: 44.

[25] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* (London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland-Johannesburg: Bantam Press, 2006), pp. 1–2.

[26] André Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme, Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2006, p. 88. The English version, translated by Nancy Huston, is entitled 'The Book of Atheist Spirituality, (London: Bantam Press, 2008).

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> the instrument, and wholly also to the principal agent. (*Summa contra Gentiles* Bk.III, chapter 70)

Furthermore, God has gifted us with the ability to be causes, we are free human beings, God did not create passive puppets or robots.

> While God can of Himself produce all natural effects, for them to be produced by other causes: this is not from the insufficiency of God's power, but from the immensity of God's goodness, whereby God has wished to communicate His likeness to creatures, not only in point of their being, but likewise in point of their being causes of other things. (*Summa contra Gentiles* Bk III, chapter 70)

God created our being gifted with causality. We are to a large extent free, free in our decision making, and thus free not to choose well. The existence of moral evil in particular raises questions about the existence of God, or at least a good, caring God, and raises these questions for believers no less than being a key argument for those who profess atheism.

Thinking with Aquinas on this, we must first ask: how is the world possible with its contingency and its order? Only then can we ask: if God made the world, then why is there evil in it? Confronted with this question Aquinas answers as follows:

> Now, with these considerations we dispose of the error of those who, because they noticed that evils occur in the world, said that there is no God. Thus, Boethius introduces a certain philosopher who asks: "If God exists, whence comes evil?" [*De consolatione philosophiae* I, 4]. But it could be argued to the contrary: "If evil exists, God exists." For, there would be no evil if the order of good were taken away, since its privation is evil. But this order would not exist if there were no God. (*Summa contra Gentiles* Bk. 3 chapt. 71)

Of course, this is only the beginning of a much fuller search for some understanding of the evil we encounter and how we might endure it.

Critiques

Apart from the gross misunderstanding of Dawkins and the like, many theologians also exhibit a misunderstanding of Aquinas on crucial points. Process theologians such as Alfred North Whitehead, professing a God that changes, dismiss Aquinas' theology of an immutable God, misunderstanding what Aquinas is saying when he insists that God has no real relation to creation. This then becomes what is represented as "classical theism", with its domineering, patriarchal God, the God rejected by modern atheism for threatening the autonomy of the world, a God with whom we are unable to enter into relationship and so contrary to the God of the covenant

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revealed in sacred scripture. Elisabeth A. Johnson offers a version of this critique of Aquinas' classical theism,[27] and Karl Rahner too was unhappy with what he perceived as Aquinas giving priority to the divine nature over the divine persons.[28]

All this shows how even a slight modification in Aquinas' theology of God runs the risk of upsetting his whole theological enterprise. As he himself warns, in the Prologue to the *De Ente et Essentia* "a small error at the outset ends by being great".[29] Aquinas is particularly careful in properly conceiving the relationship between essence and existence, and for this reason we have given much space to theological consideration of the statement that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*. It is imperative that we get Aquinas' thought on God right if Aquinas' theology is to have relevance for today.

Part Two: Aquinas, God and Prayer

As mentioned above many contemporary voices see Aquinas' God as uninvolved with the world – the classic distant god of Greek philosophy – an unmoved mover, remote, cold. This, as has been shown, is to misread him, for the God Aquinas studies and researches is the God of Hebrew scripture. (See ST I q.13)

Thus to speak of God as Aquinas does is not to speak of a God that is passive with respect to the world, a God incapable of being in relationship with us. The God Aquinas is studying is the source of goodness (ST I q.6) and the end of creation. Just as the universe requires a transcendent beginning, a First Cause, likewise it requires

[27] 'An abstractness colors this entire systematic ordering "from above," rendering it remote from the historical experience of the triune God in the economy of salvation and therefore from the actual life of believing persons.' Elisabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1993), p. 121.

[28] Karl Rahner, 'Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise "De Trinitate" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. K. Smyth (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 83–84; The Trinity, trans. J. Donceel, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 15–21; 45–46. Gilles Emery provides a comprehensive response to this claim see eg Emery, "Essentialism or Personalism in the Treatise on God in Saint Thomas Aquinas?" *The Thomist* 64 (2000): pp. 521–563. See also, Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

[29] *De Ente et Essentia*, On Being and Essence, in Ralph McInerney, *Thomas Aquinas Selected Writings*; pp. 30–49: 30. "A small error at the outset can lead to great errors in the final conclusions, as the Philosopher says in I *De Caelo et Mundo* cap. 5 (271b8–13), and thus, since being and essence are the things first conceived of by the intellect, as Avicenna says in *Metaphysicae* I, cap. 6, in order to avoid errors arising from ignorance about these two things, we should resolve the difficulties surrounding them by explaining what the terms being and essence each signify and by showing how each may be found in various things and how each is related to the logical intentions of genus, species, and difference." http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/aquinas-esse.asp

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a transcendent end. The end of the universe is not pointlessness but God.

For Aquinas it is important to conceive the real relation of the world to God in the correct way and thus avoid an idolatrous conception of God wherein we conceive of God as needing us, which in turn obscures the love and giftedness that God is.[30] As he writes in ST I q.6 a.2 ad 1, a relation of God to creatures is not a reality in God but in the creature, for in God it is in our idea only.

> God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him. (ST I q.13 a.7 c)

In other words, "God is actually, if not necessarily, related to the world because the world is really related to him . . . the reality of God's relation to the world is found not in the necessity of God's nature but in the act of all that God is freely willing and doing for creation."[31] "God is related to the creature for the reason that the creature is related to God" (ST I q.13 a.7 ad 5). So God is truthfully addressed as Creator because the world, all of creation, has a real relation to God. "God is the Act by which creation is."[32]

What Aquinas is asserting is the fact that God does not have any relation of dependence on God's own creatures. Being Creator adds nothing to God, we can say it makes no difference to God, but it makes all the difference in the world to the creature. The gift of *esse* brings us existence. 'Creation fulfils no need of God's. God has no needs . . . the God of Augustine and Aquinas, precisely by being wholly transcendent, *extra ordinem omnium entium existens* (*In Peri Hermenias* I, lect.14 197), is more intimately involved with each creature than any other creature could be.'[33]

As Michael Hoonhout writes, "The God Aquinas is introducing us to, and safeguarding, is the God of sacred scripture, the God of whom

[30] In using the term 'relation' Aquinas is not understanding by this term what today is termed a 'relationship'. In Aristotelian terms a distinct relation is predicated for each term, thus resulting in two relations which may or may not be equivalent. The God-universe/Creation-creator pairing is an example of a non-equivalent relation. I am related to God by creation, that relation is necessary, it describes who I am. The relation of creation to Creator is necessary, while the relation of Creator to creation is only necessary for a truthful predication that God is Creator.

[31] Michael A. Hoonhout, "Aquinas' Theology of the God Who Is: The Significance of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* in the *Summa theologiae*" in *Seat of Wisdom*, Issue 1 (Spring 2010): pp. 27–57: 37.

[32] Hoonhout, 37 n. 27. See ST I, q.45 a.3 ad 1: **'**Creation signified actively means the divine action, which is God's essence, with a relation to the creature.'

[33] Mc Cabe, "The Involvement of God", p. 45.

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the bible teaches 'as God is, so does God act for us'".[34] The fact that there is change in the world indicates not a changing God but an immutable God operative universally. This is the God to whom Aquinas teaches us to pray, and this is the God to whom Aquinas prays. In his expositions on prayer Aquinas pays little attention to special methods or techniques of prayer. For him prayer is simply about adoration of the great mystery of God, and petitioning this mercifully caring God. His various commentaries on the Our Father illustrate this simply and clearly. Praise is followed by petition.

Adoro te Devote

While we can indeed learn from this great theologian's writings on prayer, to look at Thomas Aquinas *at* prayer not only shows us how we might pray, but also deepens our understanding of Thomas Aquinas, the person. His ecclesial rootedness is indicated by the prayer he wrote for private use, the *Adoro te devote*. There is no certainty as to the date of its composition, it is not part of the corpus of work he prepared for the *Corpus Christi* liturgy, and it was only after the seventeenth-century that there is evidence of it being set to music. According to Paul Murray OP, the "unusually personal character, and the unique beauty of its form and content, set it apart from every other work of Aquinas, and indeed from every work of Latin verse in the Middle Ages."[35] That it is a composition of Aquinas has of course been disputed, however the publication of Claire le Brun-Gouanvic's edition of Tocca's *Life of Aquinas* provides strong internal evidence it is indeed the work of Aquinas.[36] This edition shows that in his 'Life' William of Tocca included the full text of the *Adoro te devote* and attributed it to Aquinas.[37]

According to Robert Wielockx the *Adoro te devote* was composed by Aquinas as a prayer for private recitation, *sotto voce*, when he attended second mass as a non-celebrant.[38] That there should be such a prayer should not be a surprise to us as Aquinas wrote much on the Eucharist. This is a prayer of private devotion to help him ponder the mystery of Christ's presence in the Eucharist during mass. In this

[34] Hoonhout, "Aquinas' Theology of the God Who Is", p. 40.

[35] Paul Murray OP, *Aquinas at Prayer. The Bible, Mysticism and Poetry*. (London: Continuum, 2013) p. 240.

[36] Guillame de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino de Guillaume de Tocco* [1323] Claire Le Brun-Gouanvic ed. (Studies and Texts, 127) Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (January 1, 1996).

[37] Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 58, pp. 197–198.

[38] Robert Wielockx, "La preghiera eucaristica di s. Tommaso: analisi testuale e testimonianza storica', Atti del convegno: l'anima eucaristica di san Tommaso d'Aquino", in *Frontiere: Rivista di filosofia e teologia*, VII (January-December 2011) pp. 329–331.

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sacrament uniquely, according to Thomas, the entire Christ is present (ST III q.76 a.1), and the words of the prayer express the wonder of a person of faith, and of a theologian. There is a poetic dimension to the prayer, a rhythm to it, and a clear structure.[39] It is a prayer addressed directly and lovingly to Christ present in the Eucharist,

> *Adoro te devote, latens veritas,*
> *Te que sub his formis vere latitas*
>
> You I devoutly adore, hidden Truth,
> You who, under these forma, are truly hidden.

This statement of faith is simultaneously a canticle of paradox. "For the God to whom it is addressed remains unseen under the forms of bread and wine: Christ utterly present, utterly hidden. Here, within the sacramental order, faith not vision is the believer's most immediate and most profound contact with God."[40]

What I am suggesting is that while we need Aquinas as an acute analyst of the fundamental concepts of faith, he is no less needed as a source to teach us how to pray properly. A *Magister in Sacra Scriptura*, Aquinas worked firmly within his tradition, he approached his task, as Olivier-Thomas Venard put it, in a "resolutely ecclesial" manner.[41]

Part Three: Aquinas' Theology of the Virtues

Thus far we have indicated the importance of Aquinas in aiding our talk about God. The God he points us toward is not a supernatural Being; God is rather transcendent, totally other. *Deus non est in genere*. The God that Aquinas strives to describe is not the God rejected by the atheists of today, or of yesteryear. Aquinas has been shown to be an invaluable resource for discussions on matters such as the concepts of God, Creation, and the way in which the sacred and secular realms are related.

Paradoxically this mysterious, transcendent Otherness listens to us, relates to us, is intimate to our very being: "God is not far from us, nor outside us, but rather he is in us, as Jeremiah 14 says: You are in us, O Lord. Thus the experience of divine goodness is called

[39] Robert Wielockx, "Poetry and Theology in the *Adoro te devote*", in *Christ among the Medieval Dominicans: Representations of Christ in the Texts and Images of the Order of Preachers*. Eds Kent Emery, Jr., and Joseph P. Wawrykow. Notre Dame Conferences in Medieval Studies (Book 7) (University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) p. 172.

[40] Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, p. 249.

[41] Olivier-Thomas Venard, "Croire en savant: Saint Thomas bibliste," in *Thomistes ou de l'actualité de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Serge-Thomas Bonino et al. (Toulouse 2003), p. 42.

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tasting".[42] This intimacy is both fact, and invitation. In the second part we have seen how the proper response to this God is prayer. Aquinas is revealed as an important guide for our thinking about prayer and, also, Aquinas is depicted as modelling prayer for us.

In this, the third and final part, we shall address the issue of how humankind, created after God's image and likeness, invited to grow into this likeness, might live and flourish. This is where, according to Jean-Pierre Torrell "we meet with what is perhaps one of the most original portions of Friar Thomas's spiritual theology, his teaching on the virtues".[43] This part of the paper must necessarily be brief, serving as an indication, rather than a full exposition of this rich resource for the Christian tradition.

In his exposition of the good human life, Aquinas describes a long story of patient humanization, in which the virtue of charity, of learning to desire rightly, is central. Recent years have seen a "return to virtue ethics" amongst people such as Jean Porter, Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul J. Wadell to name just some. At the same time, O'Meara notes with interest that "the papal overview of moral theology, *Veritatis splendor*, seems to omit virtue ethics, and the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not choose it as its ethical framework".[44] One can only surmise as to why this is so, but it does indicate a different vision of how humans might flourish.

Not all practitioners of the restoration of virtue ethics follow Aquinas but, for those who do, the approach is unavoidably God-centred and theological. While all virtue theorists are concerned about helping people to live well in this life, Aquinas distinctively works within the order of grace. This really does make a difference. To illustrate this consider the following quotation from Alasdair McIntyre:

> I remain in general convinced by those commentators who have stressed the extent to which Aquinas in his philosophical enquiries was not just an Aristotelian, but often a keenly perceptive interpreter as well as adapter of Aristotle. But I had been misled, in part by Aquinas's use of something like Davidson's principle of charity in his interpretation of Aristotle, into underestimating the degree and the importance of the differences in their attitudes to the acknowledgment of dependence. I was first struck by this when reading a prayer composed by Aquinas in which he asks God to grant that he may happily share with those in need what he has, while humbly asking for what

[42] P. Murray *Aquinas at Prayer,* p. 258 citing from Aquinas' commentary on Psalm XXXIII.

[43] Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas. Spiritual Master*. Vol. 2. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 262.

[44] Thomas F.O'Meara, op "Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas", *Theological Studies* 58(1997), pp. 254–285: 255 n.2.

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> he needs from those who have, a prayer that in effect, although not by Aquinas's own intention, asks that we may not share some of the attitudes of Aristotle's *megalopsychos*. This led me to reflect upon how Aquinas's account of the virtues not only supplements, but also corrects Aristotle's to a significantly greater extent than I had realised.[45]

What is so valuable in Aquinas' work and so helpful to the contemporary theological project is not simply his restoration of virtue ethics in conceptualising the flourishing of human life, it is rather that he has wonderfully articulated a vision of virtuous human flourishing which centres on the living out of the theological virtues – faith, hope, charity – and the integration of the full panoply of acquired virtues into his account of human flourishing. This integration of theological virtue and acquired virtue is one of his supreme achievements.

Destined for eternal life with God, Aquinas sees grace as a vital reality in the human being, "not a transitory divine help but a principle for people living in and toward a special destiny" (ST I q.23 a.2 ad 4).[46] Grace influences how we live now, and at the same time it is a "kind of beginning of glory in us" (ST II-II, q.24 a.3). For Aquinas there is an eschatological perspective to the moral life, without which the Christian moral life has no meaning. This life and the next are intimately connected.

There is a knowledge component to the practice of virtue. For Aquinas "human acts are virtuous to the degree that they are saturated with reason".[47] Knowing and acting are two intertwined activities for the virtuous person. Charles Taylor contrasts this with a 21st century viewpoint that emphasises objectified expertise over moral insight, an approach that leads to "new and more powerful forms of paternalism in our world".[48] "Objectified knowledge"', he believes, is taking over ethics. By this he means the modern tendency to define and apply codes of conduct, and then taking these to be the signposts to human well-being.[49] He writes:

> A great deal of effort in modern liberal society is invested in defining and applying codes of conduct. First, at the highest theoretical level, much contemporary moral theory assumes that morality can be defined in terms of a code of obligatory and forbidden actions, a code moreover which can be generated from a single source or principle.[50]

[45] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. (London: Duckworth, 1999), Preface, p. xi.

[46] O'Meara, "Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas", p. 260.

[47] Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, trans. Paul Philibert. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 106.

[48] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Harvard UP, 2007) p. 501.

[49] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 501.

[50] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 704.

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For those who follow Aquinas, moral life can never be adequately captured in a code. Situations and events are various and changing. It is the discernment of the virtuous person that leads to best action.

Furthermore Aquinas' concern is not with an individual pursuit of happiness, or perfection. He believes that humans are here on earth in order to learn the game of life, to learn how to live together with other human beings and, in doing so, how to create cultures. Central to living well, to playing the game properly, is the acquisition of the skills of human living, more properly termed virtues. As Aquinas understands them these are transformative of the practitioner. The skills of human living are learnt by practicing Christian teachings.[51] By living virtuously we become virtuous. While my actions are totally "my" work, they are no less completely God's work in me, my response to God's presence in my life. They are a beginning of the sharing of God's life, the beginning of the road toward deification, begun here in this earth. This calls for the transformation of fundamental structures of human living. In Herbert McCabe's opinion, Aquinas' theology of human living "is a political matter".[52]

In the end, I think the question is not so much *do* we still need Aquinas as *why* this rich theological tradition is needed today. I have attempted to show that we need Aquinas if we are to talk properly about God, about God matters, and about the human created after God's image and likeness, called to grow into an ever deepening relationship with God, by prayer and by virtuous living.

Aquinas is also a good master when it comes to showing how we might dialogue with the other, the stranger, an increasingly important notion in today's globalised world. He would help us address questions of environmental concern, and questions of justice. Even in areas where perhaps he has nothing to say, or where what he has said is no longer relevant, much is to be gleaned from his precise and clear analytical, and argumentative approach to all questions. We began with McDermott, who had noted that "Aquinas's views redefined the relation of the sacred and the secular, and helped to change the history of western society".[53] He notes that Henri Bergson, addressing historians of philosophy at Bologna in 1911,

> understood that behind a thinker's theses as they interact with one another and with those of contemporaries lie root images and conceptions driving the thinking. And sometimes not so much an image as a little push or breathe of wind, a little dust-devil that reveals its own shape

[51] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth: London, 1981) 175, for a description of how practice is being understood.

[52] Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life*, p. 11.

[53] McDermott, *How to Read Aquinas*, pp. 4,5.

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> only be sweeping up into the air the dust and debris of the opinions of his time.[54]

McDermott continues, "To understand Aquinas we must identify that little whirlwind and let it loose on the dust of our own time so that we can re-discern the shape of it in action".[55]

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[54] McDermott, p. 5.
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