Aquinas and Catholic Universities

Brian Davies OP

According to St Augustine of Hippo (354–430), learning only occurs as God illuminates human minds. 'Regarding each of the things we understand', he says 'we don't consult the speaker who makes sounds outside us, but the Truth that presides within over the mind itself'.[1] For Augustine, this Truth is God and God alone. 'There is', he says, 'no teacher giving knowledge (*scientia*) to man other than God. This is also in accordance with what is written by the Evangelist: *Your teacher, Christ, is unique*'.[2]

Thomas Aquinas (1224/6–1274) seems to agree with these views of Augustine. For him, the coming about of knowledge (*scientia*) is never the result of what other people say or do. So you might conclude that Aquinas has nothing to say to us as we now reflect on what Catholic universities are or should be. Yet one can, I think, extract from Aquinas's writings a number of ideas which (whether we like them or not) bear on contemporary debates about Catholic university education, its aims and its methods – though there are problems which need to be acknowledged at the outset.

Contemporary universities are numerous and large, with teachers and students from many backgrounds. And they teach a vast range of subjects. But there were few medieval universities. Their faculty were mostly clerics, and they focused on a small range of disciplines. The residents of medieval universities thought of them only as local corporations, the heirs to earlier monastic and cathedral schools. They would have been astonished to discover what the successors of their associations have now become.

These are important points to stress when it comes to the topic of Aquinas and Catholic universities. Aquinas (a major influence on Catholic thinking) no more put his mind to worrying about how to think about a Catholic university than Aristotle (a major influence on scientific thinking) fretted about sub-atomic particles. Aquinas's writings never touch on matters of curriculum, faculty, or students, insofar as present day administrators in Catholic universities worry about them. Yet Aquinas does have views about the acquisition of

[1] Augustine, *De magistro* 11. I quote from *Augustine: 'Against the Academicians' and 'The Teacher'*, translated, with Introduction and Notes, by Peter King (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, 1995), p. 139.

[2] Augustine, *Retractationes*, 1. I quote from p. 94 of King op.cit.

© The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2005, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

knowledge and the role that people play when it comes to it. He wrote no treatise on the topic, but he does have what might be called a 'philosophy of education', one which gives us a sense of what he took himself to be doing as a teacher, and one which helps us to see what he thought that those who seek to educate and to learn should be like. This 'philosophy of education' is grounded in Aquinas's general theory of knowledge and understanding.

As I have said, Aquinas seems to endorse Augustine's claim that one person cannot teach another. But why does he do so? Because he thinks of knowledge (*scientia*) as something one has to achieve on one's own. For Aquinas, it is important to distinguish between knowledge and belief. If I meet you for the first time and tell you that my name is Brian, you may well believe me. But, so Aquinas thinks, you would not be gaining any knowledge. You would be having faith in me. And faith (*fides*), is, for Aquinas different from knowledge (*scientia*). To accept what someone says just because they say it may leave one ending up assenting to many true propositions. According to Aquinas, however, assenting to truths is not enough for knowledge. His view is that one knows when one *understands why* propositions to which one assents are true. And this understanding is, he argues, effected by something *internal* to knowers.

At one level, Aquinas is a kind of empiricist. He thinks that our senses put us in touch with the only realities we are capable of understanding in this life. But Aquinas does not think that sense experience gives us *understanding*. For him, sensations are physical processes in particular human bodies, while understanding (or knowledge) is shareable between people and has to do with what can, in principle, be affirmed of more than one thing. When I stroke my cat the sensations I have begin and end in my body. They are private property. On the other hand, Aquinas thinks, my knowing what cats are involves my having something which you can have too.

For Aquinas, my being able to know depends on certain internal (and God-given) mechanisms. He calls them the *intellectus agens* (or 'active intellect') and the *intellectus possibilis* (or 'possible intellect'). I shall not now bore you with an account of how Aquinas views these things in detail. Suffice it to say that, on his account, whether or not you gain knowledge depends on whether or not they are working. So Aquinas denies that knowledge can be *injected* into anyone. You achieve knowledge as your mind goes to work on sense data. Nobody can *cause* you to know. They can cause you *to have certain sense data*. And they can *brainwash* you so that you end up *expressing assent* to various propositions. But they cannot *make* you know. And yet, so Aquinas thinks, they can *help* you to know. And they can do so in at least three ways.

To start with, they can train you to speak. Aquinas views language as a tool by which people communicate with each other, a tool which

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

consists of conventional signs or symbols (and is therefore a *material* phenomenon). Considered as such, language, Aquinas thinks, can be taught. Just as one might train a dog to bring back a stick by throwing it and shouting 'Fetch!', one can, Aquinas thinks, coach people to use linguistic symbols in certain (agreed) ways. In other words, one can teach them to *converse*.

Then again, says Aquinas, one can draw people's attention to the difference between good and bad arguments. For Aquinas, knowledge (*scientia*) can be expressed by a valid deductive argument with true premises. He does not think that anyone can *insert* knowledge into someone, but he does think that people can draw attention to cogent and fallacious arguments so that others end up seeing for themselves that some arguments work and that others do not. Aquinas believes that people can *nudge* each other into reasoning well. He holds that whether or not they reason well depends on their ability to know the truth of premises and to make valid inferences. But he also thinks that one can help people to use this ability in a way that leads them to learn, that one can act as an intellectual midwife helping to bring forth what already lies in those one is helping.[3]

Following a similar line of thinking, Aquinas maintains that one can help to bring about learning by speeding up the process of research in learners. Aquinas views all learning as essentially a matter of personal research, for he thinks that coming to know always involves coming to see *for oneself*. But he also believes that those who already know can sometimes get you to where they are more quickly than you would be able to arrive if left on your own. For example, he thinks that they can present information which you might not yet have come across – information which might help you to extend the range of your learning. When it comes to knowledge, Aquinas believes that some people have 'boldly gone' where

[3] Cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 117,1: 'Knowledge is acquired both from an internal cause (as is clear in the case of those who acquire knowledge through their own research) and from an external cause (as is evident in the case of one who is instructed). For there is in everyone a kind of cause of knowledge, namely the illumination of the active intellect (*intellectus agens*), through which all the universal principles of all the branches of knowledge are known naturally and immediately. When, however, people apply these universal principles to particular cases, the memory and experience of which they get through the senses, then they acquire knowledge by their own research of things of which they were ignorant, thus proceeding from the known to the unknown. So anyone teaching leads learners on from what they already know to knowledge of what they did not know before . . . Teachers lead learners on from the already known to the unknown in two ways: first by putting before them certain means which their minds can use in acquiring knowledge . . . Second, by aiding the mind of the learner . . . in so far as teachers set out the relationship of principles to conclusions before the learner . . . Those who provide a demonstration make their listeners know'. With slight emendations, I quote from Volume 15 of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, and McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1970), pp. 133 and 135.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

others have not. And he holds that these people can help others to know by, so to speak, retracing their steps.

So Aquinas does believe that there is a job for teachers to do, and he therefore has something to say to those working in Catholic universities. His message is: *While recognizing that nobody can cause another person to know, also recognize that one can help people to know by training them in certain ways and by presenting them with what can lead them to know on their own*. And this message is surely a reasonable one. Of course one cannot *make* another to know since to know is to be personally in a state of understanding which cannot be explained *simply* in terms of external stimuli. But one can surely *help* people to know in the ways that Aquinas suggests. Yet this is a conclusion which might well be acceptable to the most secular of people working in the most secular of educational set ups. So does Aquinas have anything to say on teaching and learning which makes him especially relevant to Catholic universities as opposed to other kinds? The answer, I think, is 'Yes'.

In trying to see why this is so it helps to bear in mind that Aquinas does not think that teaching always results in what he calls *scientia*. This term is usually translated into English as 'knowledge', but perhaps misleadingly so. I would find it natural enough to say that, for example, I know what cats are. But my understanding of cats would not pass muster with Aquinas as an instance of *scientia*. For I am no zoologist. I can recognize a cat when I see one, but I cannot give you a scientific account of what a cat is. For Aquinas, however, that is just what I need to be able to do if I am to be said to have *scientia* with respect to cats.[4] And, so he adds, there is not a lot of *scientia* around. In one famous passage he doubts that we can perfectly investigate the nature of a fly.[5] Yet Aquinas also thinks that there are important matters with respect to which we lack *scientia* while able to have them *taught* to us.

Consider the following scenario. You develop headaches. You go to the doctor. The doctor sends you to a brain surgeon. The surgeon ends up telling you that you have a brain tumour. Now what do you *know* at this point? If you have no serious understanding of neurophysiology, then, it might be argued, you know virtually nothing. Of

[4] For a more detailed and nuanced account of Aquinas on *scientia* see Scott MacDonald, 'Theory of Knowledge' in Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993). I am in no way here to be taken to be disagreeing with MacDonald's account of Aquinas on *scientia*. I am simply, for present purposes, seeking to paint in broad (but not, I hope, misleading) strokes.

[5] In his sermon-conferences on the Apostles' Creed Aquinas writes: 'But our knowledge is weak to such a point that no philosopher would be able to investigate perfectly the nature of a single fly'. For the text see *The Sermon-Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostles' Creed*, translated and edited by Nicholas Ayo (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1988), pp. 20–21.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

course you realize that you should be worried if a brain surgeon tells you that you have a brain tumour. But your knowledge of the human brain is laughable when compared with that of the specialists. And this is what Aquinas would say. You might *believe* the surgeon who tells you that you have a brain tumour. And your belief might be a *true* one. According to Aquinas, however, you fall short of knowledge. In accepting what the surgeon says you are doing just that: *accepting what the surgeon says*. You are displaying faith in the surgeon. You are believing what the surgeon says *on the surgeon's say so*.

Are you therefore believing unjustifiably? The nineteenth century British mathematician and philosopher W.K. Clifford famously writes: 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.[6] This line from Clifford obviously invites questions such as 'What counts as sufficient?', but it seems clear from what he says that Clifford would not deem 'Because X said so' to amount to the right kind of evidence for believing what X says. Yet Clifford here seems to have somewhat lost touch with how we come by much that we assert with a great deal of confidence.

Where am I now? I believe that I am somewhere near Chicago. Am I rationally entitled to hold this belief? Well, how did I come by it? It was certainly not by examining evidence. My claim to know that *there is* any such place as Chicago rests entirely on what I have been told by other people (or on what I have read in books and the like). And my belief that I am *now* somewhere near Chicago is to be traced to what I was told by the airline that shipped me here, to the sign posts at the airport, and to what people said to me when they met me there. I have nothing else to which I can appeal[7]. So perhaps I *am* being unreasonable in claiming, as I do, that I am now somewhere near Chicago. If I am *not*, however, then one can reasonably believe what one cannot prove from scratch. Or, as Aquinas would say, one can be taught that something is the case without being able to explain why this is so or without being able to explain what this something is. My surgeon tells me 'You have a brain tumour'. Suppose that he is right to say so and that I believe him. What do I, as someone

[6] W.K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief' in W.K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, 2nd edition, edited by Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (Macmillan, London, 1886). I quote from the reprint in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000), p. 35. With respect to religious matters Clifford's position is echoed by Antony Flew in *The Presumption of Atheism and Other Essays* (Elek Books, London, 1976).

[7] For a development of these points see G.E.M. Anscombe, 'What Is It to Believe Someone?' in C.F. Delaney (ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1979). See also Norman Malcolm, 'The Groundlessness of Belief' in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1977).

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

ignorant of neurophysiology, end up with here? You might say that it is true belief, but something that falls short of knowledge or understanding.

The point I want to stress now is that if you say this, then Aquinas would agree with you. For him there can be true beliefs which fall short of knowledge or understanding. And his view is that the most important beliefs of all fall into this category. According to Aquinas there are truths, which God has revealed, truths expressed in the Nicene Creed, truths which we need to appropriate.[8] According to Aquinas, however, we cannot, in this life, *know* that any of the Nicene Creed's articles are true.[9] And yet, so Aquinas thinks, it matters that we believe them. The position he adopts, therefore, is that the core beliefs of Christianity have to be held on the basis of faith (*fides*), which Aquinas defines as being somewhere between, on the one hand, knowledge (*scientia*) and, on the other, doubt (*dubitatio*), suspicion (*suspicatio*) and opinion (*opinio*). According to Aquinas, those who have faith, like those with knowledge, unhesitatingly assent to certain propositions. But, like those with doubt, suspicion, or opinion, they lack knowledge.[10]

Yet faith, for Aquinas, is not something to be looked down on, or to avoid, or to protect people from indulging in. On the contrary: he thinks that we need faith in order to be united with God. So he says that the core truths of Christianity, though not knowable, need to be taught. He means that people need to be *told what they are*. He never suggests that explaining the content of the articles of faith will bring it about that anyone ends up with faith. But he thinks it important that people should have their attention drawn to them. Not being a neurophysician, and not wanting to contemplate the thought of my imminent death, I might just ignore what my doctors tell me when they say that I have a brain tumour. But, so I suppose most of us

[8] See, for example, Aquinas, *De Potentia* 10,4, ad. 13. Here we read: 'The doctrine of the Catholic Faith was sufficiently laid down by the Council of Nicaea: wherefore in the subsequent councils the fathers had no mind to make any additions'. I quote from p. 208 of volume 3 of the translation of the *De Potentia* by the English Dominican Fathers (Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd, London, 1934).

[9] When it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, Aquinas goes so far as to say that its truth is demonstrably something which cannot be demonstrated. See *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 32,1. Here we read: 'It is impossible to come to the knowledge of the Trinity of divine persons by natural reason . . . He who tries to prove the trinity of persons by natural powers of reason detracts from faith in two ways. First on the point of its dignity, for the object of faith is those invisible realities which are beyond the reach of human reason . . . Secondly, on the point of advantage in bringing others to faith. For when someone wants to support faith by unconvincing arguments, he becomes a laughing stock for the unbelievers, who think that we rely on such arguments and believe because of them'. I quote from Volume 6 of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, and McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1965), pp. 103 and 105.

[10] See *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 2,1.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

would agree, these doctors are justified when informing me of my state of health. In a similar way, Aquinas thinks that Christians are justified in stating what the articles of faith amount to. In fact, he says, this is a job to which some of them are *specifically* called. And what he has to say on this matter indicates how his approach to teaching goes beyond what I noted earlier on.

Aquinas is of the view that all Christians should, in some way or other, be proclaiming the teachings of Christianity, so far as need arises and circumstances allow. So he says, for example, that parents should tell their children about them.[11] But Aquinas also believes that some people have the task of formally seeking to present to others the content of the Christian creeds. This content he refers to as *sacra doctrina* (holy teaching). And he clearly thinks that *sacra doctrina* is something teachable. Indeed, he takes the teaching of *sacra doctrina* to be the highest form of teaching.

Aquinas's phrase *sacra doctrina* is sometimes translated as 'theology', but the translation is misleading.[12] Theology is what people who call themselves theologians have to offer. For Aquinas, however, *sacra doctrina* is what *God* has to offer. More specifically, it consists of the words of Christ, whom Aquinas takes to be God incarnate, and whose teachings he takes to be summed up in texts like the Nicene Creed. Many theologians will, of course, say that we have little access to the words of Christ. Or they will say that his teachings never amounted to anything like the articles of the Nicene Creed. For present purposes, however, we need to be clear that, rightly or wrongly, Aquinas firmly held that the Gospels give us a basically reliable account of Christ's teachings and that their critical elements are reproduced by the Nicene Creed. And it is these teachings of which Aquinas is thinking when he uses the expression *sacra doctrina*. The teaching of *sacra doctrina* is, for Aquinas, an attempt to set out what Christ taught. For Aquinas, Christ is 'is the first and chief teacher of spiritual doctrine and faith'.[13] Being divine, says Aquinas, Christ has knowledge that we lack. But, like the surgeon who tells me that I have a brain tumour, he has conveyed truths to be accepted in faith. And it is appropriate for others to keep on conveying those truths. Such people Aquinas refers to as teachers of *sacra doctrina*.

Aquinas taught *sacra doctrina* in Paris from 1256 to1259 and from 1268 to1272, and in a lecture delivered in 1256 he reflects on his role.[14] He starts with *Psalm* 103:13: 'Watering the earth from his

[11] See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae, 10,12 and *Summa Theologiae* 3a, 68,10.

[12] See my 'Is *Sacra Doctrina* Theology?', *New Blackfriars*, March,1990.

[13] See *Summa Theologiae* 3a, 7,7. See also *Summa Theologiae* 3a, 9 ad. 1 and *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Lecture 1.

[14] Aquinas was a Master of Theology in Paris during these periods. But he also functioned as a teacher of *sacra doctrina* at other times — for example between 1265 and 1268 in Rome, more of which below.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

things above, the earth will be filled from the fruit of your works'. 'The king of the heavens, the Lord', says Aquinas, 'established this law from all eternity, that the gifts of his providence should reach what is lowest by way of things that are in between'. Aquinas interprets the law here as applying to teaching and studying *sacra doctrina*. 'The minds of teachers', he says, 'are watered by the things that are above in the wisdom of God, and by their ministry the light of divine wisdom flows down into the minds of students'. In terms of this imagery, teachers of *sacra doctrina* are above their students as God is above them. So students of *sacra doctrina* may be likened to earth that is watered from on high.[15]

What you have here, of course, is a hierarchical approach to teaching. First God teaches. Then teachers pass on what God says. And you might not like this way of thinking. Notice, however, that it makes sense in terms of how Aquinas reasons in general. As we have seen, he distinguishes sharply between faith (or belief), on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other, and he denies that the articles of the Christian creeds can be known. But he thinks that we need to believe them. So they have to be taught by one who knows – meaning God. And then God's servants pass the word on, though without being able to guarantee that what they say is accepted (and certainly without being able to induce knowledge in those with whom they are dealing). Aquinas's hierarchical approach to teaching as expressed in his 1256 lecture is consistent with much that he says elsewhere. If you want to take issue with it, you need to be able to show (a) that Aquinas is wrong in his account of why the beliefs of Christians (the 'articles of faith') cannot be known to be true, and (b) that Aquinas is wrong to suppose that the articles of faith have to be viewed as what Christ has taught us. And perhaps you can show that Aquinas is wrong on both these counts. If you can, though, you will have to argue a case, and you will therefore, presumably, believe in the value of arguing cases.

For the record, therefore, note that Aquinas is very much in favour of deciding on what is taught with an eye on reasoned cases. This, of course, is especially evident from what he says when developing his philosophical conclusions. You may not care for his arguments for these, but you cannot deny that there are plenty of them. And Aquinas is also clearly concerned to argue when it comes to matters of texts and history – matters which seem particularly at stake in, for example, debates about the historicity of the Bible. Aquinas was a man of his times when it came to reading Scripture, so he does not approach it as does the typical, contemporary, post-Enlightenment

[15] For an English translation of Aquinas's 1256 lecture see *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (translated, edited, and introduced by Simon Tugwell OP, Paulist Press, New York and Mahwah, 1988), pp. 355–360.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

exegete. But he shows signs of being able to sympathize with ways in which biblical scholars now usually proceed. For while many of his predecessors and contemporaries insisted on a 'spiritual' reading of Scripture, paying little attention to what the texts actually say, or were intended by their authors to say, Aquinas often favours a literal reading while trying to make rational sense of the texts in question.

Someone who has brought this point out well is the late Dr Beryl Smalley, who, by way of example, focuses on *Exodus* 23:19: 'Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk' (RSV). As Smalley notes, St Augustine denies that the text has any literal meaning. He says that it is a prophecy to the effect that Christ should not perish in the massacre of the innocents. 'Whether the lawmaker meant it for a prophecy; what it meant to the people for whom he legislated; whether, in practice, it was regarded as an actual law on the same footing as those which had a literal sense: none of these questions is answered or even asked'.[16] Smalley then goes on to note that subsequent Christian authors worried about Augustine's position, and that some of them explicitly contradicted it – an example being Aquinas. He takes the *Exodus* text at its face value and tries to understand it accordingly.[17] As Smalley goes on to say, modern study of early laws may have shown that the purpose of their precepts was more complicated than Aquinas might have thought. But this is a minor point. For, as Smalley says, Aquinas 'brought Christian exegesis to a stage where the Old Testament precepts could be made a subject of scientific study'.[18]

Smalley, of course, is not suggesting that Aquinas took the last word on reading (and teaching) Scripture to lie with the findings of scientific research. She is simply making the modest, though justified, claim that Aquinas was open to looking at the Bible in a critical and reasonable way, from which I infer that Aquinas would be more than interested in engaging with, and getting students to engage with, the best that is now on offer when it comes to biblical scholarship – just as he would clearly be interested in engaging with, and getting students to engage with, the best available philosophical writings. There is a school of thought which sees philosophy, especially philosophy hostile to or incompatible with Catholicism, as something from which students should be protected. Yet it is hard to imagine Aquinas endorsing such an approach. The ways in which he discusses philosophers in general, and those with whom he disagrees in particular, show him to be acutely sensitive to the opportunities for

[16] Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (3rd edn., Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983), p. 303.
[17] See *Summa Theologiae* Ia2ae, 102, 6, ad 4.
[18] Smalley, op.cit., p. 306.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

learning and understanding provided by them. Insofar as one can sympathize with Aquinas on this point, one cannot but draw certain conclusions when it comes to teaching and learning in general.

I should also point out that if you agree with Aquinas as I have so far presented him, you ought to conclude that what he has to say has at least one serious implication when it comes to thinking about the notion of a Catholic university. For if Aquinas is right, then what people need to be instructed in above all is *sacra doctrina*, considered as equivalent to the teachings of Christ as recorded in the Gospels – from which it would seem to follow that a Catholic university should be a place in which special attention is given to ensuring that students are exposed to people who expound the recorded teachings of Christ as historical and authoritative. As I have said, there are those who deny that we have access to the teachings of Christ, and I have no idea as to how Aquinas would deal with their arguments were he alive today. But I am certain of one thing: that if Aquinas had come to believe that we have no access to the teachings of Christ, then he would have abandoned Christianity. Some have said that the Christian gospel is not about historical facts. And Aquinas can be taken to be on their side at one level. He does not, for instance, think that Christian doctrines can be proved or refuted by anything that an historian might produce. But he takes the teaching of Christ to give us the only possible warrant we could have for believing in doctrines such as those of the Incarnation and the Trinity. Aquinas believes that human reflection can throw a lot of light on what these doctrines mean and imply. His bottom line, however, is (a) that they come to us from Christ as reported in Scripture, and (b) that they cannot be established philosophically (that we cannot come to know that they are true by using our powers of reason). So justified scepticism when it comes to what is often called 'the problem of the historical Jesus' would be very damaging to the core of Aquinas's teaching.

But suppose that we side with Aquinas when it comes to *sacra doctrina*. And suppose that we want to give it a high profile in a Catholic university. Does Aquinas have any good advice to offer as we do so? I think he has at least two valuable things to say. The first is 'Strive to see connections'. The second is 'Recognize that both teaching and learning have ethical dimensions'. The first piece of advice here is something which Aquinas himself obeys in writing his most famous work, the *Summa Theologiae*, which can be taken to illustrate what Aquinas thought a good education in *sacra doctrina* should be. As for the second piece of advice, its meaning and cogency should become clear if we note certain aspects of Aquinas's philosophy of action and virtue.

To start with the *Summa Theologiae*, a key question to ask is 'Why did Aquinas write it?' Different theories have been proposed, but it

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

seems to me that a plausible one is that offered by the late Fr Leonard Boyle OP.[19]

He begins by noting (a) that the Fourth Lateran Council explicitly allied the function of hearing confessions to that of preaching, (b) that the Dominican Order was founded to be an Order of Preachers (something completely new in the Church at that time), and (c) that in 1221 Pope Honorius III gave the Dominican Order a general (and hitherto unprecedented) mandate to hear confessions – the result being that from 1221 Dominicans saw their mission as one of preaching and hearing confessions.

Boyle then reminds us of some details of Aquinas's career prior to the time when he began to write the *Summa Theologiae*. From 1256 to 1259 Aquinas was Regent Master in Theology at the University of Paris, where his students would have been relatively advanced and also from various backgrounds. Between 1261 to around 1265, however, Aquinas was working as Lector in the Dominican priory at Orvieto, where his students would only have been *fratres communes*, Dominicans assigned to the Orvieto house (which was a working priory, not a formal house of studies). And his primary job was to teach moral theology, on which there were some standard Dominican text-books then available – such as Raymond of Pennafort's *Summa de Casibus* (1224 and subsequently revised) and William Peraldus's *Summa Virtutum* (1236–50).

Now, so Boyle goes on to note, the evidence suggests that before around 1259 the Roman Dominican Province (to which Aquinas belonged) gave little priority to study. But from 1260, when Aquinas had a voice at his province's annual chapter, we find the Roman Dominicans starting to legislate seriously in favour of studies. And in 1265 Aquinas was deputed by his province to set up a house of studies at Santa Sabina in Rome. It looks as though he was given *carte blanche* when it came to matters of curriculum, and it also seems that he did some unusual things while teaching at Santa Sabina. For example, he lectured on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and instead of focusing on Book IV of the *Sentences*, which deals with practical theology, he worked on Book I, dealing with God, Creation, and the Trinity. At this time also, Aquinas began to write the *Summa Theologiae*.

Boyle concludes that Aquinas started this work because he was dissatisfied with the theological education which Dominican friars were getting. Aquinas himself says that he is aiming it at newcomers

[19] Leonard Boyle, 'The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of Saint Thomas Aquinas' (Etienne Gilson Series, 5, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, 1982). Boyle's essay is reprinted with some revisions in Stephen N.J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., 2002), to which my references below refer. For a position that differs from Boyle's, see John Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), Chapter 3.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the study of 'catholic truth'. 'The purpose we have set before us in this work', he writes, 'is to convey the things which belong to the Christian religion in a style serviceable for the training of beginners'.[20] Boyle suggests that the 'beginners' in question are first and foremost Dominican students, and working friars in general, whose reading matter had hitherto been largely confined to manuals of moral and pastoral theology. And, Boyle adds, what Aquinas was trying to do was to provide a serious framework for this theology. Or in Boyle's words:

> With the *Summa* . . . Thomas made his own personal contribution to the longstanding manualist and summist tradition of the order in which he had been a participant . . . and at the same time attempted to set the regular training in practical theology in the Dominican Order on a more truly theological course . . . What had been missing in the curriculum before Thomas's tenure at Santa Sabina was what one may term 'dogmatic' or 'systematic' theology . . . This doctrinal gap in the system is precisely what Thomas attempted to fill with his *Summa*. All Dominican writers of *summae* previous to Thomas had valiantly covered various aspects of learning for their confrères in pastoral care . . . Thomas on the other hand went well beyond anything hitherto attempted. He provided a *summa* of general theology, a manual that dealt with God, Trinity, Creation, and Incarnation, as well as with the strengths and weaknesses of human nature . . . Thomas, of course, had nothing against practical theology . . . But he now gave that practical theology a setting not evident in Dominican circles before him. By prefacing the *Secunda* or 'moral' part with a *Prima pars* on God, Trinity, and Creation, and then rounding it off with a *Tertia pars* on the Son of God, Incarnation and the Sacraments, Thomas put practical theology . . . in a full theological context.[21]

Given his arguments, some of which I must now pass over in silence, Boyle's thesis seems to me a sound one. And it helps us to see how Aquinas viewed the teaching of *sacra doctrina*. He seems to have wanted it to be presented, not in snippets and with a focus on only a few topics, but with a sense of how all its elements fit together. Yes, he approves of moral theology (to which a large part of the *Summa Theologiae* is devoted).[22] But he seems not to want moral theology studied without reference to other key elements of Christian belief. He seeks to make connections so that parts can be viewed in the light of a greater whole. And this attitude surely makes perfect

[20] Prologue to Part One of the *Summa Theologiae*. I quote from Volume 1 of the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, and McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1964), p. 3.

[21] Boyle, p. 7. Boyle notes, however, that there was at least one Dominican contemporary of Aquinas who seems to have shared his sense of the need to adjust the curriculum for Dominican theological teaching – Hugh Ripelin, who wrote a *Compendium Theologiae Veritatis*. See Boyle, pp. 7 f.

[22] As Boyle notes, it was the moral sections of the *Summa Theologiae* that proved popular with Dominicans. See Boyle, pp. 11–13.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

sense. For all Christian beliefs are part of a greater whole, and one can only distort them by treating them independently of each other. They echo and draw on each other, as Aquinas's treatment of them in the *Summa Theologiae* brings out very well. I always say that it is hard to teach Aquinas to students since expounding him on one topic almost always means simultaneously expounding him on half a dozen others. But this is clearly a difficulty to be met head on, not run away from. And it springs from a sound approach to the teaching of Christianity in general – the approach being the systematic and connection-making one for which what we find in the *Summa Theologiae* serves as a paradigm.

But what if you do not want to make connections between one belief and another, or between different sets of belief? What, for that matter, if you are just not concerned about what is true or how to increase your knowledge? These questions bring me to what I am calling Aquinas's second piece of advice when it comes to the teaching of *sacra doctrina*: 'Recognize that both teaching and learning have ethical dimensions' – an injunction, I should stress, which Aquinas would think of as applying to *all* teaching and learning, not just to the teaching and learning of *sacra doctrina*.[23]

Aquinas thinks that insofar as we are acting voluntarily we are always being drawn to what attracts us. For him, voluntary behaviour is, by definition, the moving of agents towards what they take to be desirable or good. Aristotle says that goodness is what all things desire, and Aquinas agrees.[24] In his view, we voluntarily move *only* towards what appeals to us. Aquinas, of course, does not think that we always *enjoy* what we embrace voluntarily. He does not, for example, think that I will necessarily enjoy a visit to the dentist. But he does think that if I go to the dentist voluntarily, that is because I see the visit as a good thing, as something which I desire, as something that I want or to which I am drawn. For Aquinas, there can be no voluntary behaviour which does not spring from the tastes or longings of the people whose behaviour it is.

Now, of course, this view of Aquinas has an obvious implication when it comes to teaching and learning. For, insofar as teaching and learning (or, at least, *trying* to learn) are voluntary activities, the forms they take will depend on the desires of teachers and learners. And, Aquinas thinks, since desires can be good and bad, teaching and learning (or trying to learn) can be good or bad. Aquinas never

[23] I am not at this point attributing to Aquinas a way of thinking which he develops specifically with an eye on teaching and learning. I am drawing on things Aquinas says in various places which amount to the approach to teaching and learning that I am now ascribing to him.

[24] For Aristotle, see *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 1. You can find Aquinas echoing Aristotle at, for example, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 5,1 – though he endorses Aristotle's equation of goodness and desirability in many places.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

suggests that people with bad desires cannot be good at teaching. Nor does he suggest that people with bad desires cannot learn anything. But what he does say commits him to recognizing that people's bad desires might lead them to teach or learn badly. Aquinas's take on will and desire implies that both teaching and learning (or trying to learn) are not morally neutral activities since their performance springs from desires which can be thought of as good or bad. What Aquinas says about will and desire also implies that the acquisition of good desires is a necessary prerequisite for good teaching and learning.

But what Aquinas has to say about will and desire goes even further than I have indicated. For he thinks (a) that being drawn to something is a matter of taking it to be (or understanding it to be) good, and (b) that calling something good is truly or falsely describing what it actually is in itself. So he thinks that understanding something to be good depends on one's tastes or desires. And with this thought in mind he would surely want to say that you will never get good teachers or learners unless you get people who are personally drawn to what is really excellent in the field of teaching and study. Once again, I am not ascribing to Aquinas the thesis that villains cannot teach or study well. But Aquinas says enough to show (a) that he would like teachers, *as teachers*, to be drawn to teaching rather than anything else, and (b) that he would like students, *as students* to be drawn to learning rather than anything else. Aquinas also says enough to show that he thinks that one's desires can influence the extent to which one is able to learn. His view is that you only get to know if you are interested in paying attention. He also thinks that much that we know depends on us being prepared to look at certain things while disregarding others. In other words, Aquinas's view is that what one ends up learning depends a lot on the sort of person one is to start with (this being a moral issue since it has to do with character and desires). And he would surely want to say that how you teach depends on this also.

I leave it to you to imagine how, in the light of what I have just been saying, Aquinas would advise when it comes to the hiring and tenuring of teachers in today's Catholic universities. And I leave it to you to imagine what he might say when it comes to character formation in the case of the students to be found in these institutions. From what he says in many places, however, it seems clear to me that he would not be a paradigm of what I take to be political correctness. I take it that he would be urging that Catholic universities should be staffed by people who are drawn to what the Catholic Church takes to be good. I also take it that he would think of a Catholic university as a place in which students are actively helped to like and become attracted to this. Aquinas in general thinks that being a good human being needs training. He thinks that good people are those who have developed certain settled ways of acting and reacting. I take it that,

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

were he alive today, he would be encouraging administrators and teachers in Catholic universities to be doing what they can to help their students to develop ways of acting and reacting valued by Catholics.

In conclusion, though, I have to add that I do not think that Aquinas would favour a ghetto-like approach to Catholic education today. I have been reading and writing about Aquinas for years, and it seems to me to be perfectly clear that he would have had little time for educational institutions unwilling to engage with views opposed to its basic tenets, or unwilling to expose their students to such views. When George Bernard Shaw visited Washington, D.C., he was told that the Catholic University of America was located in the city. Shaw then said that a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms. I presume that he was expressing an aversion to places in which non-Catholic thinking is not taken seriously. Yet some of the most approvingly quoted authors in Aquinas's writings are not even Christians. So Aquinas clearly thought that people who disagreed with him could help him to learn. And maybe that is one of the chief thoughts he would have wished to bequeath to those concerned with Catholic education today.[25]

Professor Brian Davies OP
Fordham University,
New York

[25] This article is an annotated version of a lecture delivered on June 24th 2004 at the 8th Biennial Dominican Colleges Colloquium held at Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois. I am grateful to Sr Janet Welsh OP for inviting me to deliver the lecture and for organizing my visit to River Forest.

© The Dominican Council 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00083.x Published online by Cambridge University Press