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The Moral Disadvantage of Unbelief: Natural Religion and Natural Sanctity in Aquinas

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Introduction

Thomists debate whether according to Aquinas our knowledge of the natural law presupposes belief in the existence of God, and thus whether unbelief renders a person incapable of consistently accepting the natural law or even of living according to it. The approach often taken to answer this question¹ is to examine whether belief in God is a necessary presupposition of Aquinas's natural law theory, especially as expressed in his questions on law and the natural law.² This paper, however, will take a new and less direct, yet perhaps more revealing, approach towards settling the question, based on Aquinas's virtue ethics:³ this paper asks whether for Aquinas the life of natural virtue necessarily includes the practice of religion. For Aquinas, the virtue of religion is a moral virtue that inclines us to perform religious actions, such as worship, prayer, and sacrifice, as an attempt to pay God His due. I shall argue that the necessity of such a virtue for living a full moral life implies that Aquinas's natural law ethics require belief in God.

I shall glean my argument from the texts of Aquinas, primarily from the *Ila-IIae*, and shall present it in two stages, corresponding to the two

¹ For a sampling of recent positions on the issue, all of which center on the question of whether Aquinas's natural law theory presupposes belief in God, see Anthony Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Fulvio Di Blasì, *God and the Natural Law: A Rereading of Thomas Aquinas* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2002); John Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

² Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (henceforth, *ST*), I-II, q. 90–94.

³ Other scholars have recently taken similar approaches. Cf. Daniel Shields, "The Moral Life of the Non-Believer," (lecture, American Catholic Philosophical Association, Los Angeles, CA, November 02, 2012).

sections of this paper. Emphasizing the religious finality of the life of the natural virtues, in the first section (1) I shall show how for Aquinas the virtue of religion, which inclines man to give to God the worship that is due to Him, is not only a legitimate natural virtue that is annexed to justice, but is actually the highest moral virtue, and is therefore quite necessary for a full life of natural virtue. In the second section (2) I shall argue that religion, as a “general” virtue (under which aspect Aquinas calls it “sanctity”), has the role of “commanding” or ordering all other moral virtues towards its own, religious ends, thus giving the whole system of moral virtues a single finality and unity. Using this indirect approach, therefore, I ultimately defend the view that for Aquinas without the practice of religion (and thus without belief in God) one cannot fulfill the natural law or live to the full a life of natural virtue. In addressing the question of whether morality must be grounded in belief in God according to Aquinas, I am doing a textual study of Aquinas’s philosophical thought, and thus not only shall I assume that God does exist and that there is also an objective moral order, but I shall actually assume everything that Aquinas himself assumes by the time he gets to his treatment of the virtue of religion in II-II.81–100, which is to say that I shall be presupposing the whole range of philosophical and even theological doctrines presented in the Ia and Ia-IIae. Thus, the question I am addressing is not whether for Aquinas the non-believer can have knowledge of moral truth, but rather whether the non-believer has access to a full life of natural virtue, given all that Aquinas holds about God and morality. Moreover, in answering negatively, in no way do I want to argue that for Aquinas the unbeliever is incapable of performing any morally good acts, or of finding any motivation for leading a morally good life; rather, I simply shall argue that the unbeliever is incapable of practicing the virtue of religion, which is a key virtue for the moral life, not only because it is the highest of the moral virtues, but because it is the one that governs all other moral virtues, and without it the natural life of the virtues loses its order and finality.

1. Religion as a Natural Virtue

In the Middle Ages it was disputed whether the theological virtues included the practice of other virtues, or were themselves part of other virtues. Thinkers such as Peter Lombard, Simon of Tournai, Alan of Lille, William of Auxerre, Philip the Chancellor, John of La Rochelle, the author of the *Summa Fratris Alexandri*, Odon Rigaud, and St. Bonaventure all categorized the virtue of religion, known to the pagan philosophers as that virtue whereby man

gives to God the worship that is due to Him,⁴ as being somehow a theological virtue or at least as being directly related to the theological virtues.⁵ When Aquinas took up the topic, one of the first things he was expected to do was to decide how he was going to classify this virtue. In this regard he followed the steps of his immediate predecessor, Albert the Great,⁶ who in turn followed Cicero in classifying it,⁷ not as part of the theological virtues, but as part of the natural, moral virtue of justice. Aquinas thus establishes what will be his guiding definition of the virtue of religion throughout his discussion: “On the contrary, there is what Cicero says in the second [book] of *De rhetorica inventione*, that religion is that which offers worship and reverence to a superior nature, which they call divine.”⁸ More concretely, he classifies it as a “potential” part of the virtue of justice—that is, a virtue that is related to justice in that it gives someone (i.e., God) His due—but which falls short of

⁴ Cf. Odon Lottin, *Psychologie et Morale aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Louvain: Abbaye du Mont César; Gembloux, Belgium: J. Duculot, 1949), p. 322: “Ce qui frappe l'historien de cette période préthomiste, c'est l'ampleur du champ d'action attribué à la vertu de religion.... Et quand le théologien veut détailler la matière de la religion, il ne craint pas d'y introduire les actes des trois vertus théologiques, comme si ces actes étaient, non seulement commandés par la vertu de religion, mais constituaient eux-mêmes l'objet de cette vertu. Et cette tendance est commune à tous les théologiens, de toute école.... Pourquoi dès lors ne pas conclure que la vertu de religion est, elle-même, une vertu théologique...? [A]ux yeux des théologiens du moyen âge, le nombre ternaire des vertus théologiques était trop sacré pour être violé.”

⁵ Cf. Ibid.; see also Nicholas J. De Ponton D'Amecourt, *The Moral Goodness of Worship: Thomas Aquinas on the Virtue of Religion* (PhD. diss., Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America, 1999), 38; Francisco J. Romero, *The Finality of Religion in Aquinas's Theory of Human Acts* (PhD. diss., Ann Arbor, MI: Proquest Digital Dissertations, 2009), 20–21, <http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations/AAI3366046>.

⁶ Cf. Albertus Magnus, *Super III Sententiarum* d. 9, q. 3, sol., in *Opera omnia*, ed. A. Borgnet, vol. 28 (Paris: Vivès, 1894): “Dicendum cum Tullio, quod est pars iustitiae, et cadit in partem iustitiae quae est religio.” Nicholas De Ponton very succinctly highlights how these words, full of power, struck the edifice of the synthesis that earlier medieval thinkers had labored to erect: “Saint Albert, in one line, undoes all this work” (De Ponton, *The Moral Goodness of Worship*, 38).

⁷ Cf. *De inventione rhetorica* 2.53.161, in *Opera omnia quae exstant critico apparatu instructa* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1990): “Religio est quae superioris cuiusdam naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam caeremoniamque affert.”

⁸ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 1, s.c., in *S. Thomae Aquinatis opera omnia*, ed. P.M. Leonina XIII, vol. 9, *Summa theologiae*, II^a-II^ae q. 57–122 cum commentariis Caietani (Rome: Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, 1897): “Sed contra est quod Tullius dicit, II Rhetoricae, quod religio est quae superioris naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam caeremoniamque affert.” All translations are my own.

being a species of justice by reason of its inability to return fully what is due to Him.⁹

Aquinas will defend this classification of religion as a moral virtue (as opposed to a theological virtue) by appealing to his doctrine on the end and object of the virtues. In Aquinas's ethics, virtues are classified as theological and human depending on their object—that is, on that which they are concerned with. The theological virtues have God as their object, whereas the human, or natural virtues have creatures as their objects. For example, the object of the virtue of justice, a natural or human virtue, is that which is due to others, whereas the object of the theological virtue of faith is God Himself. With regard to religion, Aquinas says that God is not its object, but its end, and so it is not a theological virtue, but a moral one:

Religion is what offers to God due *cultus*.¹⁰ Therefore, two things are considered in religion. One is *what* religion offers, that is, *cultus*: and this is related to religion as matter and object. The other is *that to which it is offered*, that is, to God. To God *cultus* is shown not as if the acts whereby God is worshipped (*colitur*) attain God himself, as when we believe in God, by believing we attain God.... But rather due *cultus* is offered to God insofar as certain acts, whereby God is worshipped (*colitur*), are done for the sake of reverence of God, for example, the offering of sacrifices and other such things. Hence, it is manifest that God is not related to the virtue of religion as matter or object, but as end. Therefore, religion is not a theological virtue, whose object is the ultimate end: but rather it is a moral virtue, to which it belongs to be about the means [lit., “those things that are for the end”].¹¹

⁹ Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 80, sol.

¹⁰ Most translators render *cultus* as “worship.” However, this translation would run afoul in other texts, where Aquinas uses the term outside of the religious context. Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 1, ad 4: “[C]olere dicimus homines quos honorificatione, vel recordatione, vel praesentia frequentamus. Et etiam aliqua quae nobis subiecta sunt coli a nobis dicuntur: sicut agricolae dicuntur ex eo quod colunt agros, et incolae dicuntur ex eo quod colunt loca quae inhabitant....” Therefore, I shall leave this term untranslated as much as possible. Otherwise, I shall translate *cultus* and its related forms as “worship,” “cultivating,” et cetera, depending on the context; cf. Roy DeFerrari, *A Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 258.

¹¹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 5, c (emphasis added): “[R]eligio est quae Deo debitum cultum affert. Duo igitur in religione considerantur. Unum quidem quod religio Deo affert, cultus scilicet, et hoc se habet per modum materiae et obiecti ad religionem. Aliud autem est id cui affertur, scilicet Deus. Cui cultus exhibetur non quasi actus quibus Deus colitur ipsum Deum attingant, sicut cum credimus Deo, creden-

Theological virtues are the highest virtues in Aquinas's system because they directly have God as their object of operation, and because the virtue of religion has God as its *end* and not as its object, it cannot be a theological virtue.

Therefore, since for Aquinas religion is a natural virtue, and thus its acts are prescribed by the natural law,¹² it follows that the non-believer is at a moral disadvantage, for there will be religious acts prescribed by the natural law, such as cultic sacrifices,¹³ which the non-believer will be unable to practice.

Now, Aquinas asks whether its having God as *end* means that the virtue of religion is superior (*praeferenda*) to the other moral virtues, which have more worldly things as objects. He answers affirmatively:

Whatever is directed to an end takes its goodness from being ordered to that end; so that the nearer it is to the end the better it is. Now moral virtues, as stated above,¹⁴ are about matters that are ordered to God as their end. Now, religion approaches nearer to God than the other moral virtues, insofar as its actions are directly and immediately ordered to the honor of God. Hence, religion is higher (*praeeminet*) than the [other] moral virtues.¹⁵

Thus, since religion is the highest moral virtue, it follows that it is quite necessary for a full life of natural virtue. The non-believer is at a serious disadvantage in the moral life, not only because he is unable to partake of the supernatural, theological virtues, but even because he is unable to practice the highest of the natural, moral virtues.

Yet, as I hope to argue in the next section, it is not just this one virtue that the non-believer will be unable to practice, but the whole range of natural virtues in the manner and with the finality with which they are meant to be practiced. That is, the virtue of religion, as we shall see, has a governing or

do Deum attingimus...affertur autem Deo debitus cultus inquantum actus quidam, quibus Deus colitur, in Dei reverentiam fiunt, puta sacrificiorum oblationes et alia huiusmodi. Unde manifestum est quod Deus non comparatur ad virtutem religionis sicut materia vel obiectum, sed sicut finis. Et ideo religio non est virtus theologica, cuius obiectum est ultimus finis, sed est virtus moralis, cuius est esse circa ea quae sunt ad finem."

¹² Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 94, art. 3.

¹³ Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 85, art. 2.

¹⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 5.

¹⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 6, c: "[E]a quae sunt ad finem sortiuntur bonitatem ex ordine in finem, et ideo quanto sunt fini propinquiora, tanto sunt meliora. Virtutes autem morales, ut supra habitum est, sunt circa ea quae ordinantur in Deum sicut in finem. Religio autem magis de propinquo accedit ad Deum quam aliae virtutes morales, inquantum operatur ea quae directe et immediate ordinantur in honorem divinum. Et ideo religio praeminet inter alias virtutes morales."

“commanding” role with respect to the other natural, moral virtues, and not practicing this virtue means that the entire life of natural virtue will remain aimless. To shed light on this reality in Aquinas’s thought, we must now turn to his doctrine on the commanded and elicited acts of a virtue, and specifically to the commanded and elicited acts of the virtue of religion.

2. Natural Sanctity

To understand this doctrine, it would be helpful to recall the distinction Aquinas makes in his *Prima Secundae* between the “elicited” and “commanded” acts of the will so as to apply it analogically to our present issue. On the one hand, the will has acts that are proper to it; Aquinas calls them the “elicited” acts of the will. The act of intention, which is the will’s desire of an end, is an example of an elicited act of the will. On the other hand, the will can command the acts that are proper to other powers, ordering them to the end; these are the “commanded” acts of the will. Thus, the act of walking is an act commanded by the will. Now, this distinction between elicited and commanded acts of the will has an analogical correlation in the treatise on the *virtues* and their acts: in effect, the elicited-commanded distinction is meant to apply to both virtues and powers. As Aquinas puts it: “By its command, *the power or virtue* that operates with regards to the end moves *the power or virtue* that effects those things that are ordered to that end.”¹⁶ This distinction is extremely important in Aquinas’s doctrine on the virtues, although curiously he cashes it out for the first time in the *Summa theologiae* in his discussion of almsgiving:

Nothing hinders an act that is proper to a virtue “elicitedly” from being attributed to another virtue as commanding it and directing it to its end. And in this way almsgiving is reckoned among works of satisfaction insofar as pity for the defect of a subject is ordered to the satisfaction of sin; and insofar as it is directed to placate God, it has the nature of a sacrifice, and thus it is commanded by *latria*.¹⁷

¹⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 5, ad 1: “[S]emper potentia vel virtus quae operatur circa finem, per imperium movet potentiam vel virtutem operantem ea quae ordinantur in finem illum.”

¹⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 32, art. 1, ad 2: “[N]ihil prohibet actum qui est proprie unius virtutis elicitive, attribui alteri virtuti sicut imperanti et ordinanti ad suum finem. Et hoc modo dare eleemosynam ponitur inter opera satisfactoria, inquantum miseratio in defectum patientis ordinatur ad satisfaciendum pro culpa. Secundum autem quod ordinatur ad placandum Deum, habet rationem sacrificii, et sic imperatur a latria.”

Thus, a virtue has, on the one hand, acts that are proper to it. Aquinas calls them the “elicited” acts of that virtue. Visiting one’s father, paying signs of respect to him, etc., are examples of the elicited acts of the virtue of piety. On the other hand, a virtue can “borrow,” as it were, the acts that are proper to other virtues, *ordering* them or commanding them to its own proper end and giving them a new formality. That is, the act of a virtue has its own natural end, but it can be ordered or commanded by a higher virtue to *that* virtue’s own end; these Aquinas calls the “commanded” acts of a virtue. In the example that Aquinas gives, an act of almsgiving, which is normally done for the sake of relieving the poor, can be elevated to an ulterior end, namely, that of placating God, by the virtue of satisfaction (which is a “part” of charity). Similarly, the virtue of piety can command an act of fortitude, for example, when a son joins the armed forces in order to honor his father. In this case, the act of obtaining an arduous good is the natural end of fortitude, but it is elevated by piety to the ulterior end of honoring the father.

Aquinas brings this teaching to the fore in his discussion on religion. He tackles the objection that:

It seems that religion does not order man to God alone. For it is said in James 1 [v. 27]: “Religion clean and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their tribulation, and to keep oneself immaculate from this world.” Now “to visit orphans and widows” is said according to an ordering to neighbor, and “to keep oneself unspotted from this world” pertains to an ordering of a man to himself. Therefore, religion is not said only as in an ordering to God.¹⁸

His reply is the central passage distinguishing between the elicited and commanded acts of religion:

Religion has two kinds of act: certain proper and immediate acts, which it elicits, through which man is ordered to God alone, such as sacrifice, adoration, and other suchlike things; and it has other acts which it produces by means of the virtues which it commands, ordering them to divine reverence. For, the virtue to which the end pertains commands the virtues to which those things that are ordered to the end pertain. And according to this “to visit orphans and widows in their tribulation,” which is an act elicited by

¹⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 1, obj. 1: “Videtur quod religio non ordinet hominem solum ad Deum. Dicitur enim Iac. I, *religio munda et immaculata apud Deum et patrem haec est, visitare pupillos et viduas in tribulatione eorum, et immaculatum se custodire ab hoc saeculo. Sed visitare pupillos et viduas dicitur secundum ordinem ad proximum, quod autem dicit immaculatum se custodire ab hoc saeculo, pertinet ad ordinem quo ordinatur homo in seipso. Ergo religio non solum dicitur in ordine ad Deum.*”

[the virtue of] mercy, is put forward as an act of religion by way of command; and “to keep oneself clean from this world” as an act commanded by religion, but elicited by temperance or some other suchlike virtue.¹⁹

Thus, the principal acts of the virtue of religion are its elicited acts, such as adoration, prayer, and sacrifice. These are directly “elicited” by the virtue of religion because they have no other finality than to give honor to God. They are the acts that are *proper* to the virtue of religion. But since the virtue of religion can also “command” the acts of any other moral virtue to this divine end, it follows that there are also other secondary or indirect religious acts, such as chastity and martyrdom, which, though directly elicited by other moral virtues (e.g., temperance and fortitude) are “commanded” by the virtue of religion in such a way that religion orders them to a higher, religious end. Thus, the acts of essentially non-religious virtues can all be transformed into indirectly religious acts by being “commanded” to a religious end. In every act of religion, whether elicited or commanded by the virtue, the will is ordering something to the honor of God as to its end; otherwise, the act would not count as “religion” at all.

What is most noteworthy in this account for our purposes is the result that the virtue of religion has on the life of natural virtue in us. Religion does not just incline us to pray, offer sacrifice, etc., to God, but also to order our entire lives, all of our acts of virtue of whatever kind, to the honor of God as to our natural end. This is precisely why religion is a virtue in Aquinas’s account: it is a virtue because it “orders man to God.”²⁰ This order to God is the good that the virtue of religion obtains for us.

As stated above,²¹ “a virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his act good likewise.” Hence we must say that every good act belongs to a virtue. Now it is evident that to render anyone his due has the aspect of good, since by rendering someone his due, one is also placed in a suitable relation to him as though “fittingly ordered to” him. Now, order comes under the aspect

¹⁹ *ST* II-II.81.1 ad 1: “[R]eligio habet duplices actus. Quosdam quidem proprios et immediatos, quos elicit, per quos homo ordinatur ad solum Deum: sicut sacrificare, adorare et alia huiusmodi. Alios autem actus habet quos producit mediantibus virtutibus quibus imperat, ordinans eos in divinam reverentiam: quia scilicet virtus ad quam pertinet finis, imperat virtutibus ad quas pertinet ea quae sunt ad finem. Et secundum hoc actus religionis per modum imperii ponitur esse visitare pupillos et viduas in tribulatione eorum, quod est actus elicited a misericordia: immaculatum autem custodire se ab hoc saeculo imperative quidem est religionis, elicitive autem temperantiae vel alicuius huiusmodi virtutis.”

²⁰ Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 1.

²¹ *ST* II-II, q. 58, art. 3; *ST* I-II, q. 55, art. 3–4.

of good, just as mode and species, according to Augustine, in his book, *De natura boni* [3]. Since then it belongs to religion to pay due honor to someone, namely, to God, it is evident that religion is a virtue.²²

Therefore, given its “commanding” role, the virtue of religion has a certain generality, a kind of universal applicability in relation to the other moral virtues. This is why Aquinas identifies its role as one of the “general” virtues over and above its nature as a “special” virtue.²³ As a general virtue, religion takes on the name of “sanctity” (*sanctitas*) in Aquinas’s moral philosophy. That is, according to St. Thomas, insofar as this virtue elicits acts proper to itself, it is called ‘religion,’ but insofar as it commands the acts of the other virtues, ordering them to divine honor, it is called ‘sanctity’:

Thus, that through which the mind of man applies itself and its acts to God is called ‘sanctity.’ Hence, it does not differ from religion according to its essence, but only conceptually (*ratione*); for it is called ‘religion’ according as it shows to God due service in those things that pertain specifically to divine *cultus*, such as in sacrifices, oblations, and other suchlike things; but it is called ‘sanctity’ according as man refers to God not only these but also the works of the other virtues, or according as man disposes himself by means of good works to divine *cultus*.²⁴

²² *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 2, c: “[S]icut supra dictum est, *virtus est quae bonum facit habentem et opus eius bonum reddit*. Et ideo necesse est dicere omnem actum bonum ad virtutem pertinere. Manifestum est autem quod reddere debitum alicui habet rationem boni, quia per hoc quod aliquis alteri debitum reddit, etiam constituitur in proportionem convenienti et recte ipsius, quasi convenienter ordinatus ad ipsum; ordo autem ad rationem boni pertinet, sicut et modus et species, ut per Augustinum patet, in libro de natura boni. Cum igitur ad religionem pertineat reddere honorem debitum alicui, scilicet Deo, manifestum est quod religio virtus est.”

²³ Within his question on religion in general (II-II, q. 81), Aquinas first argues that religion is a “special” virtue, distinct from all the rest, because it has its own object and its own goodness, namely, the honor of God, which is not shared with any other virtue; *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 4: “[C]um virtus ordinetur ad bonum, ubi est specialis ratio boni, ibi oportet esse specialem virtutem. Bonum autem ad quod ordinatur religio est exhibere Deo debitum honorem. Honor autem debetur alicui ratione excellentiae. Deo autem competit singularis excellentia, inquantum omnia in infinitum transcendit secundum omnimodum excessum. Unde ei debetur specialis honor, sicut in rebus humanis videmus quod diversis excellentiis personarum diversus honor debetur, alius quidem patri, alius regi, et sic de aliis. Unde manifestum est quod religio est specialis virtus.” But, as I shall now explain, he later (II-II, q. 81, art. 8) argues that it is also a “general” virtue.

²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 8, c: “Sic igitur sanctitas dicitur per quam mens hominis seipsam et suos actus applicat Deo. Unde non differt a religione secundum essen-

And again:

Sanctity is a certain special virtue according to its essence; and according to this, it is in a way the same as religion. It has a certain generality, however, insofar as by its command it directs the acts of all the virtues to the divine good, just as legal justice is said to be a general virtue, insofar as it directs the acts of all the virtues to the common good.²⁵

This goes to show that practically any act can count as an act of “sanctity” (that is, of religion as a “commanding” virtue) so long as it is ordered to God as to an end. Not only can any virtuous act become an act of sanctity, but even otherwise morally-indifferent acts can be transformed into virtuous acts of sanctity. An entire life, in fact, if ordered to God as to an end, can be transformed into an act of the virtue of sanctity.²⁶ Therefore, in order to live a complete life of virtue, one needs not only to perform acts that are “elicited” by the virtue of religion, such as prayer and sacrifice; the truly virtuous man will in fact elevate the acts “elicited” by all other moral virtues, such as acts of temperance and fortitude, by ordering them to a religious end, thus transforming them into “commanded” acts of religion. Consequently, we can say that in Aquinas’s ethics the whole life of the virtuous man is in its most profound sense a life of worship, because it is governed or commanded by the natural virtue of religion, and as such this life receives the name of ‘sanctity.’

A theological point will perhaps shed light on the issue: there is a parallel between the theological virtue of charity and the natural virtue of

tiam, sed solum ratione. Nam religio dicitur secundum quod exhibet Deo debitum famulatum in his quae pertinent specialiter ad cultum divinum, sicut in sacrificiis, oblationibus et aliis huiusmodi, sanctitas autem dicitur secundum quod homo non solum haec, sed aliarum virtutum opera refert in Deum, vel secundum quod homo se disponit per bona opera ad cultum divinum.”

²⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 81, art. 8, ad 1: “[S]anctitas est quaedam specialis virtus secundum essentiam, et secundum hoc est quodammodo eadem religioni. Habet autem quandam generalitatem, secundum quod omnes virtutum actus per imperium ordinat in bonum divinum, sicut et iustitia legalis dicitur generalis virtus, inquantum ordinat omnium virtutum actus in bonum commune. Cf. *Ibid.*, ad 2: Ad secundum dicendum quod temperantia munditiam quidem operatur, non tamen ita quod habeat rationem sanctitatis nisi referatur in Deum. Unde de ipsa virginitate dicit Augustinus, in libro de virginitate, quod *non quia virginitas est, sed quia Deo dicata est, honoratur.*”

²⁶ Interestingly, this Thomistic moral principle seems to be operative within the teachings of many modern Catholic spiritual writers, notably, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis de Sales, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, and Fr. Joseph Kentenich, all of whom placed emphasis in some way or another on the sanctification of ordinary life; that is, the elevation of non-religious acts to a religious end.

religion. In the same way that religion can command the acts elicited by lower virtues, its own acts can themselves be commanded by higher virtues. That is to say, the theological virtues can command the acts elicited by religion and guide them to their own, proper ends:

By its command, the power or virtue that operates with regards to the end always moves the power or virtue that performs those things that are ordered to that end. Now, the theological virtues, namely, faith, hope and charity, have an act with regards to God as with regards to their proper object: and therefore, by their command they cause the act of religion, which performs certain things directed toward God: and therefore, Augustine says that “God is worshipped (*colitur*) by faith, hope and charity.”²⁷

Therefore, religion is to all the moral virtues what charity is to all the virtues without qualification. Charity is said to be the “form” of the virtues because it commands the acts of all those other virtues, ordering them to the ultimate supernatural end of loving God.²⁸ Without charity, therefore, the entire supernatural organism of virtues is lifeless, and loses its order, more or less like a corpse begins to decay because it has lost its substantial form.²⁹ Similarly,

²⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 81, art. 5, ad 1: “[S]emper potentia vel virtus quae operatur circa finem, per imperium movet potentiam vel virtutem operantem ea quae ordinantur in finem illum. Virtutes autem theologicae, scilicet fides, spes et caritas, habent actum circa Deum sicut circa proprium obiectum. Et ideo suo imperio causant actum religionis, quae operatur quaedam in ordine ad Deum. Et ideo Augustinus dicit quod *Deus colitur fide, spe et caritate*.”

²⁸ Cf. *ST II-II*, q. 23, art. 8, c: “[I]n moralibus forma actus attenditur principaliter ex parte finis, cuius ratio est quia principium moralium actuum est voluntas, cuius obiectum et quasi forma est finis. Semper autem forma actus consequitur formam agentis. Unde oportet quod in moralibus id quod dat actui ordinem ad finem, det ei et formam. Manifestum est autem secundum praedicta quod per caritatem ordinantur actus omnium aliarum virtutum ad ultimum finem. Et secundum hoc ipsa dat formam actibus omnium aliarum virtutum. Et pro tanto dicitur esse forma virtutum, nam et ipsae virtutes dicuntur in ordine ad actus formatos.”

²⁹ Cf. *ST II-II*, q. 23, art. 7: “[V]irtus ordinatur ad bonum, ut supra habitum est. Bonum autem principaliter est finis, nam ea quae sunt ad finem non dicuntur bona nisi in ordine ad finem. Sicut ergo duplex est finis, unus ultimus et alius proximus, ita etiam est duplex bonum, unum quidem ultimum, et aliud proximum et particulare. Ultimum quidem et principale bonum hominis est Dei fructio, secundum illud Psalm., mihi adherere Deo bonum est, et ad hoc ordinatur homo per caritatem. Bonum autem secundarium et quasi particulare hominis potest esse duplex, unum quidem quod est vere bonum, utpote ordinabile, quantum est in se, ad principale bonum, quod est ultimus finis; aliud autem est bonum apparens et non verum, quia abducit a finali bono. Sic igitur patet quod virtus vera simpliciter est illa quae ordinat ad principale bonum hominis, sicut etiam philosophus, in VII Physic., dicit quod virtus

from what we have discussed it follows that for Aquinas the virtue of religion is, as it were, the “form” of the other moral virtues, for it orders them to God as to their natural end, and without this virtue the other virtues fall into disorder.

Conclusion

I have gleaned an argument from the texts of Aquinas to show that the moral life, even at a natural level, requires the practice of the virtue of religion, and hence belief in God. I have shown how for Aquinas the virtue of religion is a natural virtue annexed to justice and is actually the highest of the moral virtues, such that it “commands” all others towards its own, religious ends. Moreover, we saw that the virtue of religion is necessary in order to live a complete life of natural virtue, for this virtue elevates the acts “elicited” by all other moral virtues by ordering them to a religious end, thus transforming them into ‘commanded’ acts of religion. Thus, in Aquinas’s ethics, the whole life of the virtuous man is in its most profound sense a life of worship.

We can now easily see how according to Aquinas, lack of belief in God would have to affect a person’s moral life, even at the natural level. The unbeliever is unable to practice the virtue of religion, and this is morally detrimental for at least two reasons: (1) first, the virtue of religion is not only a legitimate virtue that perfects the person morally (and thus without it a person’s moral life cannot be complete), but is actually classified by Aquinas as the highest of the moral virtues, and thus neglect of this virtue is no small moral defect; and (2) most significantly, the virtue of religion has a commanding role in relation to the other moral virtues, such that it orders them to their natural end, and thus without this virtue the moral life falls into disorder. Therefore, in Aquinas, there is a profound sense in which morality must be grounded in God.

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est dispositio perfecti ad optimum. Et sic nulla vera virtus potest esse sine caritate. Sed si accipiat virtus secundum quod est in ordine ad aliquem finem particularem, sic potest aliqua virtus dici sine caritate, inquantum ordinatur ad aliquod particulare bonum. Sed si illud particulare bonum non sit verum bonum, sed apparens, virtus etiam quae est in ordine ad hoc bonum non erit vera virtus, sed falsa similitudo virtutis, sicut non est vera virtus avarorum prudentia, qua excogitant diversa genera lucellorum; et avarorum iustitia, qua gravium damnorum metu contemnunt aliena; et avarorum temperantia, qua luxuriae, quoniam sumptuosa est, cohibent appetitum; et avarorum fortitudo, qua, ut ait Horatius, per mare pauperiem fugiunt, per saxa, per ignes, ut Augustinus dicit, in IV Lib. contra Iulian. Si vero illud bonum particulare sit verum bonum, puta conservatio civitatis vel aliquid huiusmodi, erit quidem vera virtus, sed imperfecta, nisi referatur ad finale et perfectum bonum. Et secundum hoc simpliciter vera virtus sine caritate esse non potest.”