

THE UNIVERSAL MEDIATION OF CHRIST AND NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

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The modern magisterium of the Catholic Church, particularly at the Second Vatican Council, articulated in tandem two fundamentally interdependent principles, both of Biblical origin. First, Christ is the unique universal mediator of salvation for the entire human race (and with this: all salvation occurs through membership in the Catholic Church, or by being ordered toward it.)¹ Second, because Christ died for all human beings, and does offer the possibility of salvation to all members of the human race, the practices and beliefs of non-Christian religions may contain elements of truth that the Holy Spirit may make use of for the purposes of the saving work of God in history.² We should note the two-fold conditional character of this second statement. There may be elements of truth, and God may employ them. In documents such as *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dominus Jesus*, the reflection on *Nostra Aetate* has been refined.³ The sacred writings of other religious traditions are not to be considered inspired in the profound theological sense of the term.⁴ Their rites are not sacramental (instrumental *ex opere operato* causes of grace).⁵ Nor are their beliefs to be confused with the grace of supernatural faith.⁶ Such beliefs and practices may contain important elements of error or superstition, and may harm or delude the human person.⁷ At the same time, some human religious traditions do contain profound elements of the truth, and reflect in many cases the depths of the human search for God.⁸ The Holy Spirit may work through elements of these traditions – including in their collective and historical nature – so

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, para. 14-16.

² *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 22 and 45; *Nostra Aetate*, para. 2.

³ *Redemptoris Missio*, para. 28-30, 55-57 ; *Dominus Jesus*, para. 4.

⁴ *Redemptoris Missio*, para. 36; *Dominus Jesus*, para. 8.

⁵ *Dominus Jesus*, para. 21.

⁶ *Dominus Jesus*, para. 7.

⁷ *Redemptoris Missio*, para. 55; *Dominus Jesus*, para. 8 and 21. 21: "...it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. *1 Cor* 10:20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation".

⁸ *Redemptoris Missio*, para. 28-29 ; *Dominus Jesus*, para. 2 and 14.

as to communicate hidden forms of invitation to, or even habitual participation in, the grace of Christ.⁹ Here we find something akin to highly qualified version of sacramental occasionalism: God may when he wishes, according to his wisdom and providence, make use of elements of the non-Christian religious traditions either to initiate or even progressively to effectuate the salvation of human beings who are not baptized, and are not visible members of the Catholic Church.¹⁰

The teaching of Thomas Aquinas regarding the headship or capital grace of Christ offers resources for thinking about this contemporary theological problem. I would like here briefly to reflect on two elements. (I) The capital grace of Christ as it pertains to our human salvation. (II) Various ways, according to Aquinas, that all human beings are potentially receptive to the work of grace by virtue of their intrinsically religious nature.

I. The Capital Grace of Christ

Aquinas famously considers the grace of Christ according to a tri-partite distinction.¹¹ First, it is a “grace” for the individual human nature of Jesus that it should be the human nature of the Word Incarnate. This grace of the hypostatic union (or *grace of union*) is proper to Christ alone because he alone is God made man, the eternal Word subsisting in a human nature. Second, the *habitual grace* is that created grace that is present in the human soul of Christ, particularly manifest in his spiritual faculties of intellect and will, resulting in the plenary illumination of his human mind with supernatural wisdom, and the influx of a plenitude of charity in his human

⁹ *Redemptoris Missio*, para. 28; *Dominus Jesus*, para. 12.

¹⁰ See Benoit-Dominique de la Soujeole, “Etre ordonné à l’unique Eglise du Christ: l’ecclésialité des communautés non chrétiennes à partir des données œcuméniques” *Revue Thomiste* (2002): 5–41, in which he argues (33–37) that authentic truths and ethical practices embodied in the cultural forms of other religions may indeed be used in an ‘occasionalist’ fashion by God’s providence. God may employ them *when He wills* as stable natural dispositions to the operation of and cooperation with grace. Consequently, they may be sign-expressions of persons who are motivated by grace, without in any way being *ex opere operato instruments* of the supernatural order. The latter order is mediated instrumentally uniquely through Christ’s sacred humanity, the sacraments, and through the mystery of the Church.

¹¹ Aquinas, *In Ioan.* III, lec. 6, n. 544: “There is in Christ a three-fold grace: the grace of union (*gratia unionis*), the grace that is proper to him as distinct person, which is a habitual grace (*gratia habitualis*), and last of all, his grace as Head [of the Church] (*gratia capitis*), which is that of his graces of influence [upon others]. Each of these graces, Christ receives without measure” [Trans. mine].

heart.¹² By extension, Christ possesses as man the plenitude of the infused moral virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Third, there is the *capital grace* of Christ, that of his headship, by which he communicates his grace to the entire Church, to all those who partake of his grace, visibly or invisibly. Aquinas underscores that this grace is not ontologically or essentially distinct from the habitual grace of Christ, but is distinguished only logically or notionally.¹⁴ This point is significant. The capital grace of Christ simply is his sanctifying grace *insofar as it is shared with other members of the human race*. All who are given any participation in the life of God whatsoever participate in some way in the habitual grace of the Lord, who possesses this grace as the source or principle from which all human beings derive their salvation.

Here we should make four subjacent points that are of essential importance. First, according to Aquinas, Jesus possesses a unique plenitude of habitual grace and is the head of the Church fundamentally due to the ontological reality of the hypostatic union.¹⁵ As Jean-Pierre Torrell has observed, St. Thomas purposefully opposed himself to a common opinion held at his time (by Alexander of Hales among others) according to which the habitual grace of Christ given to his individual human nature should serve as an ontological disposition to the hypostatic union.¹⁶ It would be as if his humanity needed first to be proportioned by a grace *of the kind other human beings receive* so as to be capable of being united to the Word. Aquinas perceives there to be a relation between this idea and the *homo assumptus* Christologies that he labels quite strikingly as “Nestorian” in kind. The latter are theories of the hypostatic union derivative from the first theory of hypostatic union found in the Lombard. According to this theory, the human being Jesus is a man united to the Word by virtue of a habitual

¹² *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 7, a. 1.

¹³ ST III, q. 7, aa. 11-12.

¹⁴ ST III, q. 8, aa. 1 and 5.

¹⁵ ST III, q. 7, aa. 1 and 13.

¹⁶ Alexander of Hales, *Glossa Alex* III, 7, 27 (L), in *Magistri Alexandri de Hales Glossa in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, ed. PP. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 4 vols. (Florence: Quaracchi, 1960). See Walter H. Principe, *Alexander of Hales' Theology of the Hypostatic Union*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), 163-65, 171-73. Philip the Chancellor holds this view even more overtly; *De Incarn.* 2, 19. See Walter H. Principe, *Philip the Chancellor's Theology of the Hypostatic Union* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1975), 116-17.

relation.¹⁷ In fact, Alexander goes so far as to speak of two hypostases or concrete substances, the man assumed and the Word assuming. They are united in one person (*persona*) but this union occurs by the disposition of the habitual grace that exists in the human nature of Christ.¹⁸ The “person” in question is one who is constituted by a habitual relation between the Word acting upon the *suppositum* of the humanity and the humanity being illumined and inspired by the grace of the Word. Aquinas is concerned rightly that this form of union (based on a relation, and therefore accidental rather than substantial) cannot be understood as specifically distinct in kind from that which we find in the saints, created human persons who receive habitual grace like Christ himself, but to a lesser degree. His reflection is of a striking pertinence since one finds positions analogous to the one he criticizes in contemporary theorists of religious pluralism. Often such thinkers perceive in Jesus of Nazareth a figure of moral perfection, like other religious founders, differentiated from them more according to a degree of enlightenment (or “grace” equivocally speaking), than due to a distinction of personal identity insofar as Jesus alone is the God-man.¹⁹

Aquinas posits by contrast, then, that the human nature we possess does not require any grace to proportion it to personal union with the Word, but is naturally open to the possibility of the Incarnation by virtue of our spiritual nature.²⁰ In principle, God could become incarnate in any individual human nature. The humanity of Christ therefore needs no dispositive habitual grace in order to make the hypostatic union possible. Indeed, no such grace would suffice for this purpose, since the grace of union is infinite in kind, such that no finite habitual grace could create the adequate conditions for it! Instead, the order is inverted. *Because* Christ is the

¹⁷ ST III, q. 2, a. 6. The teaching of Aquinas on this matter has also recently been reexamined helpfully by Jean-Pierre Torrell, in *Le Verbe Incarné* I (Paris: Cerf, 2002), Appendix II, 297–339.

¹⁸ See Alexander of Hales’ *Theology of the Hypostatic Union*, 123. Principe shows how Alexander can consider the human nature of Christ to be a distinct hypostasis while not having a unique personhood, since the latter is a characteristic that the assumed humanity acquires from the divine hypostasis.

¹⁹ For prominent examples, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821–22); *The Christian Faith*, 2 vols., eds. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); The idea referred to is developed thematically in 2:385–424 (§94–99); Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), 270–71, where the influence of Schleiermacher is apparent.

²⁰ *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, c. 41, para. 13.

Word made flesh – God who subsists in a human nature composed of body and soul – *therefore*, he possesses the plenitude of habitual grace as a proportionate *effect*.²¹ God incarnate fittingly possesses the perfection of grace in himself *as man* due precisely to the fact that his humanity is the humanity of God. In turn, it is this grace that he can share with us as the head of the Church. Here we rejoin the soteriological principle of Athanasius that Aquinas was quite familiar with. Christ alone among all men is the mediator of salvation because Christ alone is truly God. Since God has united himself to our human nature in Christ, we are assured the possibility of being united to God by grace.²²

A second point concerns the relation of the habitual grace of Christ to the atonement, which is accomplished especially by virtue of Christ's obedient suffering even unto death by way of crucifixion. When Aquinas considers the principles of the atonement (*satisfactio*) in ST III, q. 48, a. 2, it is interesting to note that he interprets Anselm's teaching in the *Cur Deus Homo* in light of the mystery of Christ's capital grace. Aquinas gives three reasons that Christ's passion is meritorious of our salvation: (1) due to the plenitude of charity by which he obeys the Father in our stead, (2) due to the infinite dignity of the person who suffers, (3) due to the intensity of his suffering. Some commentators emphasize the second of these reasons as the essential reason for our salvation. Christ's merits of love and obedience are infinite in kind due to the fact that he is God.²³ Other commentators emphasize the first reason: Christ's habitual grace of charity is the formal principle of our salvation.²⁴

A balanced interpretation should insist on both principles but in a given order.²⁵ The Son of God crucified acts "formally" or essentially as mediator

²¹ ST III, q. 2, a. 10, q. 6, a. 6; q. 7, a. 13.

²² SCG IV, c. 54, para. 2.

²³ See, for example, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Jesus the Savior*, trans. B. Rose (London: Herder, 1957), 577–88; Jean-Hervé Nicholas, *Synthèse Dogmatique; de la Trinité à la Trinité* (Fribourg and Paris: Éditions universitaires Fribourg and Éditions Beauchesne, 1991), 363–66; 511–12; 547–48. However, both Garrigou-Lagrange and Nicholas maintain the traditional Thomist view that habitual sanctifying grace in the human soul of Christ stems necessarily from the mystery of the hypostatic union.

²⁴ See, for example, Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Verbe Incarné II* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), Appendix II, 396–409.

²⁵ See in this respect the balanced analysis of Domingo Bañez, *Tertia partis divi Thomae Aquinatis commentaria*, q. 1, a. 2, n. 16–27 [*Comentarios ineditos a la tercera parte de Santo Tomas*, vol. I, *De Verbo Incarnato* (qq. 1–42), ed. V. Beltran de Heredia (Salamanca: Biblioteca de Teólogos Españoles, 1951)].

of our salvation as man, by virtue of his human obedience and love, which he “substitutes” for our actions of gracelessness and disobedience. Just because this is the case, we must say that the habitual grace of Christ (and particularly his actions of charity or love) are the formal principle by which he as man atones universally for all sins of the human race. However, this act is rooted in the *person* who acts, and whose dignity is infinite, since the person is God the Word. This principle is not formal but foundational, or hypostatic. Fundamentally, the subject who acts humanly to save us is God, and so his actions and sufferings are of a mysterious, infinite worth or dignity.²⁶

Aquinas sometimes casts this mystery in terms of the *virtus divinitatis* of Christ. Because Christ is the Lord, his human self-offering is unique as an offering of reparation for human sin. Christ has the *power as the Lord incarnate* to communicate the fruits of his passion to all human beings.²⁷ Here we see what Aquinas calls the *effective* dimension of Christ’s saving mediation.²⁸ Christ as man is able to communicate effectively to all the members of the mystical body, the Church, the grace by which they might be conformed progressively from within to his paschal mystery. He does this principally as God, of course, insofar as he is the author of grace, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, he also does so instrumentally as man, since the sacred humanity of the Word is the conjoined instrument of his divinity. The Lord wishes in his human reason and will to give grace to the world, in accord with his sacred will as God, which he shares in with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

We may note two conclusions of contemporary significance that each derive from this last point. First, any work of grace that occurs within salvation history and that derives from the Holy Trinity, is also a work of the man Jesus. When the Holy Spirit gives grace previous to the time of the Incarnation, this grace is given in view of the merits of Christ crucified.²⁹

²⁶ ST I, q. 48, a. 2, obj. 3 and ad 3: “Christ did not suffer in His Godhead, but in His flesh... [However,] the dignity of Christ’s flesh is not to be estimated solely from the nature of flesh, but also from the Person assuming it – namely, inasmuch as it was God’s flesh, the result of which was that it was of infinite worth” [Trans. English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger, 1947)].

²⁷ ST III, q. 49, a. 1, ad 2: “Passio Christi, licet sit corporalis, sortitur tamen quondam spirituales virtutes ex divinitate, cuius caro ei unita est instrumentum. Secundum quam quidem virtutem passio Christi est causa remissionis peccatorum.” See also ST III, q. 48, a. 6, ad 2; q. 56, a. 1, ad 3.

²⁸ ST III, q. 48, a. 6.

²⁹ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 7; III, q. 26, a. 1, ad 2; 61, a. 3.

When the Holy Spirit gives grace subsequent to the age of the Incarnation, this is always mediated instrumentally (according to Aquinas) through the human mind and heart of the incarnate Lord.³⁰

Second, the theory of the *virtus divinitatis* offers at least one profoundly reasonable way to respond to the famous objection of Gotthold Lessing. How can the contingent singular life of one figure in history (to whom we have no current empirical access) be the basis for a universal science of explanatory knowledge and moral behavior that affects the whole human race?³¹ Well, because that person alone is God, who is the transcendent universal cause of all reality and who *by virtue of the divine power that resides within him* is able not only to merit salvation for the whole human race *but to communicate this grace of salvation to all effectively, not only by virtue of his divinity but also by virtue of his conjoined humanity.*³²

II. The Religious Dispositions of the Human Person

How does the capital grace of Christ come to non-Christian persons? In the second part of this essay let me simply note some principles offered by Aquinas.

A. Implicit Faith

Aquinas is well aware of the problem of salvation for non-Baptized persons. His theology of the non-baptized Jews of the Old Testament serves as a primary evidence of his belief that non-Christians can be saved and that their salvation orders them in various ways toward the mystery of Christ.³³

³⁰ ST III, q. 22, a. 5; q. 26, aa. 1-2.

³¹ Gotthold Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power", in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. H. Chadwick (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53-54: "If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is: *accidental* [i.e., contingent] *truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.* . . . It is said: 'The Christ of whom on historical grounds you must allow that he raised the dead, that he himself rose from the dead, said himself that God has a Son of the same essence as himself and that he is this Son'. This would be excellent! if only it were not the case that it is not more than historically certain that Christ said this. If you press me still further and say: 'Oh yes! this is more than historically certain. For it is asserted by inspired historians who cannot make a mistake'. But, unfortunately, that also is only historically certain, that these historians were inspired and could not err. That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap".

³² See the argument to this effect in ST III, q. 48, a. 6 and q. 56, a. 1, ad 3.

³³ ST I-II, q. 100, a. 12; q. 102, a. 2.

Here the concept of *implicit faith* plays a central role. Those in the ancient covenant of Israel prior to the time of Christ who believed explicitly in the God of Israel by supernatural faith were oriented implicitly toward the mystery of the Lord incarnate, as the culminating work of the God of Israel in history.³⁴ Aquinas extends this same line of thinking to those “holy pagans” mentioned in Heb. 11 who are given as exemplars of faith from former times: Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Rahab.³⁵ Interestingly, Heb. 11:6 states that “without faith it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Salvation comes by way of supernatural faith alone, but that supernatural faith, Aquinas notes, may be present in those who believe that God exists and who expect good to come from his universal providence.³⁶ There is clearly an overlap here with Aquinas’ treatment of the *praeambula fidei*: these are basic truths of faith that may also be grasped in another way by natural reason.³⁷ The knowledge that there exists some kind of unitary transcendent cause of reality and that there exists some kind of universal providence is not something wholly inaccessible to human beings.³⁸ Aquinas thinks that natural knowledge of God is available to all ordinary people in an imperfect way.³⁹ Indeed, he even thinks this knowledge is available even to children who attain the age of reason, and that grace is offered to children who are aware of God even outside of the realm of sacramental baptism, grace that they can resist or refuse, as well as accept.⁴⁰ Inchoate stirrings of supernatural faith, then, *can* be at work in and through the imperfect religious perceptions of human beings. We find implicit faith in at least some non-Christians.

B. Natural Religious Inclinations

This is not to say that religion is something *supernatural* as such for Aquinas. Rather, he treats the virtue of religion as a potential part of the

³⁴ ST II-II, q. 2, aa. 7-8.

³⁵ *In Heb.* XI, lec. 2, esp. 575-79.

³⁶ *In Heb.* XI, lec. 2, esp. 576.

³⁷ *In De Trin. Boeth.*, q. 2, a. 1.

³⁸ SCG III, c. 94.

³⁹ SCG III, c. 38.

⁴⁰ ST I-II, q. 89, a. 6: The terminology employed strongly suggests that Aquinas is referring to people who are born in original sin and not baptized, who have the possibility of receiving the grace of justification once they reach the age of reason.

virtue of justice, and therefore as something pertaining to human nature.⁴¹ Furthermore, our human nature is fallen, and subject to vices as well as virtue. Consequently, any theological consideration of non-Christian religion has to be qualified carefully.

On the one hand it is clear that there are fundamental natural inclinations of the human intellect and will toward God, as the first truth and cause of reality and as the sovereign good.⁴² The human intellect is structured so that it may naturally desire to know the primary cause of all that is and the human will likewise is made for love of the universal good that is God.⁴³ The inclinations toward natural knowledge and love of the Creator, then, are latent capacities of the human person.⁴⁴ These are not eradicated by the consequences of original sin in the human person. They are, however, seemingly weakened greatly.⁴⁵ Aquinas says as much. It is difficult for fallen human beings to come to know God rightly by the use of unassisted natural reason, especially in any sophisticated fashion, and if persons do come to do so, it is after a long time, by few in number, and admixed with error.⁴⁶ More poignantly, Aquinas states baldly that the fallen human being cannot love God above all things naturally by his own powers, though this would have been possible had the human race not become subject to the effects of original sin. To assure genuine love of God (and therefore authentic worship of God) in the fallen world, the healing activity of grace is required.⁴⁷ It is clear that St. Thomas thinks that to affirm otherwise is overtly Pelagian, as it would suggest that the fallen human being can keep the Ten Commandments by his own powers, without the healing work of grace, an idea he takes to be contrary to the teaching of Augustine, as well as the traditional doctrine of the Church.⁴⁸

Human nature is wounded then by ignorance and malice (selfishness) in regard to God, and unsurprisingly we see the admission of this present in Aquinas' treatment of the vices that afflict human religion: superstition, idolatry, religious indifference.⁴⁹ The human being finds itself in a liminal

⁴¹ ST II-II, q. 81, a. 5.

⁴² ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

⁴³ ST I, q. 12, a. 1.

⁴⁴ SCG III, c. 37; ST I-II, q. 109, a. 3.

⁴⁵ ST I-II, q. 85, aa. 1-3.

⁴⁶ ST I, q. 1, a. 1.

⁴⁷ ST I-II, q. 109, a. 3.

⁴⁸ ST I-II, q. 109, aa. 4-5.

⁴⁹ ST II-II, q. 92-95.

state: a fundamentally religious being by nature, it is unable to heal itself of the plights that maim or fragment its best religious inclinations and leanings. So if there is a true religious foundation in man from which or in which grace may act, it does so in a humanity torn in many ways by error and moral compromise and this enters into the very composition of the non-Christian religions themselves.

Aquinas gives concrete examples. He speaks of sacrifice as a practice that pertains to the natural law as a dimension of justice and atonement for human sin.⁵⁰ However, when speaking of examples of religious actions as “natural” in the treatise on religion, he gives the example of human sacrifice practiced among the ancient Romans!⁵¹ The example is not intended ironically. It is meant to illustrate poignantly that while religion is natural to man, all religious acts need not spring from the work of charity in the human person, and can be vitiated by superstition or error.⁵² Analogously, Aquinas can identify good aspirations present in the midst of erroneous religious doctrines of other religions. He spends a great deal of space in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* book II arguing that the theory of reincarnation is metaphysically incoherent and unreasonable.⁵³ However, he also notes that the theory, which he knows to be common in pre-Christian religion, hints opaquely at a deep truth: the need for reunion of soul and body. Reincarnation is not a feasible theory of human eschatology, but by its insistence on the fitting reconciliation of the separated soul with a physical body, it points negatively and obliquely toward the truth of the resurrection.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ ST II-II, q. 85, a. 1.

⁵¹ ST II-II, q. 82, a. 1. See also q. 81, a. 1.

⁵² It is interesting in this respect to consider the study of human sacrifice in traditional Hawaiian religion offered by Robert N. Bellah in *Religion in Human Evolution; From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 197-209.

⁵³ SCG II, c. 83; see also ST I, q. 90, a. 4.

⁵⁴ *In I Cor.* XV, lec. 2, 924: “...if the resurrection of the body is denied, it is not easy, yea it is difficult, to sustain the immortality of the soul. For it is clear that the soul is naturally united to the body and is departed from it, contrary to its nature and *per accidens*. Hence the soul devoid of its body is imperfect, as long as it is without the body. But it is impossible that what is natural and *per se* be finite and, as it were, nothing; and that which is against nature and *per accidens* be infinite, if the soul endures without the body. And so, the Platonists positing immortality, posited re-incorporation, although this is heretical. Therefore, if the dead do not rise, we will be confident only in this life. In another way, because it is clear that man naturally desires his own salvation; but the soul, since it is part of man’s body, is not an entire man, and my soul is not I; hence, although

Only when the latter mystery is revealed, can the truth and error of the pre-Christian theory be adequately discerned.

C. Sacraments of the Natural Law

Finally, we should say a word about the sacraments of the natural law. Aquinas distinguishes the sacraments of the Old Law from those of the New. The rites of the Torah are instituted by divine inspiration but they do not communicate grace *ex opere operato*.⁵⁵ Rather, they are signs or expressions of supernatural faith present in their ancient Hebrew practitioners, and they signify a reality that is to come: the unique atoning sacrifice of Christ.⁵⁶ The sacraments of the New Law, by contrast, signify the mystery of Christ, but also effectuate what they signify as instrumental causes of grace.⁵⁷ They communicate effectively the capital grace of Christ (or he communicates his grace through them) to all who partake of them with a genuine good will.

Aquinas needs to posit a third category, however: sacraments of the natural law.⁵⁸ Why so? In fact, this category is necessary in particular to talk about the religion of the patriarchs as well as the “holy pagans” mentioned above: Abel, Noah and so on, who clearly perform non-covenantal religious actions and do so in ways pleasing to God. Aquinas thinks these are something both unlike and like the ancient rites of the Old Law. They are unlike them because they are not instituted by God and bear within them no guarantee of a relationship to God. Rather, they are the products of natural human culture. After all it is natural to be religious, and so human beings generate external rites of various kinds. Even in cases where grace may be at work, then, the rites in question are conventional and man-made. However, while such sacraments are not causes of grace in any way, they may be the *outward expressions of the inward work of grace* in the human person.⁵⁹ They *can* be signs or indications of the grace of God present in the

the soul obtains salvation in another life, nevertheless, not I or any man. Furthermore, since man naturally desires salvation even of the body, a natural desire would be frustrated” (Translation by D. Keating, Unpublished Manuscript).

⁵⁵ ST III, q. 62, a. 6.

⁵⁶ ST I-II, q. 101, a. 2.

⁵⁷ ST III, q. 62, aa. 1-5.

⁵⁸ In IV Sent. d. 1, q. 2, a. 6, qc. 3, corp.; ST I-II, q. 103, a. 1.

⁵⁹In IV Sent. d. 1, q. 2, a. 6, qc. 3, corp.: “...illa sacramenta legis naturae non erant ex praecepto divino obligantia, sed ex voto celebrabantur, secundum quod unicuique dictabat sua mens, ut fidem suam aliis exteriori signo profiteretur ad honorem Dei, se-

world acting in and through the human inclinations of human beings, purifying them and elevating them. St. Thomas mentions overtly the possibility of charity at work in the religious actions of persons outside the visible covenant, who have offered their lives to God in authentic worship.⁶⁰ He is probably thinking of people like Abel, mentioned in the Roman canon.

Aquinas clearly thinks that all grace is ecclesiologicaly oriented. This is evident in his consideration effects of the grace of the Eucharist: he says that the Eucharistic sacrifice ultimately effectuates the mystical body of Christ, the Church, as its *res tantum* or most inward purpose.⁶¹ Thus anyone who receives any grace whatsoever is oriented implicitly toward the Eucharist as the one saving sacrifice of Christ present at the heart of the Church and her communion. All salvation takes place in the Church or as ordered toward visible membership in her, including in her sacramental communion.⁶²

Conclusion

How may we conclude? What is the contribution of Aquinas' theology to the modern problematic regarding Christ and non-Christian religions? We may summarize by thinking about the classical adage "grace does not destroy nature" from a two-fold viewpoint. First, natural religious instincts do not suffice. Christ alone is the savior of our human religiosity, because he alone is God made man, and possesses accordingly the fountal principle of sanctifying grace for the human race. This grace is the source of redemption of the religious dimension of the human person, and it is within the sphere of the Catholic Church that we find religion healed and elevated to its most noble and true form. Against all contemporary temptations to neo-Pelagianism that would see in every religious instinct of man an intrinsic avenue toward salvation, we should say that natural religious activity outside of the sphere of the grace of Christ is not only not intrinsically

cundum quod habitus caritas inclinabat ad exteriores actus; et sic dicimus de caritate, quod sufficit motus interior; quando autem tempus habet operandi, requiruntur etiam exteriores actus. Ita etiam quantum ad adultos in lege naturae sufficiebat sola fides, cum etiam modo sufficiat ei qui non ex contemptu sacramenta dimittit; sed ipsa fides, quando tempus habebatur, instigabat ut se aliquibus signis exterioribus demonstraret" [Emphasis added].

⁶⁰ ST I-II, q. 103, obj. 1, corp. and ad 1.

⁶¹ ST III, q. 73, a. 3. See on this subject, Gilles Emery, "The Ecclesial Fruit of the Eucharist", *Nova et Vetera* (English Edition) vol. 2, n. 1 (2004): 43-60.

⁶² Consider the treatment of this subject by Charles Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*, Vol. IV, *Essai de théologie de l'histoire du salut* (Paris: Saint Augustin, 2004).

salvific, but can enter readily into the world of superstition and irrational fanaticism. The Biblical and Christological critique of human religion should be deeper than that of secular liberalism!

On the other hand, the grace of Christ is universal in horizon. Against the modern error of Jansenism, classical Thomism and the modern magisterium affirm that the grace of God may be at work in the natural, social and historical experiences of non-Christian humanity. God can indeed work graciously in more or less discrete ways, in and through the natural religious structures of human persons and societies. We see this most unambiguously when non-Christians seeking God find avenues from within their own religious traditions by which they arrive at the doorstep of the Church.

What results from this brief portrait is a complex vision. All salvation takes place from and through the mediation of Christ in his capital grace, and from the unique atoning sacrifice of the Cross. Salvation has an ecclesiological character or horizon. Natural religious inclinations in human beings are not inimical to the work of salvation but integral to it. Other religious traditions can embody elements of profound truth in this regard, as well as serious falsehood.⁶³ We need to practice a careful discernment in the face of other religious traditions: one that is simultaneously philosophical, theological and spiritual.⁶⁴ “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:16). “We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). If we wish to follow these Dominical and Apostolic adages in the 21st century, we will profit greatly from recourse to the perennial wisdom of Thomas Aquinas.

⁶³ *Dominus Jesus*, para. 14: “The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: ‘the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source’ (*Lumen Gentium*, para. 62). The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ’s unique mediation: ‘Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ’s own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his’ (*Redemptoris Missio*, 5) Hence, those solutions that propose a salvific action of God beyond the unique mediation of Christ would be contrary to Christian and Catholic faith”.

⁶⁴ See the helpful principles enunciated by the document of the International Theological Commission, *Christianity and the World Religions*, 1997.