



# THE VIRTUE OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

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**ABSTRACT:** This article seeks to explicate, drawing on the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, specifically question 81 of the Secunda Secundae of the Summa Theologiae, the nature of religion, its connection with the virtue of justice, and its proper acts.

**Keywords:** God; Religion; Saint Thomas Aquinas; Virtue.

Saint Thomas Aquinas lived in the context of the thirteenth century<sup>2</sup>, whose existential and social situation was profoundly religious. As a Christian thinker, he was concerned with explicating the legitimacy and veracity of *sacra doctrina*. More than that, as Fr. Henrique Cláudio de Lima Vaz often recalled, Thomas intended “to distribute to others the intellectual goods attained through contemplation.”<sup>3</sup>

The sense of the sacred and the search for God manifested themselves in Thomas from an early age, as his biographers recall. For the Angelic Doctor, God is the meaning and ultimate reason of all things. But what understanding did he have of man’s relationship with God? In what way can the human being be bound to the divine? Is religion something

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2 On his life, work, and historical context, see: Chesterton, G. K. *Santo Tomás de Aquino*. Campinas: Ecclesiae, 2015. Grabmann, Martin. *Santo Tomás de Aquino: uma introdução à sua personalidade e ao seu pensamento*. Anápolis: Editora Magnificat, 2020. Torrell, Jean-Pierre. *Iniciação a Santo Tomás de Aquino*. São Paulo: Loyola, 1999. Weisheipl, James A. *Tomás de Aquino: vida, obras y doctrina*. Pamplona: EUNSA, 1994.

3 Cf. Lima Vaz, H. C. de. *Escritos de Filosofia: Problemas de Fronteira*, p. 29.

necessary? Does religious practice have an anthropocentric or theocentric aspect? In short, what is religion? What is its nature and specificity? In which text can we find Thomas's thought on this question, and at what logical-conceptual moment of his exposition?

The Thomistic text in which the treatise on religion appears in a systematically is question 81<sup>4</sup>, found in the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*. At this point in the *Summa*, we find a detailed analysis of the theological virtues — faith, hope, and charity — and of the cardinal virtues — prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The analysis of the essence of religion occurs precisely at this moment in the text, that is, within the context of the exposition of the virtues and, more specifically, after the explanation of the virtue of justice. Why? What is the meaning and rationale of this architecture established by the Doctor of the Church?

In Part II of the *Summa Theologiae*, after having presented, in Part I, the natural structure of man<sup>5</sup> and his creation<sup>6</sup>, Thomas understands that it is necessary to demonstrate in what sense and on what basis the human being has the possibility of being the author of his own action. Now, for the author of the *Summa*, man, insofar as he possesses two great powers, meets these conditions. That is, precisely because he bears an intellective power — the intellect — by which he is capable of seeking to understand reality in itself, and because he possesses an intellective appetitive power (the will) through which he can make free choices and determine himself, man meets the conditions of possibility for being the author of his own acts.

Moreover, insofar as human action is teleological, as Thomas explains<sup>7</sup>, it is necessary to analyze what ultimate end guides the entire dynamism

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4 Cf. Mondin, Battista. *Dicionário Enciclopédico do Pensamento de Santo Tomás de Aquino*, pp. 583–587.

5 Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 75, aa. 1–83.

6 Cf. *ibid.*, I, q. 90, aa. 1–93.

7 Cf. *ibid.*, I–II, q. 1.

of human acts, showing, concomitantly, what is, in fact, man's supreme realization or beatitude.<sup>8</sup>

After analyzing these questions at the beginning of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa*, the Angelic Doctor examines what path leads us to this transcendent goal. This implies evaluating human actions in various aspects<sup>9</sup> and the status of the passions<sup>10</sup>. That is, it is necessary to explicate the factors underlying human actions. In the first moment, Thomas presents the internal principles of the one who performs the act and, subsequently, sets forth the external principles of the agent.

Presupposing the entire natural structure of man, he points to the internal factors, drawing attention to the habituation or qualification in performing certain actions that human faculties sometimes possess. Exploring this theme in depth<sup>11</sup>, the *Doctor Communis* shows how these qualifications are important in human life. Such qualities are precisely the virtues, understood as something stable and permanent, which enable the moral subject to act with greater ease. It is something that renders both the action performed and the agent good, since it qualifies the latter according to his natural capacities.<sup>12</sup>

After these considerations, Thomas addresses the gifts of the Holy Spirit<sup>13</sup>, the problem of vices and sin<sup>14</sup>, as well as the dynamics of law

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8 Cf. *ibid.*, q. 2.

9 Cf. *ibid.*, qq. 6–17.

10 Cf. *ibid.*, qq. 22–25.

11 Cf. *ibid.*, qq. 49–67. This passage of the *ST* constitutes one of the most profound analyses of the problem of the virtues in the history of this topic.

12 Cf. Nascimento, Carlos Artur Ribeiro do. “A religião na *Suma de Teologia* de Tomás de Aquino,” p. 86.

13 Cf. *ST* I–II, qq. 68–70.

14 Cf. *ibid.*, qq. 71–89.

and grace<sup>15</sup>, showing, from these last two points, that there are external factors that influence human action.

However, it seems that this structure, with all its elements, due to an internal demand of the analysis, still required a meticulous consideration of each virtue, especially the theological<sup>16</sup> and the cardinal ones<sup>17</sup>.

Now, it is at this moment in the internal movement of the demonstration carried out by Thomas, that is, at the moment of consideration of the virtue of justice, that the nature and essence of religion are examined. Religion, therefore, appears as an unfolding of, or something annexed to, the virtue of justice. But why at this moment in the text and in the exposition?

In question 80 of the *Secunda Secundae*, before the question that will address the nature of religion, Thomas investigates the potential parts of justice, elucidating the virtues annexed to justice. Now, the virtue of justice presupposes a relation to another, and it is part of its essence to give to the other what belongs to him, what is owed to him.

Thus, religion, insofar as it has this reference to the other — in this case, God — is annexed to justice and, consequently, must render to this other what is owed to him. However, it cannot perform such an act in a way that would constitute equal restitution, since “what is given to God is owed, but it cannot be equal to what has been received from God in equal measure.”<sup>18</sup>

As Gilson states:

“To perform an act of justice is to give someone what is owed to him, in such a way that what is given is equal to what is owed. Two notions are

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15 Cf. *ibid.*, qq. 90–114.

16 Cf. *ibid.*, II–II, qq. 1–46.

17 Cf. *ibid.*, qq. 47–170.

18 Cf. *ibid.*, q. 80, resp.

therefore inseparable from justice: the notion of debt and the notion of equality. There are, however, virtues whose definition contains only one of these notions — for example, the notion of debt. Through this notion, they are associated with the virtue of justice, to which they are annexed; but they are distinguished from justice in this: they do not oblige those who practice them to give everything that is owed.

The most striking example of such a relationship is that of the relationship uniting the human being to God. What does the human being owe to God? Everything. It is not to be expected, however, that the human being will discharge his debt to God. It is precisely because he owes everything to God that the human being cannot return to him in equal measure. [...] Surely, such benefits cannot be repaid; but the inability to discharge a debt does not authorize anyone to deny it; on the contrary, one is only more strictly urged to acknowledge it and declare oneself obligated to the one to whom one knows oneself to be a debtor. For this, a special virtue is required, a substitute for the justice that one knows oneself incapable of exercising. The virtue by which we acknowledge having a debt to God that we cannot discharge is the *virtue of religion*".<sup>19</sup>

It is for this reason that, in the understanding of the Holy Doctor, religion is bound to justice and is necessary in human life.

However, for these considerations to make sense, it is necessary to explicate the nature of religion, to show what it actually is, and to what extent it can be understood as a virtue. Moreover, if it truly is a virtue, what kind is it?

From questions 81 to 100 of the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa*, Thomas addresses various points related to the problem of religion.

First, he demonstrates the nature of religion; next, its proper acts; and finally, the vices contrary to it.

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19 Gilson, Étienne. *O tomismo: Introdução à filosofia de Santo Tomás de Aquino*, pp. 439–440.

Concerning the proper acts of religion, the author of the *Summa* distinguishes between interior and exterior ones. The former are devotion and prayer; the latter consist of adoration, sacrifices, oblations, first fruits, tithes, and the vow. Finally, with regard to the name of God, Saint Thomas treats of oath, adjuration, invocation, and praise.

There are, however, vices opposed to religion. If virtue is the mean between two extremes, as Aristotle reminds us, then these vices arise either from excess: superstition, idolatry, divination, magic; or from deficiency: tempting God, perjury, sacrilege, and simony.

It seems that Thomas wishes to present a structured and comprehensive understanding of religion in itself.

Let us examine more closely question 81, which consists of eight articles.

In its structure, three significant logical moments can be observed. First, from articles 1 to 6, the aim is to explicate the nature of religion, in what sense it is a virtue, and, finally, what type of virtue it is.

In a second moment, in article 7, the aim is to address the proper acts of religion, presenting to what extent there are external acts, and not only internal ones.

And, in a final logical moment, in article 8, there is an analysis of the identity, or lack thereof, between religion and holiness, returning, in a different way, to the opening of the question.

Initially, there is a concern to understand whether religion orders and orients man solely toward God.<sup>20</sup>

At first, it does not seem so. Drawing on the Epistle of James and on Saint Augustine, one might think that religion always implies a relation with one's neighbor: whether because of the need to visit orphans and widows; whether because it must be manifested to relatives and kin; whether also because *latría* carries the sense of service, not only in rela-

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20 Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1.

tion to God but also in relation to one's neighbor; whether also because we render honor to persons, and because all those in a state of salvation are subject to God. Yet, among these, not all are called religious, but only those who submit themselves to men through vows and other practices. Now, all of this seems to indicate that religion orients man also toward his neighbor and not solely toward God. However, with Cicero as a reference, it seems that the central point of religion is to render worship to a reality of a superior and divine nature.

Thomas, considering the various objections, explicates that religion consists of two kinds of actions: the proper or immediate ones, and the commanded ones. In the proper actions, something is produced directly by the virtue of religion, such as sacrificing and adoring God. In the commanded ones, something is produced by a virtue moved by the virtue of religion, as, for example, visiting the sick. In other words, the virtue of religion commands another virtue by ordering it to divine reverence. Thus, the virtue to which the end belongs commands the virtues to which belong those things that are ordered to the end. In this way, keeping oneself unstained by the world in order to remain pure is an act performed by temperance, but commanded by religion.<sup>21</sup>

In a second moment, the author of the *Summa* emphasizes that religion must be understood as pertaining to relatives, or to something similar, by extension and implication, not by its specific nature.

Concerning the question of *latria*, Thomas acknowledges that it contains the idea of servitude, but not of just any servitude. That is, if there is a special reason for dominion, there is a special reason for servitude. Now, God is the sovereign par excellence, and His dominion belongs to Him by a proper, intrinsic, and singular reason. Why? Because He is the origin and Creator of all things, and thus possesses supreme dominion over all reality by virtue of something inherent in Himself. Therefore,

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21 Cf. *ibid.*, q. 81, a. 1, resp.



He deserves a special servitude, since the reason for His dominion is more excellent. *Latria* expresses precisely this special servitude.

As for worship rendered to persons and even to things subject to us, it exists. In the case of men, we do this by honoring them, and, in the case of things, by cultivating them. However, the worship we render to God is not the same, for He deserves a special worship due to His special honor, a consequence of the fact that He is the absolute principle of everything.

Finally, he recalls that the term “religious” is not used in only one sense. If “religious,” on the one hand, designates anyone who renders worship to God, on the other hand, in a more specific and special sense, “religious” designates anyone who leaves everything and consecrates himself entirely to divine worship.

However, what, in fact, are the nature and purpose of religion? From an analysis of the term “religion,” taking into account a tradition that goes back to Cicero and Augustine, Thomas points to three meanings of the term: a) re-reading (*relegere*), to re-read that which pertains to divine worship, since it must always be meditated upon more deeply in the heart; b) re-election (*reeligere*), to re-elect God, to choose Him again, insofar as we have lost Him through negligence, through sin; c) re-binding (*religare*), to establish this bond, this connection of man with God.<sup>22</sup>

Now, whether we consider the first, the second, or the third meaning, all of them imply an orientation toward God. Religion, therefore, is theocentric, since God is the principle of all things, the absolute foundation, the ultimate meaning of existence. Thus, according to the Angelic Doctor, we must bind ourselves to Him and choose Him as our ultimate end. And if we deviate from Him through sin, we must return to Him through faith.

However, for Thomas, explicating the nature of religion requires an analysis of its status as a virtue. That is, is religion a virtue? In what sense?

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22 Cf. *ibid.*

Religion is a virtue because, since virtue is that which makes its possessor good and renders his work good, it may be admitted that all good acts belong to virtue. And if paying what is owed to someone is a good — indeed, something good — since it restores a fitting relationship with the other, ordering oneself fittingly in relation to him, and since order is one of the elements of the nature of the good, then religion is a virtue because it renders to God the honor owed to Him; and this is a good, a good act, and, therefore, belongs to the sphere of virtue.<sup>23</sup>

Now, being what it is, the virtue of religion is one and special. That is, for Thomas, habits are distinguished according to their objects, and these, in turn, are distinguished according to their notional structure. Thus, the central and unique reason that leads us to render reverence to God is His notional status as Creator and Provider. That is, He is the first principle of existence, and of the governance of things, and, for this reason, we honor Him by practicing religion. Therefore, religion must worship this one God according to His notional meaning and, in this way, also be one.<sup>24</sup>

In the second place, if virtue has the good as its object, then, wherever there is a special notion of good, there must be a special virtue. The good of religion consists in rendering to God the honor owed to Him because of His excellence, which is essentially distinct from any other excellence. God possesses singular excellence, for He transcends all things with absolute superiority. If this is so, then a special honor is owed to Him, showing that the virtue of religion is special.<sup>25</sup>

But would religion be a theological virtue? No. It is a moral virtue<sup>26</sup>. According to Thomas, it is necessary to distinguish two aspects of religion.

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23 Cf. Nascimento, Carlos Artur Ribeiro do. *A religião na Suma de Teologia de Tomás de Aquino*, p. 88.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

25 Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 81, a. 4, resp.

26 *Ibid.*, q. 81, a. 5, resp.

One thing is the worship rendered, which is the matter and object of religion. And another thing is to whom this worship is rendered, namely, God.

Now, the worship rendered to God is not an act that reaches God Himself. Worship is offered to God by means of certain acts performed to reverence Him. Thus, God, in the virtue of religion, is not present as matter or object, but rather as end. For this reason, religion is not a theological virtue, whose object is the ultimate end, that is, God Himself<sup>27</sup>; rather, it is a moral virtue.

And if, in fact, things ordered to the end are good in proportion to this ordering, then the closer they are to the end, the better they are. Now, the virtue of religion is closer to God than the other moral virtues, since its actions directly and immediately order themselves to divine honor. Therefore, it is superior to the other moral virtues.<sup>28</sup>

However, would the acts and actions present in the worship rendered to God through *latria* be merely interior? For Thomas, no<sup>29</sup>, for we honor God not for His sake. Why? Because insofar as He is absolute, sovereign, perfect, and full of glory, we cannot add anything to Him. Thus, we honor Him for our own sake. In what sense?

By reverencing God, we submit ourselves to Him, and thus our spirit is perfected, since anything is perfected when it submits to what is superior to it.

However, by virtue of his own mode of being and knowing, man needs sensible realities. In this way, in order to submit himself to God and be united to Him, our spirit relies on visible and sensible realities in order to arrive at what is invisible. Thus, one arrives, for example, at Divine Beauty through the beauty manifested in creatures.

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27 D'Amécourt, Joseph de Poton. "Religião." In: Savian Filho, Juvenal; Nascimento, Carlos Arthur Ribeiro do, eds. *Tomás de Aquino: Chaves de Leitura*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2024, pp. 345–351.

28 Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 81, a. 6, resp.

29 Cf. *ibid.*, q. 81, a. 7, resp.

This shows, consequently, that the worship rendered to God must make use of corporeal, visible realities, so that, through them — which, in this context and under this aspect, are signs — the human mind may be awakened to spiritual acts and, in this way, be united to God through them.

Thus, interior acts are what are proper and essential to the virtue of religion. Yet there are also, in a secondary way, exterior acts, which must be ordered to the interior acts.

Finally, after analyzing the nature of religion, showing its dimension as a virtue, and explicating its interior and exterior dimensions, the Angelic Doctor returns to the question of the identity of the virtue of religion, examining its relation with holiness. Are being religious and being holy the same thing?

In a certain respect, being religious and being holy are the same thing<sup>30</sup>, for if holiness admits a two-fold perspective, or two possible considerations — that is, it can be seen as purity, but also as firmness — then these two meanings are found in the context of the worship rendered to God.

Without purity, it is not possible to elevate the spirit to God, since, insofar as the spirit turns toward and submits itself to what is inferior to it, it progressively loses this purity. The act of surrendering oneself to what is inferior always generates a loss of rectitude and of the integrity of one's own capacities. Silver, for example, mixed with lead, is no longer pure, integral silver.

Therefore, the human spirit must not surrender itself to what is inferior to it, in order to preserve its purity and, consequently, draw near to God.

But firmness is also necessary for the spirit to unite with God. A spirit that allows itself to be shaken by anything cannot move toward the absolute, toward the transcendent. However, according to Friar Thomas, it must be understood that this firmness does not reside in itself. We do not find it in ourselves by ourselves. That is, we possess firmness only

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30 Cf. *ibid.*, q. 81, a. 8.

when we are grounded in the One who is unshakeable in Himself, through an unshakeable faith and life. The certainty that comes from faith, that nothing can separate us from the love of God, is the secure foundation.

Thus, for Thomas, holiness and religion, from the point of view of essence, do not differ, but only under the notional aspect. As he says, “Therefore, essentially, religion and holiness are not distinct. They are distinguished by a distinction of reason. Religion consists in rendering to God the due service with respect to those things that specifically pertain to divine worship, such as sacrifices, oblations, and the like. Holiness, however, consists in referring to God not only these acts, but the acts of the other virtues, or in causing a person, through good works, to dispose himself for divine worship.”<sup>31</sup>

That is, it is religion when we render to God the service owed to Him, the due worship. And it is holiness when we direct our entire life, our acts and thoughts, wholly to Him. This shows a mutual implication: religion, through the worship rendered to God, sanctifies and leads us to acknowledge our total dependence on Him and, concomitantly, to express a profound gratitude and desire to unite with the Divine through certain acts. Holiness, in turn, leads us to direct all our acts to God and to become ever more disposed to worship Him.

We see, in this way, that for Thomas, by the natural light of reason, we can understand that religion is something necessary in human life: a natural disposition; a special virtue, whose center is God and not man; and whose primary purpose is to lead man to relate to God by adoring Him and loving Him above all things, as a sign of acknowledgment, gratitude, rectitude, and justice. In short, it is the virtue capable of offering consistency and security to the whole of created reality.<sup>32</sup>

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31 *ST* II–II, q. 81, a. 8, resp.

32 Biffi, Inos. *La virtù della religione nella Summa Theologiae di San Tommaso d'Aquino*, p. 10.

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