

THE VIRTUE OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

ANDREA PAEZ

PHIL 602

PHILOSOPHY OF GOD AND MAN

DR. KRISTIN BURNS

INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the virtue of religion in general, according to the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, drawing mainly on the *Summa Theologiae*. In order to understand what the virtue of religion is, the first thing this paper will aim to explain is the essence of virtue in general. Having clearly defined virtue, it will go on to explore the virtue of justice. The rationale for this is that the virtue of religion is annexed to the virtue of justice, therefore it can be better understood in this context.¹ Finally, having explored these two concepts, the virtue of religion itself will be discussed according to Aquinas' understanding of it, and as an integral part of religion, its various acts will be discussed.

1. VIRTUE IN GENERAL

In the *Summa Theologiae* St. Thomas defines virtue as “a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us.”² Essentially, a virtue is a disposition in man's powers that perfects those powers, making it easier for them to produce good actions.³ Virtue helps man give the best

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, 2nd Revised Edition, 1920, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>, accessed February 2014, II-II, 80, 1.

² *Ibid.*, I-II, 55, 4. When you use an “*ibid.*” you don't need to repeat anything that is the same, such as the part & question, just what is different, like the page number or in this case the article number.

³*Ibid.*, I-II, 55, 3.

of himself, tending with all his sensorial and spiritual powers towards good, choosing it in concrete actions.⁴ Virtue causes man and his acts to become good.⁵

Since man has a rational soul he has the capacity to know things and the capacity to desire things. The capacity to know things is called the intellect and the capacity to desire things is called the will or rational appetite.⁶ If the power that the virtue perfects is the intellect, then the virtue can be considered to be an intellectual virtue. If, on the other hand, the power that the virtue perfects is an appetite, then it can be considered to be a moral virtue.⁷ It is the moral virtues, along with prudence, that are placed among the principal virtues. The reason being that the perfect idea of virtue is one that not only gives the possibility of doing a good action, but rather one that causes a good action to be done in actuality. It is the moral virtues that dispose men's appetites to good deeds.⁸

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC), http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P64.HTM, accessed February 2014, 1803.

⁵ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 58, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 78, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I-II, 58, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I-II, 61, 1.

2. THE VIRTUE OF JUSTICE

The virtue of justice is among one of the four cardinal or principal virtues. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, justice is the moral virtue that “consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour.”⁹ It is through this virtue that man gives to each what is due with a stable will.¹⁰ As can be deduced, the object of justice is right.¹¹ A work is said to be right or just when it is merited by someone, different from the person performing the just work, according to some kind of equality. This right can either be natural or positive. A natural right is derived from the person’s nature, whereas a positive right is reached by agreement between the giver and the receiver.¹² It is the proper act of justice to give to each his own, according to what is due to him.¹³

Justice can be considered a special virtue, in the sense that a virtue usually perfects a man mainly in relation to himself, but justice perfects man in relation to others. Therefore, justice can be seen as a greater virtue than those virtues that perfect man only in relation to himself.¹⁴

On the other hand, justice can also be thought of as a general virtue. As has been stated, justice directs man in his relationships with others. “Others” can be considered as individuals or as part of a community. When they are seen as part of a community then they

⁹ CCC, 1807.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 58, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II-II, 57, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, II-II, 57, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II-II, 58, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II-II, 57, 1 and II-II, 58, 2.

are a part of a whole. Whenever man does a good action that contributes to the good of a part, it ends up being beneficial to the good of the whole. This “good of the whole” can also be called the common good. The common good is the end to which justice directs man. In this sense, all acts of virtue that direct man to the common good can be considered acts of justice.¹⁵

As previously stated, justice is a cardinal virtue, though there are other virtues that are connected with it. For a virtue to be considered connected to justice, two conditions have to exist. The first is that the connected virtue must have something in common with the cardinal virtue just mentioned. The second condition is that the related virtue must fall short of the perfection of justice. This falling short can be either in accordance with equality between the two parts, or in accordance with what is due to the other person.¹⁶ Examples of connected virtues would be the virtues of religion, piety and observance.¹⁷

This explanation lies at the core of the present work, which is the virtue of religion itself. In the case of religion, it is connected with justice because it gives God what is due to Him. Religion will never equate man to God, since man can never repay all the benefits he has received from God.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., II-II, 58, 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., II-II, 80, 1.

¹⁷ Ibid., II-II, 81 through II-II, 102.

¹⁸ Ibid., II-II, 80, 1.

3. THE VIRTUE OF RELIGION

The virtue of religion might be described as the moral virtue that inclines man's will to render unto God the worship he is due as the first principle of all beings.¹⁹ The word "religion" does not have a very clear etymological root. It is linked to three different words in Latin. The first one is "*relegere*" referring to the fact that the virtue of religion makes man ponder over, or read again (*re-legere*) the things related to God's worship. The second Latin word "religion" is often linked to is the word "*reeligere*" which means to choose again. In a certain way, religion makes man choose God again after having lost Him when he committed original sin. Finally, the third definition of religion is connected to the word "*religare*" meaning "to bind together". This last definition attempts to express the way religion binds us to the service of God.²⁰ Either way, it is quite clear that the word "religion" speaks about a direct relationship with God.

It is often asked whether the virtue of religion is somehow connected to the theological virtues, and sometimes it is even considered a theological virtue in itself. To clarify this, it is important to bear in mind that the theological virtues are the virtues that have God as their direct and immediate object. The virtue of religion is indeed similar and closely related to these virtues because it concerns something directly associated with God, which is divine worship. However, religion does not have God as its object. God is the end to which the acts of worship caused by religion

¹⁹ Antonio Royo Marin, *Teología moral para seglares I Moral fundamental y especial*, 3th ed., (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1986), 331.

²⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 81, 1.

tend, rather than object of the virtue as such.²¹ This is often where confusion can arise. The theological virtues (which have God as their immediate object) cause an act of religion to be performed by commanding certain actions that are directed to God's worship.²² For example, out of faith in God present in the Eucharist, one can be moved to adore him in this sacrament. Thus, it is faith itself that is causing an act of religion. It is because of how closely related religion is to God himself that it is considered by some to be the first and most important moral virtue, even more important than the cardinal virtues.²³

Furthermore, religion is also considered by Aquinas to be a special virtue. All virtues direct man to good, but wherever there is a special aspect of good, there is a special virtue. Religion leads man to give worship to God because God is excellent, infinitely surpassing all other beings. Considering the special honor given to God, St. Thomas clearly states that religion is a special virtue.²⁴

Despite what has been said about the excellence of the virtue of religion, some may question whether or not religion is a virtue. St. Thomas confirms that religion is in fact a virtue. In order to defend his statement, he goes back to the nature of a virtue, saying that a virtue is that which makes man and his acts good. So, to revere and worship God is to order man's relation to God, giving God what is due to Him. Since order is an aspect of good and religion orders man's relationship with God,

²¹ Idem., II-II, 81, 5.

²² Idem., II-II, 81, 5, ad.1.

²³ Royo Marin, *Teología moral para seglares*, 329.

²⁴ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 81, 4.

then it can be argued that religion produces good acts. For this reason, religion must be considered a virtue.²⁵

For every virtue, it is necessary to establish whether there is only one or more virtues involved, so the object of every virtue must be considered. If the object has different aspects, or if there is another object different from the original one, then it can be said that there is more than one virtue. In the case of religion, its unifying principle is God as the creator and governor of the world. It is under this one aspect of God that man worships and serves God. Given that there is only one aspect of the object, it is possible to state that religion is only one virtue instead of many.²⁶

As has been suggested above, the virtue of religion “bends” man’s will towards God’s service. By nature, man is directed to God as to his end. So to achieve eternal salvation man must know his end in order to direct all his thoughts and actions towards Him.²⁷ The virtue of religion places man on the right path towards salvation, as John Paul II said in his encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis*: “Our spirit is set in one direction, the only direction for our intellect, will and heart is towards Christ our Redeemer, towards Christ, the Redeemer of man. We wish to look towards him because there is salvation in no one else but him...”²⁸

²⁵ Idem., *ST*, II-II, 81, 2.

²⁶ Idem., II, 81, 3.

²⁷ Idem., *ST*, I, 1, 1.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Encyclical letter Redemptor Hominis*, (Rome, 1979), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html, accessed March 2014, 7.

Man needs to direct himself towards God to achieve salvation. Therefore, it is interesting to note that man offers worship to God not because God needs it, because God is complete in Himself and no creature can add anything to Him. Man worships God because of His glory²⁹, (the comma should go before the footnote number) and because of how useful it is for man to render honour onto God. In a way, man reveres God for man's own sake, for in Him, and only in Him, does man find his fullness.³⁰

Every virtue, as has been previously explained, produces certain acts. Religion has both internal and external acts. When man worships God, his mind is subjected to Him and it is in this subjection to Him that man's mind finds perfection. Even if this is so, this does not mean that man only worships God with his mind. The human mind needs to have an external manifestation, such as kneeling down, which can then lead in turn to a spiritual act, such as prayer. Religion's interior acts are its principal acts, but they are based on external and secondary acts.³¹

In the following paragraphs, the proper acts of religion will be explained in a more extensive way, followed by a brief outline of the exterior acts of religion. The interior acts of religion are devotion and prayer, while the exterior acts are adoration, sacrifices, oblations and first fruits, tithes and vows.³²

²⁹Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 81, 6, ad 2.

³⁰Idem., II-II, 81, 7.

³¹Idem.

³²Idem., II-II, 82 through 88.

Devotion is the first and main act of religion.³³ It is the readiness of man's will to give himself to that which concerns the service of God.³⁴ Devotion comes from the Latin word "*devovere*" which means "to vow". (punctuation inside of quote marks) A devout person is one who consecrates him or herself completely to God and remains in submission to Him. The distinguishing characteristic of a devout person is the readiness of the will to undertake to worship or to serve God.³⁵

There are two causes of devotion. The first and primary cause is God himself, for it is He who calls men and who places in their heart the desire to serve Him. God is obviously an external cause, but there is also an internal cause which depends on man himself and this is contemplation and meditation. The content of this meditation is quite simple and contains two elements: the contemplation of God's goodness along with the consideration of man's limitations.³⁶ This meditation will usually result in a mixture of joy and sadness, joy being generally the feeling which predominates.³⁷ (incomplete sentence – hence the edit)

The reason why contemplation is necessary to lead to devotion in man is because the will (which is the power that the virtue of religion perfects) is a blind power. The will only tends towards the object the intellect presents as good. The will needs the light that comes from intelligence. It is through man's consideration of God's

³³ Royo Marin, *Teologia Moral para seglares*, 334.

³⁴ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 82, 1.

³⁵ Royo Marin, *Teologia Moral para seglares*, 334.

³⁶ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 82, 3.

³⁷ *Idem.*, II-II. 82, 4.

benefits and his own limitations that he conceives the idea of surrendering himself completely to God.³⁸

Since the first act of religion has been explained, the second interior act of this virtue, prayer, will be explored. Prayer can be described as the elevation of the mind to God to bless him and to ask from Him what is convenient for eternal salvation.³⁹ In prayer, man turns towards God with his mind, having his mind subjected to Him. Given that the mind is man's highest power, it might be argued that prayer surpasses all other acts of religion.⁴⁰

Prayer has just been defined as man turning towards God. This means that his mind, and thus his whole being, is directed to Him. Making this explicit can clarify doubts about prayer being an act of religion. Religion helps man recognize God as the creator and governor of the entire universe. Concretely, in prayer man recognizes that God is the author of all things⁴¹ and that only from Him will he receive the graces he needs to attain salvation.⁴² Since prayer is clearly directed to God, it is evidently an act of religion.

An example of perfect prayer can be found in the Our Father, the prayer that Our Lord taught his disciples when they asked Him to teach them to pray. The Our Father is considered a perfect prayer mainly because of the authority of Christ himself who

³⁸Idem., II-II, 82, 3.

³⁹Royo Marin, *Teología Moral para seglares*, 337.

⁴⁰Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 83, 3, ad. 3.

⁴¹Idem., 83, 3.

⁴²Royo Marin, *Teología Moral para seglares*, 337.

said it. ⁴³ This prayer teaches man what is suitable for him to ask for in prayer. Therefore, it orders man's desires. A brief analysis of the Our Father may be useful to prove this.

In the first place, Our Lord teaches his disciples to ask for man's end: God's glory and the coming of His Kingdom. These are the first two petitions "...hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come..."⁴⁴. After this, Jesus goes on to asking for those means which help man attain his end. These means are the fulfilling of God's will and the receiving of man's daily bread on his pilgrimage towards eternal life. Finally, Christ teaches his disciples to ask for the removal of those obstacles that get in the way of God's glory and His Kingdom: To forgive their sins, to lead them away from temptation, and to deliver them from the Evil one. The order in which the petitions of the Our Father are stated is important. It starts with the end in itself, then goes to the means needed to obtain that end, concluding with the petition to remove what prevents men from achieving eternal life. ⁴⁵

When contemplating the petitions of the Our Father, it is obvious that most of the petitions are purely related to spiritual realities, whereas only one of them is related to material things. This may raise the concern as to whether it is legitimate for man to ask for material things in prayer. Man can (either have no comma here, or put one after both "can" and "should" but I think it is clear enough without them) and should pray for material things, inasmuch as they can lead him to sustaining his

⁴³ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 83, 9.

⁴⁴ *Luke* 11, 2, New Jerusalem Bible.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 83, 9

life and performing acts of virtue.⁴⁶ Moreover, man should also pray for others, since prayer for others is sweeter to God than prayer which is centred only on one's own particular needs.⁴⁷

The first letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians contains an interesting verse that can be directly related to this topic. "Pray constantly,"⁴⁸ the Apostle says. This raises the question of how much time should be dedicated to prayer. This verse requires further explanation. Prayer can be viewed in two ways: in itself and in its cause. On the one hand, prayer in itself cannot be continuous, for man has to occupy himself with other activities. The moments dedicated to prayer should be long enough to refresh in him the fervor of the interior desire, but not so long that it tires the soul. On the other hand, the cause of prayer is the desire that is born of charity, and it is this desire that should be continual.⁴⁹ This is what that St. Paul meant when he asked the Thessalonians to pray constantly.

So far, this paper has covered the explanation of the two interior and main acts of religion. Now the exterior and secondary acts of this virtue will be explored briefly.

Adoration is the exterior act of religion through which man shows the honour and reverence God deserves and his submission to Him.⁵⁰ It involves both body and

⁴⁶ Idem., 83, 6.

⁴⁷ Idem., 83, 7.

⁴⁸ *1. Thes.* 5, 17, New Jerusalem Bible.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 83, 14.

⁵⁰ Royo Marin, *Teología Moral para Seglares*, 345.

mind. Through humiliating our body we incite interior reverence while at the same time, the exterior reverence is an expression of the interior devotion to God.⁵¹

Sacrifice is the external offering of a sensory thing, with a certain destruction of it, performed by the priest to show God's supreme dominion and man's complete subjection to Him.⁵² Since man acquires knowledge from his senses, he needs sensorial signs to show his submission to God.⁵³ There are three different sources of the sacrifices man can offer to God: with his soul man can offer prayer or interior sacrifices; with his body man can offer fasting, abstaining from sexual intercourse or the enduring of martyrdom; and with his material possessions man can sacrifice them or share them with others.⁵⁴

Oblations and first fruits are the donation of something, given for divine worship.⁵⁵ It is essential for oblations that they be made voluntarily, and it is only under certain circumstances that a person is obliged to make an oblation.⁵⁶

The last exterior act of religion is the making of vows. Vows are promises made to God which contract man to do or to avoid doing a particular thing.⁵⁷ This promise made to God is for our own profit and not so much for God's profit, since God does

⁵¹ Aquinas, ST, II-II, 84, 2.

⁵² Royo Marin, *Teología Moral para Seglares*, 347.

⁵³ Thomas Aquinas, ST, II-II, 85, 1.

⁵⁴ Idem., II-II, 85, 3, ad. 2.

⁵⁵ Royo Marin, *Teología Moral para Seglares*, 349.

⁵⁶ Thomas Aquinas, ST, II-II, 86, 1.

⁵⁷ Idem., II-II, 88, 1.

not need to be reassured by us that we will do something for Him. Rather, when we make a vow, we fix our will in the direction that will lead us to attain salvation.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the virtue of religion is a virtue that is connected with the virtue of justice. It is considered by many to be the greatest of moral virtues, given the excellence of its object, which is divine worship. Religion places man on the direct path towards eternal salvation, since it makes him live according to his end: to love and to serve God. Many might think religion is an out-of-date phenomenon, but now more than ever man's heart is crying out for God, often without realizing it, while looking for Him in places where He will not be found. In fact, there is nothing that will ever quench man's desire for God. It is through the different acts of religion that man can express and nourish his relationship with God which is so deeply rooted within him.

Very fine paper. You researched it well and obviously understood it too. Well-organized and clearly explained.

⁵⁸ *Idem.*, II-II, 88, 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aquinas St. Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*.

2nd Revised Edition. 1920. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

Accessed February 2014.

Catechism of the Catholic Church.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P64.HTM.

Accessed February 2014.

John Paul II. *Encyclical letter Redemptor Hominis*.

Rome. 1979.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html.

Accessed March 2014.

New Jerusalem Bible.

Royo Marin Antonio Maria. *Teologia moral para seglares I Moral fundamental y especial*.

3th edition. Madrid. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos. 1986.