

The Christian Humanism of Thomas Aquinas*

EUGENE R. FAIRWEATHER

I

ON TUESDAY, 2 July 1661, the newly appointed Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge delivered his inaugural lecture before a distinguished company, including the Lord Chancellor Clarendon. John Pearson had already done much to merit Burnet's future description of him as "in all respects the greatest divine of the age."¹ Two years before, when he was still enjoying the enforced leisure provided by the Puritans for the "Prelatist" clergy, he had published his *Exposition of the Creed*—"within its limits the most perfect and complete production of English dogmatic theology."² Eleven years later, and almost on the eve of his own elevation to the episcopate, he was to produce, in his *Vindiciae Epistolarum S. Ignatii*, aimed especially at the criticisms of the French Reformed scholar Jean Daillé, the definitive defence of the authenticity of one of the weightiest ancient testimonies to episcopal church order. Meanwhile, as he faced his new audience from his professorial chair, he undertook to make plain what they must expect from him.

He could hardly have made it plainer. He proposed (he said) to teach theology, the "science of God and divine things"³—and, more precisely, to teach scholastic theology, because of its sense of order, its clarity, its effectiveness against doctrinal error. After noting both the older scholastic practice of using the *Libri Sententiarum* of Peter Lombard as a textbook and the newer custom of following the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, and with a graceful reference to the influence of the noted commentary of Cardinal Cajetan in promoting the latter alternative, he announced his own decision in favour of Aquinas' great work as "more accurate, more lucid, . . . [and] more famous."⁴ The twenty incomplete lectures that remain of his own projected *Summa Theologiae* suggest that Pearson was well equipped in learning and judgment to carry out his plan, and we can only regret that so little of his work is now at our disposal.⁵

*Adapted from a public lecture given in Trinity College, Toronto, in February, 1957.

1. G. Burnet, *History of His Own Time* (Oxford, 1823), Vol. III, p. 134.

2. F. Sanders in *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. XLIV, p. 169.

3. *The Minor Theological Works of John Pearson, D.D.*, ed. by E. Churton (Oxford, 1844), Vol. I, p. 1.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

5. Twenty-four lectures are reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 1-267; their subject-matter is substantially that of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 1-24.

We may reasonably suspect, however, that his hearers on this occasion were not unanimously enthusiastic. In the same year, that easy-going latitudinarian Joseph Glanvill—who is said, incidentally, to have regretted his education at Oxford, where a sterile “Aristotelian” logic passed for scholastic philosophy, and to have expressed a preference for Cambridge, so much more receptive to new ideas⁶—published his *Vanity of Dogmatizing*, in which he stated picturesquely the judgment of many of his (and Pearson’s) contemporaries. “School divinity,” he wrote, “. . . is but Peripateticism in a theological livery. A schoolman is the ghost of the Stagirite, in a body of condensed air, and Thomas but Aristotle sainted.”⁷ In addition to such criticism from the standpoint of humanistic culture, Pearson would also have to reckon with the long-standing Calvinism of Cambridge. “I know, of course,” he said, with masterly understatement, “that not a few in the reformed churches condemn the School.”⁸ But he met both kinds of criticism manfully.

As to the first, he made it plain that he did not intend (as he put it) to call his hearers back “to barbarism from the purity of renascent letters.”⁹ On the contrary, he hoped, for example, to compensate for the defect of Greek patristic scholarship from which even the greatest of the schoolmen suffered.¹⁰ As to the second criticism, he urged discrimination. He agreed, for instance, that the schoolmen were wrong in accepting the dogmatic authority of the papacy. Modern popes, he said, had caused dissension in the Church, while their predecessors could rank only as members of the great company of the Fathers.¹¹ But for all that he commended the medieval theological tradition, both for its intrinsic merit and for its contemporary importance. For one thing, the study of scholastic theology opened the door to what was still the great world of theological discourse. More concretely, as long as the English Church kept out of the debates of the schools, her Roman Catholic critics would have some excuse for charging even the strangest ideas of Lutherans, Calvinists, Sacramentaries, and Socinians to her account, and she could no longer afford to be thus misunderstood.¹²

To those in his audience whose native hue of Anglican resolution was sicklied o’er with the pale cast of Genevan thought, this last observation must have been something of a challenge, and even the most detached reader may wonder at the enthusiasm of so convinced a critic of the papacy for a theologian who had stated clearly enough that the Supreme Pontiff alone had authority to promulgate dogmatic definitions.¹³ In fact, however, this was no private enthusiasm of Pearson’s. Passing over the roll of lesser

6. Cf. Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. by P. Bliss (London, 1813–20), Vol. III, col. 1244.

7. J. Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (London, 1661), p. 152.

8. *Minor Theological Works of John Pearson*, Vol. I, p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

13. Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, IIa-IIae, 1, 10.

theologians who made extensive use of Thomistic ideas, we need only note that the greatest of Elizabethan divines and patriarch of modern Anglican theology, Richard Hooker, while he could speak sharply enough against certain Thomist theses which failed to convince him, had made Aquinas' philosophy of being, nature, and law the basis of his classic apologia for the polity of the English Church and, when sniped at by his determined Puritan opponent Walter Travers, had defended his scholasticism with considerable asperity.¹⁴ Pearson's Thomism, then, was far from alien to his own theological heritage.

At first glance, this exploration of the mind of a little, embattled church on the edge of post-Reformation Europe may seem an eccentric introduction to the work of a theological giant of another country and another age. Yet to understand the influence of a particular thinker on the thought of later generations must always be to learn something of the distinctive significance of his doctrine, and I believe that the spiritual kinship between Thomas Aquinas and his Anglican disciples is so close that real light can be shed on his enduring importance for the Christian mind by discovering what "classical Anglicanism" undertook to learn from him in its particular historical situation. In the long run it may be an old story that I have to tell, but something may still be gained by giving it a new introduction.

What peculiar value, then, did Hooker and his successors find in that "greatest among the school-divines"¹⁵ whose weapons the brilliant controversialists of the Tridentine Counter-Reformation were aiming with considerable effect, not only at those Continental Protestants in whose political and ecclesiastical struggle even the most insular Anglicans could hardly help recognizing something of a common cause, but also at the doctrinal position of the English Church herself? To suggest that it was this very usefulness of Aquinas for the purposes of the Counter-Reformation that contributed largely to his popularity among Anglicans may seem paradoxical to the point of absurdity—and yet I am quite sure that, at least in one important respect, it is true. For in her own quiet and careful way—and only under extreme provocation—the Church of England was undertaking a little "Counter-Reformation" of her own. Hooker's work illustrates the situation quite precisely. His great treatise, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, was prompted by a rigidly "biblicist" attack on traditional church order—an attack ultimately inspired by the strongly voluntaristic interpretation of the relations between God and man which the Puritans derived from Calvin and from which they deduced the obligation of conforming every detail of church life to the pattern required by the divine will and allegedly revealed in Scripture. The cogency and adequacy of Hooker's counter-attack have been variously estimated by his successors, but it is at least clear that he did create, in Books I and V of his *magnum opus*, two small treatises of major

14. R. Hooker, *Answer to Travers*, 16, in *The Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. by J. Keble (Oxford, 1845), Vol. III, p. 586.

15. R. Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, III, ix, 2 (*Works*, Vol. I, p. 381).

importance. It was in the first of these, which stated the natural principles underlying all social order, whether civil or ecclesiastical, that he took his stand for St. Thomas Aquinas against the Puritans and their entire theological ancestry. In page after page of Book I—perhaps his most effective contribution to the shaping of the Anglican mind—he outlined a theological defence of nature and reason whose essential dependence on Aquinas will be obvious to anyone who takes the trouble to compare Hooker's text with the questions on law in the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*.¹⁶

The issues involved in this particular aspect of the English "Counter-Reformation" may be sketched summarily. The aggressive forces that precipitated the great debate of the sixteenth century were two—on the one hand, the *humanism* of the "New Learning"; on the other hand, the *anti-humanism* of the Reformation interpretation of fallen man—and between them there often seemed little room for a theological humanism. Here, as always, we must avoid putting our trust in our own generalizations—which means that we can ignore neither the "Renaissance" elements in the Reformation movement, exemplified in Zwingli's humanistic interests and Melancthon's concern for classical education, nor the ambiguity of Renaissance humanism itself, as displayed in Erasmus' combination of love for Greek letters with antipathy to Greek philosophy. Nonetheless, there really was in the sixteenth-century West a radical conflict of anthropologies, of which the bitter Luther-Erasmus controversy about human liberty is a significant symbol. And in the noise of this conflict it was often impossible to hear the voices—including, it would seem, that of Erasmus himself in his less disgruntled moments—that were trying to speak up for something like the theological humanism of Aquinas.

Moulded as it was in this setting of anti-theological humanism, theological anti-humanism, and an almost-observed theological humanism, the Anglican tradition was quite obviously touched by them all. For one thing, the Anglicans shared the common Protestant hostility to much medieval theory and practice, and a good many Lutheran and Reformed influences contributed to the formation of Anglican liturgy and theology. But Colet and Erasmus and Thomas More, as well as Dr. Robert Barnes and his fellow Lutherans gathered in their "Little Germany" at Cambridge, were part of the background of the English Reformation, and even Cranmer, for all his submissiveness to Reformed influence, could appeal to reason, along with Scripture and the Fathers, with sufficient conviction to make a biblicist give him up in despair. It was this regard for nature and reason that Hooker and his spiritual heirs sought to develop, not in isolation from Christian dogma—as in thoroughgoing Renaissance humanism or in the later Deism which English theology first created and then fought to a standstill—but as integral to the understanding of the Christian faith. And so, at last, we come back to St. Thomas Aquinas.

16. Cf. P. Munz, *The Place of Hooker in the History of Thought* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), pp. 29-67.

In such a situation there was a profound historical fitness in an appeal to Aquinas. Then, as now, the mind committed to the radical principles of Luther and Calvin might respect St. Thomas, but could hardly approve of him. A modern Reformed theologian speaks for his whole tradition when he writes that "Mediaevalism and scholasticism were an unholy amalgam of Aristotelianism and Christianity, of Greek paganism and New Testament faith."¹⁷ A timid literary humanism might and did criticize Aquinas on similar grounds, while radical naturalism, on the contrary, attacked him for either deliberately or ignorantly misunderstanding Aristotle in the interests of dogma. To Hooker, however, and to those who shared his outlook, Aquinas' teaching came as an already tested remedy for the ills of their time. Confronted with certain anticipations of sixteenth-century humanism and anti-humanism—on the one hand, the theologism and pietism of the *soi-disant* Augustinians; on the other hand, the burgeoning naturalism of the Aristotelian revival—St. Thomas had tried to do justice to both. Or more exactly—for he was concerned to do much more than a scissors-and-paste job—he was convinced that Christian theology must go beyond toleration to the acceptance, as essential to its own mature development, of those humanistic and naturalistic values that he had discerned in the philosophical tradition stemming from Aristotle. And out of this conviction he undertook to give expression to a theological and humane wisdom which, in the outcome, has proved relevant to more than one age in which theology and humanism have confronted each other.

II

The attitudes that collided in the sixteenth century and that can be seen, on the whole in less radical forms, in the intellectual world of the thirteenth century, had their roots in an even earlier period. It may be true that, in the "Dark Ages," such humane and scientific studies as had survived the *débâcle* of Roman civilization were essentially instrumental to the functioning of the Church and the transmission of its teaching and that even the pretty classical games of the court of Charlemagne were no obvious portent of change. But by the twelfth century humanism had become a sufficiently comprehensive movement to present a serious challenge to the Church and its theologians, and the story of the thirteenth century and its aftermath might have been different if more of those theologians had been alive to the possibilities of the new knowledge. Unfortunately, before a good many of them had managed to grasp what had already happened, humanism began to take on a new form and the full crisis of the thirteenth century was upon them.

Of course, not all twelfth-century theologians were uncomprehending and passive, let alone hostile, in the face of the humanist movement. Humanists

17. R. C. Chalmers, *See the Christ Stand!* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945), p. 209.

and theologians did, after all, occupy a common intellectual world, and humanism and theology often met in the same minds. Peter Abailard, for example, the brilliant and sometimes offensive dialectician and the tragic hero of the greatest "real-life romance" of the Middle Ages, was the same Abailard who sang so longingly of the heavenly Jerusalem and passionately avowed his loyalty to Christ above all masters.¹⁸ Alan of Lille, keen student of philosophy and science and author of a glowing hymn to Nature, *O Dei proles, genitrixque rerum*, was the same Alan who died, just as the thirteenth century was beginning, in the habit of a monk of Cîteaux.¹⁹ The list could go on and on. And yet one cannot help wondering how well even these eager minds had put two and two together. They lived in a time when dialectical studies, literary enthusiasms, scientific interests, technical advances, and speculative nature-philosophies all pointed to the imminent "leap forward," theoretical, artistic, and technological, of medieval man. But they somehow give us the impression that in their minds the claims of the theological parent and of the rapidly growing humanistic child are still unreconciled, while all around them rigorist divines are insisting that the only solution lies in a belated infanticide. There was, of course, St. Anselm of Canterbury, who towered over the twelfth century and who carried the generosity of mind disclosed in his engaging discussion of the upbringing of boy oblates in the cloister into his approach to the intellectual life of his day.²⁰ But in the century after his death too many theologians seemed indifferent or even antipathetic to the claims of humanism. Consequently that clearer recognition of the humanistic implications of Christianity itself which might have promoted a sounder assessment of the claims of grace and faith, on the one hand, and of nature and reason, on the other, lacked adequate expression, and the issues were still unresolved when the new invasion of classical naturalism got under way.

The main feature of this new phase of medieval humanism was the rediscovery of Aristotle as the "Philosopher"—the exponent of a comprehensive, naturalistic world-view. Thanks to Aristotle, what had been primarily a literary humanism began to find a philosophical basis for a high evaluation of nature and its works. At first the blow was softened for the conservative theologians by the fact that the "Aristotle" introduced to the West by Muslim philosophers had been made more acceptable to the Augustinian-Christian outlook by being "Platonized." But as the century wore on the dangerous potentialities of Aristotle's doctrine—already realized,

18. Cf. Abailard's hymn, *O quanta qualia* (E. R. Fairweather [ed.], *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956], pp. 298f.), and his *Epistle 17* (*PL*, 178, 375).

19. Cf. M.-D. Chenu, O.P., "Naturalisme et théologie au XIIe siècle," *Recherches de science religieuse*, 37 (1950), 5-21; E. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 172-78. The text of Alan's hymn is in *PL*, 210, 447f.

20. Cf. the excerpt from Eadmer's *Vita Anselmi* in Fairweather, *Scholastic Miscellany*, pp. 213-15.

in fact, in the works of Averroes, the "Commentator" *par excellence*—became unambiguously clear. It was then that some of the greatest theologians of the day, including the early teachers of the new Mendicant orders, mounted a great counter-attack on Aristotelianism in defence of Christian faith.

The best of the conservative divines did not indeed refuse to assimilate certain elements of the new philosophy, whose "scientific" value they were prepared to recognize, and in all fairness it must be said that they were not deliberate obscurantists or anti-humanists. Nonetheless, in pursuing their declared aim of defending the Augustinian tradition against those new ideas that seemed to threaten Christian faith, and so to undermine the whole structure of Christian life and piety, they concentrated on just those elements of Augustinianism that lent themselves to an anti-naturalistic interpretation. For the aspect of Augustinianism they saw fit to emphasize, as especially relevant to the questions of their age, was the tendency to stress the all-embracing efficacy of the divine action in such a way as to minimize the capacities and natural activities of the creature. It was not just that they confessed (as Christians surely must) that man's salvation depends from beginning to end on God's grace, apart from which human nature is absolutely incapable of attaining to the end for which God gave it being. To this doctrine no instructed Christian could have taken exception. What did lead to drastic criticism, however, was what seemed to be the underlying motif of Augustinian philosophy as presented in the thirteenth century—namely, the inefficacy of nature *as nature*, the unreality of creaturely causality in general, and the inability of created minds and created objects, in particular, to establish true knowledge. The greatest of all the theological conservatives of the time, St. Bonaventure, stated their essential concern precisely enough when he wrote:

However much anyone grants to the grace of God, he does not depart from piety, even though in attributing so much to the grace of God he may be subtracting something from natural power or from free will. But when he takes something away from grace and ascribes to nature what belongs to grace, then danger threatens. And therefore, since the one position [in the matter he is discussing] . . . ascribes more than the other to the grace of God and postulates a greater inadequacy in our own nature, it follows that it is more consistent with piety and humility, and so more secure. For even suppose that it is false; nonetheless, since it does not turn aside from piety and humility, to hold it is nothing if not good and safe.²¹

We could hardly ask for a better statement of an anti-naturalist pietism, however unfair it might be to quote it as an exhaustive statement of its author's outlook.

Over against Bonaventure's assertion certain statements of Aquinas are often quoted—for example, his succinct remark that "to detract from the

21. Bonaventure, *In II Sent.*, d. 26, art. un., q.2, concl. (*Opera Omnia*, Quaracchi ed., Vol. II, p. 635).

perfection of creatures is to detract from the perfection of the divine power."²² Without doubt this expresses St. Thomas' deep conviction, and yet by itself it might suggest that we had to deal merely with a conflict of pious emotions, whereas in fact Aquinas' careful delineation of the powers of nature is forced on him by the fundamental principle of his thinking—to put it simply, by his affirmation of the primacy of truth. For Aquinas, St. Bonaventure's argument would have been unthinkable, for the simple reason that for him religious devotion could never claim to be independent of truth.

St. Thomas gives striking expression to his idea of the primacy of truth in his *Exposition of Job*—one of his most interesting but least studied works—and to glance at it should help us to understand how he approached his theological task. His approach to the drama of Job may seem quaint, since he presents the discussion between Job and his friends as a kind of academic *disputatio* and introduces the Almighty, at the beginning of the great divine utterances, as the *quaestionis determinator*—the master who decisively concludes the debate—but there is surely a method in his quaintness, in so far as he is concerned to make the story of Job speak directly to the intellectual problems of the day. By itself, the parallel between Aquinas' ascription to Job of the twofold intention of defending the truth and attacking untruth—an ascription based on Job 13:22: "Then call me, and I will answer thee, or assuredly I shall speak, and answer thou me"—and the description of the wise man in which he declares his own intention in writing the *Summa contra Gentiles* may seem to prove little.²³ But when we read his remarks on Job 13:3—"I desire to dispute with God"—where he speaks so firmly of truth as the objective standard in whose light all questions must be determined, we can scarcely doubt that he is stating a deeply rooted personal attitude.

It seemed [he writes] that a disputation of man with God was improper because of the excellence by which God surpasses man. But one must take into account the fact that truth does not change on account of a diversity of persons. For this reason, when someone is speaking the truth he cannot be defeated, no matter whom he is debating with. Now Job was sure that he was speaking the truth infused into him by the gift of faith and wisdom; hence, feeling no uncertainty concerning truth, he begged that he should not be weighed down by the divine power. . . ."²⁴

Finally, if this passage describes the spirit of Aquinas' own teaching, another remark expresses his condemnation of an intellectually irresponsible pietism. Commenting on Job 13:7—"Does God need your lying, that you should speak deceit for him?"—he writes: "One must consider that he who uses a lie to display the justice or goodness of God not only does something which God does not need, but also by this very fact goes against God; for since

22. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 69.

23. Cf. *ibid.*, I, 1; *Expositio in Iob*, c. 13, lect. 2 (*Opera Omnia*, Parma ed., Vol. XIV, p. 57).

24. *Ibid.*

God is truth, and every lie is contrary to the truth, whoever uses a lie to display the splendour of God, in so doing acts against God."²⁵

From all this it should be obvious enough that Aquinas will try to decide the respective claims of theology and humanism, grace and nature, faith and reason, in the light of an objective order of truth. The measure of piety towards God and respect for creatures will be the truth of the divine Being and the truth of created nature, in so far as St. Thomas believes that the mind can reach such truth. In other words, he will bid us judge, not by a feeling of what is fitting, but by an awareness of what is. Through such objectivity alone can justice be done both to the true sovereignty of God and to the legitimate aspirations of the creature.

Up to this point I have simply reported Aquinas' assertion of the primacy of truth against the suggestion that piety and humility towards God can somehow justify an evasion of the question of truth—a suggestion that often proves insidiously tempting to the religious mind. My next task will be a brief examination of his reasons for asserting the primacy of truth. Even a brief survey will (I think) enlarge our understanding of the vision of reality on which St. Thomas' Christian humanism is founded.

III

The theological humanism of St. Thomas Aquinas is centred in truth because truth is central to his understanding of the being and action of God himself. No doubt what is often called Aquinas' "intellectualism" owes much of its force and clarity to Aristotle's influence on his mind. But in view of the great diversity of mediaeval Christian attitudes towards Aristotle, we must ask why St. Thomas used Aristotle in his own distinctive way. Surely Etienne Gilson is right when he says that "it is not the influence of Aristotle that explains the theology of St. Thomas, but the theology of St. Thomas that explains the influence of Aristotle."²⁶ More explicitly, it is the "objective" understanding of theology as an apprehension of the truth by which all thought and life must be ordered that makes Aristotelian intellectualism a fitting instrument of Christian faith. This understanding of theology, however, is based in turn on a doctrine of the divine nature which Aquinas believes to be characteristic of the Christian faith itself.

To put it more sharply, St. Thomas' evaluation of truth is a consequence of his firm adherence to biblical theism, with its faith in the supreme and transcendent reality of God, its insistence on the wisdom of his creative purpose, its confidence in the "truth" and "righteousness" of his dealings with mankind. If St. Thomas asserts the primacy of truth, it is because for him it is the consequence of the sovereignty of God, seen not as an inscrutable despot—as some caricatures of biblical theism have sought to portray him—

25. *Ibid.*, c. 13, lect. 1 (p. 55).

26. E. Gilson, "Le christianisme et la tradition philosophique," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 30 (1941-42), 262.

but as the ultimate Reality to which man's thought and action must be conformed if he will live and not die.

This conviction is brought out at the beginning of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, in a passage to which I have already referred.²⁷ Truth, Aquinas says, is the primary concern of the wise man, because it is the end sought in creation by the primary Author of the universe, who is God, and determined by his nature. God is Spirit, and the root of spiritual life is intelligence. It is not that God is to be thought of simply in terms of mind; God is love, and he acts in love to create a real world—not just an idea—and real persons—not just minds—to live in the world. Nevertheless, his analysis of spiritual life leads Aquinas to assert the primacy of intelligence and truth in God who is Spirit. For St. Thomas spiritual life is distinguished by its inwardness or “immanence”—its capacity for a possession of the real by knowledge and love rather than by material manipulation and absorption. Moreover, whereas love is desire of that which can be possessed or complacency in that which is possessed, knowledge exists for itself, as the fullest possession of its object. God, therefore, whose very being is Spirit, lives in the blessed peace of his perfect self-knowledge, which is one with himself in the utter simplicity of the divine being. But to say this is to imply both that God is truth, perfect being adequately apprehended by perfect mind, and that God's action *ad extra* is directed above all to the manifestation of truth, since its end is the communication of that divine life which is truth. Looking at it in this perspective, St. Thomas finds a new depth in Aristotle's comparative evaluation of truth and friendship. “Truth,” he writes, “is an all-surpassing friend, to which reverence and honour are due. There is even something divine about truth, for it is found first and primarily in God. And so he [Aristotle] concludes that it is the act of piety to honour truth above human friends.”²⁸

All this helps to explain why Aquinas insists on determining man's status on the basis of truth rather than piety. His assertion of the primacy of truth serves, however, not only to safeguard humanism from misguided religion, but also to show how a genuine humanism is rooted in true religion. If truth is the supreme value, beings will be ranked in terms of their capacity for truth, and that creature which can apprehend truth, however inadequately, will be immeasurably superior to one that can only express truth without knowing it. Furthermore, since God is the *prima veritas*, the supremely intelligible Being, the capacity for truth is ultimately the capacity for God. If then God's creative purpose is most fully accomplished when his creatures know his truth, while man's innate dignity is most fully manifested when he knows the supreme Truth, it follows that true religion and true humanism, the glory of God and the perfection of man, coincide.

On the creaturely side the possibility of such a religious humanism obviously requires that the meaning of human life should be found above

27. Cf. Aquinas, *Sum. contra Gent.*, I, 1.

28. Thomas Aquinas, *In X Libros Ethicorum Expositio*, lib. I, lect. 6 (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. XXI, p. 13).

all in man's capacity for truth. To the primacy of truth in the divine purpose there must correspond the primacy of intelligence in creatures. St. Thomas' hierarchical vision of the universe is based on this principle. While he states firmly enough that the variety of the universe contributes to the fuller display of divine truth, so that there is no dualistic depreciation of the material in his teaching, to his mind the most perfect creatures are those who can apprehend truth and goodness. Thus if material existence, bodily sensation, and spiritual response to the true and the good are all united in a creature, as they are in fact in man, it will be the spiritual to which the material and the sensuous are ordered; furthermore, within the spiritual realm intelligence must reign, as the king in his kingdom or as God in his creation²⁹—though Aquinas' realistic appraisal of human weakness makes him aware that internal rebellion is no less possible than sedition or sin.

It is important to see St. Thomas' anthropology in this theological perspective, not least because of the widespread inclination to find its sources anywhere but in Christianity. We may be told, for example, that "Thomas Aquinas, . . . when he arranges matter on the lower half of his scale of realities, bifurcates human nature in the familiar dichotomy of mind and matter, thereby sacrificing biblical anthropology to Aristotelian," and that at best "the inconsistencies of Thomism . . . are often committed for the sake of a more biblical conception of the relation of God and man" than those taught by many other theologians.³⁰ In fact, St. Thomas tried—more consistently, perhaps, than his critic allows—both to distinguish and to integrate the powers of human nature in such a way as to safeguard the essential Christian principles of man's spiritual dignity and his unique vocation in the material world. It was from this standpoint, common (he believed) to Christian faith and right reason, that he saw in the soul, as the basis of both intellectual and bodily life, the unifying principle that informs and integrates man's diverse activities. Against those contemporaries whose failure to recognize the peculiar status of human intelligence led them, by teaching the plurality of substantial forms, to divide man into two separate entities, St. Thomas asserted that the soul is at once the cognitive and the vital principle in man, and he sought to determine man's precise function in the order of divine truth by applying his own thesis that the same intelligence that informs and gives being to the human body is called to the vision of truth, a vocation whose natural basis is the spiritual subsistence and consequent incorruptibility of the soul.

A less subtle intellectualism than Aquinas' might well emphasize the spiritual aspect of human life to the virtual exclusion of its material side. St. Thomas, however, asserts the primacy, not the exclusive significance, of spirit and mind, and the delicate balance of this complex humanism will never be appreciated unless we grasp the implications of man's composite

29. Thomas Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum*, I, 12 (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. XVI, p. 235).

30. E. 1aB. Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 72f.

nature for his intellectual activity. To begin with, the role that it plays in bodily life is the condition of the human soul's knowledge of truth. Standing as it does at the very foot of the ladder of intelligence, the soul can know truth only through the medium of sense-images, and it is substantially united to matter in order that through the spiritual-material process of sensation it may make its arduous way to that truth which it cannot apprehend more simply. Truth remains the goal, but the whole diversified structure of human nature is part of the apparatus of the quest for truth.

From the peculiar status of human intelligence it follows that man's intellectual activity cannot be a simple, undisturbed contemplation of truth. Just because the soul informs the body and attains to truth through bodily sensation, human intelligence must apply its knowledge of truth to the ordering of sensation, emotion, and biological process. In other words, the human spirit, coming at truth, as it does, only through the visible and tangible, and reaching its goal only through repeated acts of thought and will, must permeate its whole activity with the truth that it so laboriously grasps. Man's spiritual life in time, therefore, is a quest for "objectivity" in thought and in outward action, an effort both to reason and to live according to reason, both to know and to do the truth. In Aquinas' own Aristotelian language, the intellect is at once speculative and practical. Because it really is intellect, its unique object is truth, but because man must act externally, and yet as an intellectual creature, the intellect must, so to speak, put its truth to work.

The same two-sidedness appears in St. Thomas' treatment of the contemplative life. From the primacy of truth and intelligence he concludes to the primacy of contemplation on theological and humanistic grounds alike. On the one hand, those creatures who can know the truth must devote themselves to it, if it is true that God, who is truth, has acted in creation with a view to the manifestation of truth. On the other hand, the contemplation of truth is the only way in which man can avoid self-alienation in a multiplicity of activities with limited and extrinsic goals. But for all that, Aquinas will not let us forget the conditions of contemplation in this temporal world. Given the diversity of the activities by which man lives and matures and learns, an exclusively contemplative life is really possible for nobody, and in fact, in view both of the temporal responsibilities of human society and of the limited capacity of most men for speculative contemplation, the active element will predominate in most human lives. This is not, indeed, to deny the essential primacy of contemplation.

In fact [St. Thomas writes], all other human operations seem to be ordered to this one, as to an end. For there is needed for the perfection of contemplation a soundness of body, to which all the products of art that are necessary for life are directed. Also required are freedom from the disturbances of the passions—this is achieved through the moral virtues and prudence—and freedom from external disorders, to which the whole program of government in civil life is directed. And so, if they are rightly considered, all human functions may be seen to subserve the contemplation of truth.³¹

31. Aquinas, *Sum. contra Gent.*, III, 37.

Nonetheless, he asserts the superiority of the "mixed" life to the strictly contemplative, and although it is true that this judgment refers to the life whose activity is that of teaching—that is to say, a kind of overflow of contemplation, which he compares, with what the harried modern prelate might well regard as sheer incongruity, to the activities of the bishop—it does concede the principle that activity belongs even to the most perfect life in this world.³²

If then the intellectual power of the soul, its speculative capacity, and its contemplative vocation point to the dignity of man as ordered to truth, the dependence of intellect on sense, the practical responsibilities of mind, and the necessity of action indicate the conditions under which that dignity is realized. As we have seen, St. Thomas regards these conditions, not as an evil, but rather as the gift of creative generosity. Nonetheless, they do mark man's present state as incomplete and transitional, since while they last that simple vision of the ultimate truth which is at once the final purpose of God for man and the final perfection of man in God remains inaccessible. And that means, of course, that the final union of theology and humanism in the truth remains unachieved.

But for Aquinas, the man of faith, its achievement is certain, just because in fact divine grace does bring human nature to perfection. The fullest beatitude promised by the philosophers is a pretty thin affair—the imperfect satisfaction of the separated soul in a still indirect contemplation of the divine. But over against this St. Thomas is able to set the Christian hope of the vision of God, in which the intellect is filled to overflowing, all desire is stilled in perpetual joy, and the body, transformed through the resurrection, shares in the peace of eternity. His transitive activity past, the whole man is absorbed in contemplation of the divine, no longer through images and shadows, but face to face. And in this goal of all contemplation and all action, theology and humanism at last completely coincide, as the whole man finds completion in God and God is glorified in the whole man.

The man who is unmoved by this hope must have too limited a conception of the vision of truth. Because our present knowledge of truth is too abstract to satisfy us, we are inclined to look for satisfaction in the play of human sensations. But in a way this ultimate intuition of truth is analogous to sense-intuition rather than to abstract thought. I do not suggest that Aquinas would have us despise the latter, because even in such hampered contemplation he sees a feeble foretaste of what is to come. Nonetheless, it is so radically limited in comparison with the vision of truth that is to satisfy man's desire and hold it fast for ever that (to borrow St. Thomas' own image) it seems no better than straw.

Meanwhile, however, in the particular form that we call theology, the indirect contemplation of divine truth must rule man's mind and heart. This science of faith links earthly contemplation to the heavenly vision it anticipates, and thus unites man as he now is with the destiny to which he must

32. Cf. Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, IIa-IIae, 188, 6.

come. Of course it is true that living faith of itself unites man to God and prepares him for the vision of glory. But *sacra doctrina*, starting from the principles of faith, takes to itself creaturely images and even, when they are relevant, philosophical demonstrations, thereby uniting reason to faith—and in the process, Aquinas says, not so much mixing water with wine as changing water into wine.³³ Theology, then, is in effect a declaration of faith in the final union of divine truth and human intelligence.

Like intelligence itself, this supreme human wisdom transcends the distinction between the speculative and the practical. But in a universe whose end is truth and in which action is ordered to contemplation, the highest wisdom (St. Thomas is persuaded) can only be the contemplation of divine truth. Furthermore, only such a truth-centred theology can make room for the kind of rational knowledge that the nature of human intelligence makes not only possible but inevitable. Whereas a voluntarist theology, coherently worked out, is concerned with the divine imperative and human response, and has no room for the analysis of natural structures, an intellectualist theology is open to any truth that will help man understand his own relation to the God of truth, and it can therefore make room for a philosophy of the natural order which interprets man in his world from a human standpoint. In this respect at least Aquinas is correctly seen as an emancipator of philosophy from subservience to dogma, a Christian who argues freely in philosophy because he is convinced that both faith and natural reason are the gift of the God of truth. Even if he never tries to systematize his philosophical ideas philosophically, but chooses to tackle philosophical problems only in so far as they impinge on theology,³⁴ he lets philosophy speak on its own terms and—as his treatment of the problem of the eternity of the world suggests—does not try to drive philosophical demonstration further than its own standards will allow.³⁵ Thus, while he will not let philosophy be “secularized” into a self-sufficient wisdom that renders revelation unnecessary, in the manner of his contemporary Boethius of Dacia,³⁶ St. Thomas will give it its own unhampered place in the contemplation of truth and so will “naturalize” it. Only in this way, he supposes, can theology and humanism reach their fullest temporal unity, through the incorporation of a rational interpretation of nature, argued out on a philosophical basis, into the living, growing body of Christian wisdom.

Nevertheless, faith retains its primacy—both because it reaches beyond the analysis of human nature to the disclosure of human destiny and because it is the only foundation for a universal humanism of truth. That is to say, in contrast to the ultimate inadequacy and the aristocratic limitations of a simply rational humanism, a theological humanism is both complete and

33. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super Librum Boethii De Trinitate*, q. 2, art. 3, ad 3 (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. XVII, p. 362).

34. Cf. E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), pp. 21f.

35. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 147–51.

36. Cf. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, pp. 399–402.

catholic. While St. Thomas embodies Greek intellectualist ideals in his theology of truth, he transforms classical values by affirming the calling of all mankind to the knowledge of the truth, and this conviction, combined with his realistic appraisal of the condition of human intelligence, leads him to ascribe to faith a very broad role in human life. Not only is faith the sole key to human destiny, but it also opens to every man those fundamental truths of reason apart from which the union of grace and nature could never be understood.³⁷ Lest man should fail to reach that fullness of truth to which his nature is ordered, God himself not only discloses transcendent mysteries to man, but even condescends to be his teacher of philosophy. The God who is truth and the rule of truth, the Creator of nature and reason and the ultimate satisfaction of man's desire for truth, speaks his truth in love, so that all men—whatever their intellectual or cultural poverty—may share in the riches of truth. As St. Thomas himself puts it: "Among the many opinions that have emanated from various sources as to where true wisdom lies, the Apostle puts forward the one uniquely certain and true judgment, when he speaks of Christ the power and the wisdom of God, who has also been made wisdom to us from God."³⁸ In the last analysis, the solid foundation of a full and unrestricted humanism lies in the power and wisdom and love of the living God.

IV

St. Thomas' synthesis of religion and humanism is essentially intellectual and theological. It is intellectual because its fundamental principle is the apprehension of God as creative truth and of man as created to know and express truth. It is theological, in the full Christian sense of "theological," because it looks to faith for the widest, deepest, and most certain knowledge of the supreme, archetypal, and unifying Truth, which is God. Yet, since all of nature expresses God's truth and all of human life can incarnate the vision of truth, this intellectual and theological humanism can comprehend every aspect of human experience. Hence it is not surprising to find in Aquinas himself not only a theologian, but a philosophical commentator, a political thinker, and a poet as well. In *principle*, then, and within very wide limits in *fact*, he sketches out a comprehensive view of man in relation to his fellows, to his world, and to his God. His teaching neither rejects man's widely varied activities as worthless nor fosters an aimless proliferation of human enterprises and a superficial development of humane studies in total forgetfulness of the surpassing proof of man's dignity—his vocation to the vision of God. Rather, he summons religion and culture to witness together to the primacy of truth and intelligence, in the name of God who is truth and of man who was made for truth.

37. Cf. Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, Ia, I, 1.

38. Thomas Aquinas, *Scripta super Libros Sententiarum*, lib. I, prol. (*Opera Omnia*, Vol. VI, p. 1).

I do not pretend either that this majestic ideal was perfectly realized in Aquinas' own work—that would be too much to claim for any man—or that the philosophical categories in which he expressed it could have been expected to retain their pristine vitality through the cultural developments of seven centuries, but I must confess to a certain rueful surprise at the failure of most of his contemporaries and successors to comprehend and appreciate the ideal itself. Yet the failure is undeniable. His own world was brightened by a galaxy of learned and brilliant theologians, but some of the best of those wise men demonstrated their misunderstanding of his teaching by effecting its condemnation in the incongruous company of a radical Aristotelian naturalism. The masters of the faculty of arts at Paris mourned him at his death, but many of their academic heirs have seen in him only a promising Aristotelian spoiled by dogma. The forces that he had united in his own mind continued to grow apart in the world, until the West was torn asunder by the conflict of Renaissance rationalism and Reformation fideism. Even his disciples have failed him repeatedly—notably either by obscuring his vision of the theological coherence of grace and nature or by displaying a most unthomistic timidity in the face of new knowledge of the world. For generations all too many theologians in the Catholic tradition have done him the disservice of treating his writings as a mine of ready-made solutions for all manner of theological and philosophical problems, thereby inviting a reaction—of which there are many portents at the present time—not only against “Thomism,” which may well deserve it, but also against the Angelic Doctor, who does not.

For all that, it need not be said that his essential message has always gone unheard. On the contrary, the intelligent acceptance of his ideas has again and again helped to liberate the Christian mind from a narrow biblicism or pietism. If the timid have often found in St. Thomas (as they will always find in someone) a refuge from the labour of possessing the truth for themselves, bolder minds have found in him the living model of the Christian teacher in the face of new ideas—neither obscurantist nor uncritical, but hopeful and persevering. He stands beyond all reasonable question among the great creative minds of Christian history—a giant on whose shoulders many a wise dwarf has stood to the vast enlargement of his vision.³⁹

On Wednesday, 8 August 1319, Bartholomew of Capua, logothete and protonotary of the Kingdom of Sicily, was testifying at the inquiry which led to the canonization of St. Thomas Aquinas four years later.

The witness [we are told] referred to some words of brother James of Viterbo of holy memory, doctor of sacred scripture and archbishop of Naples, who had been both a father and a friend to him, and who had once remarked to him that, in all sincerity and in the Holy Ghost, he believed that Our Saviour and Master, for the enlightenment of the world and the Catholic Church, had sent

39. Cf. the famous simile of Bernard of Chartres, quoted in Fairweather, *Scholastic Miscellany*, p. 21n.

out first the Apostle Paul, and then Augustine, and finally, in our day, brother Thomas—who himself would have no successor until the end of time.⁴⁰

We may hope that the prediction was erroneous, but there is much to be said for the assessment of “brother Thomas.”

40. *Acta Sanctorum*, March, Vol. I, p. 712. The translation is taken from K. Foster, O.P. (ed.), *The Life of St. Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (London: Longmans, 1959), p. 113.