

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS AQUINAS AND THE NEO THOMISTIC TRADITION

## PREFACE

It is hardly necessary to argue that Thomas Aquinas is one of the giants of Western philosophy. The philosophy of the *Doctor Angelicus* is a fundamental *locus* to understand past and present Christian thought. His philosophy is also important to understand past and present non-Christian philosophy. Aquinas' system of thought could be regarded as the centre of Western philosophy. On the one hand it is connected to the Greek past that is "appropriated" and re-interpreted to fit into the framework of Christian dogma. On the other hand it branches out in and influences many modern and late-modern movements. One just needs to think, for example, of phenomenology and its interest for essence and being.

At the same time, Thomas Aquinas is a difficult author. His works are difficult to read because they are monumental (not only in depth but also in size) and because they are ancient works, belonging to another time and culture. These are difficult to access to the modern reader. Furthermore, Thomist philosophy is difficult to read because after many centuries of interpretations and comments, there seem to be many Thomas Aquinas, each one confirming or condoning the views of past or recent movements within the Roman Catholic tradition.

The response to these problems, however, cannot of course be to stop reading his works, or to stop commenting on them. As a matter of fact, each interested reader, each philosopher, whatever his or her position may be, needs to know what Aquinas said and what impact this may have on one's tradition. Reformational philosophy has paid a large amount of attention to Thomist philosophy especially through Dooyeweerd's works. If one could say that Dooyeweerd focused on key figures of Western philosophy, then Aquinas is certainly among those key-authors. Among those who studied and wrote on Aquinas and Medieval philosophy

from a Reformational perspective in more recent times, we also find SU Zuidema, MC Smit and BJ van der Walt.

In this book, Professor Van der Walt enriches this tradition of reformational reflection on Medieval philosophy. His contribution, in my opinion, is new in at least two senses: first it focuses with special emphasis on neo-Thomism and second it utilises Vollenhoven's method for the study of the history of philosophy.

Concerning the first point, extending the discussion to neo-Thomism has the advantage of highlighting the consequences and sometimes the hidden tensions of Aquinas' philosophy. Van der Walt conceives of neo-Thomism as beginning very early, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, not just in the revival of this movement during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore we can say that he takes into account various interpretations of Thomas since his death. The questions and observations developed in this regard are certainly important, first of all for reformational philosophy, a movement that regards itself as a *neo-Calvinist*. Secondly, by utilising a solid method for the study of the history of philosophy, this book has the right credentials to offer a truly reformational point of view on Thomist philosophy. This means that it doesn't simply provide a slightly modified version of previous assessments but attempts at breaking new ground, from its own original position. This is of course a contribution not only for reformational circles but for the whole philosophical community.

This text has several other plus-points, and a couple of them should be mentioned. The book does not focus on peripheral issues but deals directly and with vigour with ontological, epistemological and anthropological issues. This grants a thorough systematic character to the text. On the other hand, the historical side is by no means neglected and is supplied in a well-informed and pleasant manner. The balance between the systematic and the historical perspectives allows to experience this text as an integrated whole. It is not simply an

accumulation of a-historical and abstract lucubration; it is also not a pile of historical reports on interpreters who disagreed, popes who canonised, commentators and betrayers. Finally, the author tries to bring to light the very soul of Thomist philosophy: the worldviewish, pre-scientific or “religious” level, which is essential to understand the “heart” of Aquinas’ philosophy (and any other philosophy).

The book will therefore benefit at least historians, theologians and philosophers. We live in a time in which many, even in reformed circles, confusedly recommend a return to “orthodoxy”, and an attitude of compromise. They often regard the “borrowing” of past or present philosophical ideas as the only possible strategy. This book returns to the Christian scholar a sense of dignity and hope.

## **Introduction**

Like every giant in the history of Christian philosophy and theology Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) still deserves our attention. The greatness of this man is already evident from the fact that he was not only declared a saint, but moreover became the universal *doctor angelicus*, whose teachings had to guide the Catholic Church and theology. Consequently his heritage was reflected in many following centuries after his death.

### **Lasting world-wide influence**

Apart from his influence already during the Middle Ages, the impact of his thinking during the past nearly 750 years remains something remarkable, as can be illustrated by the following examples.

Firstly, through the ages his ideas have been accepted, interpreted and in countless ways reworked by many of his Neo-Thomist followers – not only his closest Dominican brothers, but also by Jesuits and Franciscans. Especially chapter 7 and 8 of this book trace the huge impact Thomas Aquinas has had on many Neo-Thomists.

Secondly, Aquinas' heritage was not only appreciated by like-minded Catholic philosophers and theologians. It had a wide-ranging influence even in Protestant circles. Soon after the sixteenth century Reformation both Reformed and Lutheran theologians, because of a lack of an own, genuine Reformational philosophy, accepted Thomistic synthetic philosophy as a basis for their own theological works. This trend is called Reformed Orthodoxy or Scholasticism.

### **Influence on the Reformed theological tradition**

To prove this influence a number of contributions by myself were published in scholarly journals during the last few years (cf. Chapter 1). Unfortunately most of them were written in my mother tongue, Afrikaans. But for those who will be able to consult them they are mentioned here – with the prospect that eventually they will also be available in English.

An introductory article provided an appraisal of Reformed Orthodoxy in general and appeared in *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap*, 47(1):97-116, 2011.

The following three articles were devoted to the Synod and Canons of Dordt (1618-1619). The first one discussed the Reformed-Scholastic view of the relation between God and man in the works of F. Gomarus (1563-1641) and J. Arminius (1560-1609), two prominent figures at the Synod. (Published in *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 51(3):269-287, 2011.) The second one (in *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap*, 48(1 & 2):91-110, 2012) focussed on the Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophical influences on this important meeting and its “confession” accepted by the Reformed churches.

Then followed an essay on the Aristotelian-philosophical influences at Dordt (in *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 52(3):174-195, 2012), followed in the same year by a more comprehensive treatment of the same issue (in *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap*, 48(1 & 2):91-110, 2012). Only one article was written in English, viz. “Flagging philosophical minefields at the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619); Reformed Scholasticism reconsidered” (Published in *Koers*, 76(3):505-538).

Next, two of my contributions were published on the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, written at the request of the Synod of Dordt and first published in 1625. In the first (in *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap*, 47(2):1-34, 2011) it was argued that the title of this Reformed Dogmatic textbook was inappropriate: Without a pure biblically-

oriented philosophical basis, it could not be a *prioris theologiae* (a purified theology). The second article (in *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap*, 47(3 & 4):49-86, 2011) indicated similar philosophical impurities reflected in the theological anthropology and epistemology of the *Synopsis*.

A next (third) indication of the impact of Thomas and Neo-Thomism on Reformed theologians is clearly discernable in Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). One only has to read carefully Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* and Kuyper's *Encyclopedia of Holy Theology* to see to what extent they still relied on Aquinas.

### **Influence on Reformational Philosophy**

What is even more surprising is that (fourthly) traces of Thomas' philosophy can even be detected in Reformational philosophers afterwards who deliberately tried to distance themselves from his influence. I here have in mind philosophers like Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) in the Netherlands and Hendrik G. Stoker (1899-1993) in South Africa. (Cf. my book of 2014 *At the cradle of a Christian philosophy in Calvin, Vollenhoven, Stoker and Dooyeweerd*.)

A last, fifth, example of Aquinas' lasting significance is the contemporary movement known as the Radical Orthodoxy of John Milbank and his followers. (Cf. e.g. J.A.K. Smith: *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* (2004).) By returning to (a newly interpreted) Aquinas and other Medieval thinkers, like Duns Scotus, their intention is to develop a post-secular theology. An effort is even made to reconcile Radical Orthodoxy and the European Reformational philosophical tradition (cf. J.K.A. Smith & J.H. Olthuis (Eds.) *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*).

The present monograph takes a more critical stance at the whole Thomistic heritage. Unlike many Evangelical and Reformed theologians Aquinas realised that his Christian theology cannot be developed without a philosophical basis. But I do not regard the enduring influence of Aquinas and Neo-Thomism as simply beneficial for contemporary Christianity in general and a Reformational philosophy in particular.

### **Returning to the original Aquinas**

Not to be confused by the myriad interpretations of Aquinas' large oeuvre, the present writer decided to read the original Aquinas (in Latin) again. The focus fell on his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, regarded as his main philosophical work, tracking the deepest, philosophical basis of his theology.

The first result of my research was written up long ago (1968) for my master's degree in philosophy: *Die wysgerige konsepsie van Thomas van Aquino in sy "Summa Contra Gentiles"* (The philosophical conception of Thomas Aquinas in his "Summa Contra Gentiles").

In 1974 I was privileged to attend and deliver a paper at the International Congress (in Rome and Naples), commemorating Aquinas' death seven centuries ago.

In 1975 (for part of my doctoral dissertation in philosophy) I again paid attention also to his view on natural theology.

Recently (2012-2014) a series of eight articles (translated for this volume) on Thomas and Neo-Thomism were published in the South African *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap/Journal for Christian Scholarship*, vol. 48-50. (See *Acknowledgments*.)

### **Methodology**

The method employed in this book to evaluate Aquinas's philosophy is the consistent problem-historic method of which the reader will find an elementary explanation in various previous publications as well as in my monograph of 2014: *Constancy and change: historical types and trends in the passion of the Western mind*.

## **Contents**

The first five chapters of this book provide a systematic overview of Aquinas' philosophy.

Chapter 1 uncovers the basic religious direction of his thinking, while the second chapter describes his peculiar idea of law, considered as a key to comprehend his entire philosophy.

The third chapter is an exposition of his ontology or view of reality (God and cosmos). Then (Chapter 4) indicates how these ontological starting-points are determinative for his anthropology and epistemology.

Next (in Chapter 5), the implications of the preceding four chapters are illustrated in how, in his doctrine of providence, Thomas viewed the relation between God and human beings in, for instance, his ideas about human freedom, prayers and the issue of evil.

In Chapter 6 I retrace my steps to return to the question whether justice has been done (in the first chapter) by characterising Aquinas' thinking as an unacceptable scholastic synthesis or accommodation between pagan Greek and biblical ideas.

## **Seven centuries of Neo-Thomism**

Chapter 7 and 8 move beyond the *doctor angelicus*. Chapter 7 provides a bird's eye view of how Neo-Thomist thinkers themselves tried to understand their own long and complex history. Their key question has been: what exactly does it mean to be a Neo-Thomist? To what degree should a follower of Aquinas connect his/her thinking to the "original" Thomas, and to what extent may she/he deviate from him? Because of the many divergent interpretations of Aquinas the problem can be stated differently as: Which Aquinas and whose Thomism?

Neo-Thomists employed two methods, portraying their own development, namely an ontological categorisation (according to types of philosophy) as well as a chronological-historiographic methodology (according to different trends in the philosophies of Neo-Thomists).

The author, however, regards these approaches as unsatisfactory. He proposes a consistent problem-historical method in order to get a better grip on the protracted and involved history of Neo-Thomism. In addition this concluding chapter provides a critical evaluation of the shifting perspectives – without any real solution – in the philosophy and theology of both Aquinas and his followers on their basic doctrine of nature and super-nature (grace).

For the convenience of readers, each chapter starts with a brief abstract (printed in italics), providing an overview of its contents.

Bearing in mind that the eight chapters originated from eight separate articles, a certain amount of repetition and overlap is inevitable, but can be of value for readers who may only be interested in a specific chapter.

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May this humble contribution encourage renewed interest and further reflection on a Christian giant of the past whose influence is still reverberating today.

**Potchefstroom**

**Bennie van der Walt**

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## Chapter 1

### THE RELIGIOUS DIRECTION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS AQUINAS

*This investigation of the philosophy of the famous Catholic thinker, Thomas Aquinas, is part of a wider research programme of the author. The project intends to trace historically the influence of Aquinas on subsequent thinkers during following centuries, focussing on Reformed Orthodoxy or Scholasticism between 1550 and 1700, but also afterwards. Previous articles already investigated the main philosophical lines from Thomas (via Suarez and Zabarella) to Beza, the Synod and Canons of Dordt (1618-1619) up to the Synopsis Purioris Theologiae (1625). The line of scholastic thinking can, however, also be further followed to the founders of a Reformational philosophy, viz. Stoker, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. Today again we witness a new revival in Reformed circles of this kind of orthodox-scholastic theology and philosophy. Understanding the philosophy of Aquinas, can therefore be of great help in an appraisal of subsequent developments – not only in Catholic but also Reformed thinking up to the present day.*

*This one and the following five chapters focus on the Summa Contra Gentiles, regarded as Aquinas' main philosophical work, offering a new interpretation. The suggestion is that his law-idea should be viewed as the central motive behind his whole philosophical-theological system. But before one discusses his ontology of law, it is necessary to explain the religious direction of his thinking – the main topic of this introductory chapter.*

#### **1. Introduction**

Some introductory remarks are important in order to (1) explain the place of this and the following four articles in the author's research programme; (2) bring to the attention its topicality; (3) point out the various interpretations of Thomas's thinking; (4) motivate the

essential bibliographical limitations regarding secondary sources; (5) explain the planned layout of this part of the research project.

### **1.1 Its place within the broad outline of the research project.**

The scope of the programme is an effort to *characterise* and *evaluate* Reformed scholastic philosophy (also called Reformed Orthodoxy) (cf. Van der Walt 2011a), but also to determine the course of its historic lines (evolution) In this respect a specific kind of theology is indeed debated but the primary focus falls on the philosophical foundation of the theology. Unfortunately within this programme all results could not be published in the correct chronological order. For this reason the correct order is here given in which the different articles should be read. Chronologically this article (and the next four articles) on Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) should be read first. (Due to his synthesis thinking with Greek philosophy the historical line can be followed from him going back in history to Aristotle (384-433 B.C.).)After the reformation in the sixteenth century the scholastic thinking of Thomas became popular in Reformed Orthodox circles (by means of several intermediate links like i.a. Suarez (1548-1617) and Zabarella (1532-1589)). Van der Walt (2011a) offers a general typification and evaluation of this from a philosophical angle. This is followed (cf. Van der Walt, 2011d) by a historical outline of the development of the issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility by amongst others Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, Beza and Ursinus. Subsequently the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) and the Canons of Dort were examined from a philosophical angle in various contributions (cf. Van der Walt, 2011e, 2012a and 2012b).Under the authority of this famous Synod four professors at the university of Leiden published a dogmatic handbook, the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, in 1625. However, Van der

Walt (2011b and 2011c) demonstrates that, in spite of the suggestion by the title that it contained sound Reformed theology, philosophically seen it was not so pure since it exhibits distinctly Aristotelian scholastic features. The preceding research we hope will be resumed by following the historical lines from the *Synopsis* further to the following mile posts in the history of the Reformed tradition; The thinking during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the \*Nadere\* Reformation of the “old writers” (like Smytegeld and A’Brakel) of the Netherlands, which the Voortrekkers took along in their wagons together with the old State Translation – was almost the only literature which profoundly influenced their thinking. The European Reveil (awakening) among writers like Da Costa, Bilderdijk and Groen van Prinsterer (in the Netherlands) during the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century.

- Afterwards we learn something from the fathers of a Reformational philosophy: Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd (in the Netherlands) and Stoker (in South Africa). (On the philosophy of these three individuals the author’s research will already be published in 2012 in three contributions in *In die Skriflig*.)
- Finally this comprehensive research project – after examining all the philosophical tracks in the sandy roads of the past – will bring us to our South African history and more specifically to the Christian National ideal which for a long time indicated the normative direction.

At the end of the whole project we hope it will be clear how the threads run between the various mileposts of history; how ideas have feet that travel right through history; what Reformed identity meant in the past and should mean today.

### ***1.1 Topicality***

At least four reasons for the topicality of this part of the research project on Thomas can be enumerated.

### *1.1.1 Important for understanding Roman Catholic thinking*

In 1323 Thomas was declared a saint. During the course of history no less than 66 popes referred to his philosophy and by means of the papal encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (cf. *Aeterni Patris*, 1948) of 1879 his school of thought received a new injection for by means of this Pope Leo XIII declared that all Roman Catholic philosophers, theologians and educationalists had to follow the philosophy of the *doctor angelicus*. Although this encyclical is no longer carried out to the letter nowadays (cf. 3.1 below) the philosophy of Thomas still has an important role in Roman Catholic thinking.

### *1.1.2 Important to Protestant Scholasticism or Orthodoxy*

In the work of Thomas the synthesis thinking of the Middle Ages which attempted to reconcile the Bible and Greek philosophy reached a climax and became well-rounded. His synthesis would serve as an example for many centuries to come to both Roman Catholic and Protestant thinkers – including Reformed ones. Among the latter it happened already from the time of Beza (Calvin’s successor in Genève) and lasted until about 1700, but was revived once again in the nineteenth century by Bavinck. (For seventeenth-century Protestant Scholasticism especially in Germany compare the comprehensive investigation by Wundt, 1939.)

Venter (s.a. 63) rightly remarks: “On Western history of civilisation the philosophy of Thomas of Aquinas had a determining influence; even Protestantism did not evade its allure.”

I would like to specify this “allure”. The later appeal it would have to Reformed philosophers – which is reviving once more today – has nothing to do with *ecclesiastical, confessional* differences (e.g. on the sacraments). In this regard Reformed thinking followed its own way.

It is the *scholastic, synthesis philosophy* to which Reformed theology gave in. If my philosophical seismography is correct the greatest danger to real Reformational thinking (obviously apart from growing secularism) will in future be synthetic-scholastic philosophy, cf. 1.2.4 below.

### *1.1.3 Influence on the founders of the Reformational philosophy of the twentieth century*

In the third instance the philosophy of Thomas is important not only to theology but also to Christian philosophy. As far back as 1976 Taljaard indicated that the philosophical conceptions of two founders of Reformational philosophy, namely Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) and Stoker (1899-1993) can be linked to two phases in the evolution of Thomas. (Dooyeweerd to Thomas's initial monarchianistic thinking and Stoker to his later subsistence theory. According to Tol, 2010 Vollenhoven who also was under the influence of Scholasticism earlier on, later pursued a different road.) Since approximately the middle of the previous century similarities were sought between the Christian philosophy of Dooyeweerd and various Catholic scholars (cf. e.g. Marlet, 1954, 1961, Robbers, 1948, 1949 and Smit, 1965).

### *1.1.4 Influence on contemporary theological thinking*

In the fourth instance there is a strong tendency among theologians nowadays to cause the revival of Medieval Scholasticism (including Thomas) and the later Reformed Scholasticism or Orthodoxy in a way that is completely devoid of criticism. What is more, it is held up as an indicator of direction to contemporary Reformed thinking. (In my opinion such repristination entails keeping one's eyes on the past and walking backwards into the future.)

I mention only a few examples. In the Netherlands there are for instance Van Asselt (1996) and Van Asselt & Dekker (2001) as well as Te Velde (2006, 2007, 2010a, 2010b,), who defend Medieval and later Scholasticism. In the USA there is Müller (2003), who rehashes

Reformed Orthodox theology (from ± 1550-1700) once more for today. At the same institution (Calvin College, Grand Rapids) we have the philosopher, Smith (2004), an advocate for a new movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, who tries to reconcile it to the Reformational philosophical tradition. Millbank, the “father” of this movement, started this kind of “return to the good old times” and it has already gained support in South Africa as becomes evident from the recent doctoral thesis of Kruger (2011).

This information is given here merely to show how relevant Thomas’s thinking was not only for the centuries directly after him, but right up to the present day. My own much more critical view of this uncritical relapse into scholastic philosophy will be motivated in more detail later (cf. the fourth article in this series).

### ***1.2 Numerous interpretations of Thomas***

On the philosophy of Thomas there is an almost disorderly variety of (neo–Thomistic and other) interpretations. Venter (s.a. 135 et seq.) as far back as the fifties of the previous century grouped together different Thomistic philosophers in three groups. (1) Some regard Thomas’s thinking as a *philosophia perennis* which should hold good for all times and places without change. Others attempt to show that what is presented as thinking in modern times has already been foreseen by Thomas. (3) A third group feel even more free to take new philosophical tendencies into account and merely want to connect these with the essence of Thomism. Robbers(1961) for instance tried to reconcile Thomas and existentialism. (On what the “essence” of Thomas’s philosophy is, there is no consensus either!)

Smit (1950) is another valuable source for understanding something of this variety among Thomas’s followers as well as their diverse interpretations of the *doctor angelicus*. Most probably the nature–grace issue (cf. 4.3.3 and 4.4) is today still the most outstanding feature of Thomistic thinking.

The five hefty volumes which appeared during and after the International Thomas Conference (1974) (cf. Thomaso d’Aquino, 1974, 1975, 1976a, 1976b and 1976c respectively under Part 2 of Bibliography) is a further example of the differences in interpretation. (For more particulars on this conference at the time of the seventh centenary of the death of Thomas, cf. Van der Walt, 1974b and 1974c and 1976 for his own lecture at this occasion.) The following are examples of questions raised in the various lectures during the Thomas conference. Did he think more Platonising or more Aristotelianising? Or the question was asked what the “key” was to understanding his philosophy/theology. Was it his teaching on God, on creation, participation, analogy or what exactly?

In the light of all the above–mentioned the author therefore decided to drink from the fountain itself. Not to rely on hearsay (secondary sources), but to read at least Thomas’s main philosophical work in die original Latin. As will transpire (cf. the next article) this investigation also offers its own interpretation, namely that Thomas’s philosophy can be better understood from the angle of his specific cosmomic idea. Not only does this differ from numerous Roman Catholic interpretations but also from a Reformational one like that offered by Aertsen (1982).

### ***1.3 Bibliographical limitation***

On an individual like Thomas there already exists a chaotic number of magazine articles and books – which could easily fill a library. (Only the lectures at the above–mentioned Thomas conference already number 2696 pages!) So only by way of exception will we here refer to secondary sources. The focus falls in particular on newer sources which were not yet available at the time of the author’s previous (still unpublished) research (cf. Van der Walt, 1968 and 1974a). Newer, own insights are also included.

Even studying Thomas's own numerous works – filling a whole shelf! --is an ambitious task for a lifetime. Therefore we here focus on only one of them, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (in future abbreviated to SCG) what one could call his thesis against the heathen. It is generally considered his main philosophical work (the *Summa Theologiae* as his theological *opus magnum*) and takes up four books dealing in this order with God, creation, providence and redemption.

Two Latin texts were consulted (cf. S. Thomae Aquinatis, 1935 and Santo Thomas de Aquino, 1967). Since I consider the English translation published by Doubleday a reliable one (cf. Thomas Aquinas, 1955, 1956a,b,c and 1957) it is followed and quoted in this research. This translation takes up *five* parts since the original Book 3 (on God's providence) has been translated into two separate parts. In the English quotes therefore the method of reference to the four books and page numbers is the following: I,10; II,200; IIIa,100 or IIIb,120 and IV,90. For the purpose of checking, an earlier German translation was also used (cf. Thomas Aquinas, 1942-1960 as well as English translations (cf. Thomas Aquinas, 1945 and 1950).

#### ***1.4 The lay-out***

The philosophy of Thomas will be dealt with in five successive contributions. In this first article by way of background something is first said on (1) Thomas's evolution, (2) the place of the SCG in Thomas's thinking as well as (3) his (probable) intention with it. Subsequently (4) is focused on the religious-normative direction of his philosophy. This includes his synthesis thinking, the method he applies for reaching unity between Aristotle and the Scriptures (namely distinguishing between nature and grace), while (5) finally gives an evaluation thereof.

## **2. Thomas's philosophical evolution**

By means of the following glimpses from Thomas's life story his philosophical evolution can also be traced. (For more on his life history cf. Van der Walt, 1975.) The most discerning trait is that he developed from an initially Platonising to a clearly Aristotelising philosopher (or better formulated: Aristoteles interpretation). Please note that "Platonising" does not exclude the influence of Aristotle. (Quite early on in his life Thomas became acquainted with the work of Aristotle but this was via the Platonising thinking of the Arabic philosopher Avicenna.) In short Thomas's philosophical course ran as follows:

### ***2.1 First acquaintance with Aristotelianism***

At the youthful age of fourteen the brilliant young man (born 1224/5) began his studies at the State University of Naples. As a meeting point of Arabic culture (which for centuries had conserved Aristotle's writings) with the Western world, it was the best place to get acquainted with this Greek philosopher. Since it was a secular institution Rome's ban on studying and teaching the works of the man from Stageira did not apply to the University of Naples and one of Thomas's masters, Petrus Hibernus, availed himself of this freedom. During this period Thomas also joined the Dominican Order (founded at the beginning of the century by the Spaniard, Dominicus). This order required devoted study from its members and Thomas became one of their top students.

### ***2.2 Growing influence by the man from Stageira***

In 1245 (more or less at the age of twenty) Thomas departed to Paris, which was the Mecca of the theological world of the time, in particular to continue his studies under Albertus Magnus (1193-1280). As we have mentioned, Thomas first was substantially influenced by Avicenna and still thought in a Platonising way. Although the papal ban on Aristotle applied in Paris, he was still studied there and his influence on Thomas would gradually increase.

From 1260 Thomas taught in various places in his land of birth, Italy. Amongst other places also (1261-1265) at the court of Pope Urbanus IV who continued the efforts of Pope Gregory IX to make known to the Christian world the philosophy of Aristotle in a way which would maximise the gain and minimise the damage. At the same court there also was Willem van Moerbeke who translated several works of the famous Greek into Latin. It was also here between 1259 and 1264 that the greater part of the SCG had its origin.

### ***2.3 In defence of Aristotle's philosophy***

From 1268 (to 1272) Thomas was called back as a professor to Paris where he now had to defend his own Aristotelising philosophy (at first Platonising and later non-Platonising) against other philosophical schools. Aristotle was opposed not only by the secular professors (opposing the Dominicans) but also by the conservative Franciscans (who were oriented towards Augustine and the Neo-Platonists). One representative of the latter group (Asalo of St. Victor) for instance declared openly – and rightly so – “that the spirit of Christ cannot rule where the spirit of Aristotle prevails”. But Thomas also had to defend his own progressive Aristotelising philosophy against other forms of Aristotelising philosophy. As for instance against that of the Arabic philosopher Averroës and his followers like Siger van Brabant and Boëthius the Dacian. This group adhered to the teaching of the so-called double truth (or paradox). According to them there could be no connection between the Scriptures (or theology) and (Aristotelian) philosophy yet they accepted both as the truth!

Over against all these schools Thomas set his “Christian Aristotelianism” in which, by means of his distinction between nature and supernature (grace), he could demonstrate how the Christian faith could assimilate Aristotelian philosophy – without jeopardising either the Christian or the Aristotelian convictions. He therefore clearly was an intentional synthesis thinker. Vollenhoven (2005c: 414) writes:

In the same way that Augustine had used Plato in the explanation and defence of church doctrine, Thomas did with the philosophy of Aristotle. To be sure, he met with vehement opposition from his contemporaries but finally Thomas did prevail, to such an extent that Aristotelian philosophy became the basis of all of medieval scholasticism.

Thomas was called back to Italy from where Pope Gregory summoned him to attend the Council of Lyon. However, on the way there Thomas fell ill and (on 07/07/1274) died at Fosso Nova, near Terracina (between Rome and Naples) – merely 49 years old. During his short life-span, however, he reached far more than other philosophers who lived much longer.

#### ***2.4 Rejection after his death***

The fact that Thomas's Christian synthesis thinking was not accepted by all and sundry at the time, already became clear from his sojourn in Paris but even after his death the debate continued. Only three years after his death some of his Aristotelian ideas were rejected by the church and his former master, Albertus Magnus had to hurry to Paris in order to defend the ideas of his deceased disciple. After this Thomas's writings were likewise opposed by both a Dominican and a Franciscan archbishop of Canterbury. Not until fifty years after his death when his ideas were canonised in 1323, the hatchet was buried. Thus the Christian synthesis thinking of Thomas was even at that time not taken for granted. Why would it today (once more) be acceptable?

After this general outline we now say something more on Thomas's main philosophical work.

However, Gaybba (1998:41) adeptly summarises the above as follows:

By the time Aquinas appeared, all of Aristotle's philosophical works had been discovered and not only his works on logic. The entire corpus of Aristotelian

writings posed a major challenge to Christian thought, since it not only provided a well-reasoned survey of the entire field of human knowledge, but did so in a way that stressed the human mind's inherent ability to discover truth in the world around it. The rationalist threat that this posed to Christianity cannot be imagined any longer. But it was an immense threat and it was Aquinas who took up the challenge by mastering Aristotle's thought and forcing it to serve Christianity. He recast the entire Christian faith in Aristotelian categories of thought, thus ending the centuries-old domination of Platonic categories. So successful was he, that Scholastic Theology and Aristotelian Philosophy came to be seen as inextricably intertwined, to the point where Luther had to protest against the idea that one could not be a good theologian without using Aristotelian Philosophy!

### **3. The place and purpose of the SCG**

First we now ask the reader's attention for the place of the SCG in Thomas's philosophical evolution and secondly for what its purpose was.

#### ***3.1 The place of the SCG in Thomas's philosophical evolution***

As demonstrated above, Thomas's thinking progressed from an initially Platonising to an increasingly Aristotelising philosophy. (While "Platonic" or "Aristotelian" denotes an exact following of these two great Greek philosophers, the terms "Platonising/Aristotelising" or Plato/Aristotle interpretation mean that only elements of their philosophies are taken over and re-interpreted according to a new conception.) According to Vollenhoven (2000:237,238 and 2005c:415) in the work of Thomas two phases can be discerned, each having two subphases.

- *A Platonising (monarchianistic) period with two phases* (a) Up to approximately 1255 he still thought *without* the theme of nature-grace (or supranature) on the lines of the Arabic

philosopher Avicenna(980-1037). However, as a Dominican Thomas was accused of heresy by some priests (e.g. Gerhard from Abbeville and Willem of St. Amour c.s.) and he began solving the problem by means of a distinction between a natural (philosophical) theology and a supernatural (Christian) theology. (b) From 1255 to 1259 he therefore philosophised *with the aid* of the nature–grace method of synthesis thinking.

- *From 1259-1274* Thomas’s conception changed to a more purely *Aristotelising* subsistence theory in two phases: (a) From 1260-1265 the influence of Aristotle via Thomas’s tutor, Albertus Magnus (1206-1250) grew but he was still thinking in a Platonising way, which means he was seeing his Aristotelising philosophy through Platonising glasses. (b) From 1265 until 1274, however, he followed a clearly non-Platonising Aristotle interpretation. His last important theological work, the *Summa Theologiae* was written during this final phase. As will become clear, the SCG (his main philosophical work written between 1258/9-1263/4) falls in phase 2(a).

### ***3.2 Reason for and intention with the SCG***

It is no longer certain what the exact reason was for Thomas to write the SCG. Van der Walt (1968:40-44) goes into this in great detail and mentions the following. Apparently it was written at the request of a Dominican missionary among the Muslims in Spain, Raymundus from Pennaforte (*obiit* 1275).

This tallies with what Thomas himself says in Book I, Chapter 2 (p. 62): The Jews could be swayed to faith by means of the Old Testament and the heretics by means of the New Testament. However, the Muslims do not accept the authority of the Bible. “We must, therefore have recourse to natural reason, to which all men are forced to give their assent.” This means that the Bible was declared useless in the case of missionary work among the Islam. Moreover it implies that one can change somebody’s faith by means of

rational arguments – instead of one’s faith determining one’s thinking. This kind of apologetics in my opinion is therefore doomed from the very beginning!

Take note, too of the double irony of history. In the first place (as shown above) the Medieval Christians were indebted to the Arabs for their knowledge of Aristotle. Secondly, in the SCG, the Islamic Aristotelising philosophy is attacked by Thomas by means of a Christian Aristotelianism!

It could be that the SCG was simultaneously also directed against the Averroic Aristotelising philosophy at the University of Paris (cf. 2.3 above and Van Steenberghen, 1955: 75 et seq.).

In summary: At the time Aristotle was regarded as *the* philosopher and Aristotelising philosophy was all the vogue. The Muslims attempted to reconcile Aristotle with their Islamic faith, while the Christians were trying to connect the exact same kind of philosophy with their biblical faith – and to persuade the Muslims that it would be a better synthesis!

However, one kind of synthesis cannot be better than another. With his reconciliation between Aristotle and the Word of God Thomas fell into a pitfall which would determine the normative direction of his philosophy. In this way he accepted two – conflicting – sources of authority which he had to obey. Therefore he could not point a clear normative direction (cf. Venter, s.a.: 69), but found himself on a veritable see-saw which he had to try and keep stable all the time.

Some more about the disunity in his philosophy.

#### **4. The normative direction in the philosophy of the SCG**

Every proper philosopher should ask and answer at least the following two basic questions:

(1) What *are* the things that exist in reality? And (2) What *should* it be like? The first is more a *structural* question and the second a *directional*. The answer to the first question

is a certain *type* of philosophy and the answer to the second is a certain *school, spirit* or *direction* in philosophy. We will start with Thomas's answer to the second, normative question and afterwards (in subsequent contributions) deal with his response to the first.

#### ***4.1 The broad perspective***

Vollenhoven (2005a:29. Cf. also 2005b) distinguishes three main periods in the history of Western philosophy: (1) the *pre-synthesis period* from ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman philosophy to approximately 50 AD; (2) the *synthesis thinking* of the Church Fathers and the Middle Ages from about 50 to 1550 AD; (3) the *post-synthesis thinking* since 1550 to the present. The latter period is further distinguished in anti-synthetic left (since the Renaissance) and right (since the sixteenth century Reformation). The left (secular) direction rejects the Scriptural Revelation accommodated within synthesis thinking, while the right (Christian) thinking wants to be freed from the pagan element in it.

Synthesis thinking is therefore Vollenhoven's point of departure for a classification of Western philosophical history. One could also call it his greatest adversary. Why? Not because he denies that the philosophers from this long period were also sincere Christians. But because he was of the opinion that in their philosophy they did not do justice to the Word of God by attempting to connect it with themes from heathen, Greek-Hellenistic-Roman thinking – which in a religious sense have no connection at all. In the case of Thomas's philosophy this synthetic mentality reached a climax -- according to Vollenhoven therefore rather a record low. Why?

Because, thinking synthetically, also determines the *basic normative direction* of one's thinking. The question "How *should* I think?" can no longer be answered unambiguously. The pre-synthesis thinking for instance accepted only the human intellect as its norm. In synthesis thinking the Christian faith (based on the Scriptures) is added to it, resulting in a

divided loyalty between an autonomous reason and faith and in a muddled normative direction for the philosophy.

#### ***4.2 Synthesis in the SCG***

One need not even read through all four books of the SCG in order to be able to prove that Thomas was clearly a synthesis thinker. He starts his first book with a quotation from Proverbs 8 verse 7. (“My mouth speaks what is true...”) but from what follows it becomes evident that it is not only the truth of the Scriptures. On the same level of authority as God's Word we also find pagan Greek philosophy.

Aristotle is quoted in the very first sentence. He is not even named, but is simply introduced to the reader as “the Philosopher”. *Philosophus* is also written with a capital letter, for there was no other philosopher who had such authority to Thomas’s way of thinking. This beginning also characterises the rest of the SCG. There hardly is a chapter in which there is no quote from the works of the man from Stageira. And where there is no explicit reference to his philosophy, the traces of his philosophy transpire very clearly from the contents.

Venter is right when he writes that Thomas’s philosophy is the result of a *deliberate, intentional* effort to reconcile the Bible and Aristotle. To this he adds:

Thomas did not make this effort due to a lack of taking life seriously. On the contrary, he intended rendering Christianity a service. However, a false philosophical view of the relationship between faith and reason prevented him from realising the fatal dangers inherent in such attempts at synthesis. (Venter, s.a.:64.)

On the face of it, however, Thomas is so successful at giving both the Scriptures and heathen philosophy a place in his own philosophy and theology that he is suspected on two sides (cf. 2.3 above). On the one hand those who wanted nothing to do with pagan philosophy, while on the other hand there were those who found it most alluring. The suspicion of his

opposition was not without reason, for as a synthesis thinker Thomas did not concur with either of the two parties. Not with those (conservative) Christians who had turned their backs on the ancient philosophies, neither with the (liberal) Christian thinkers who (as one contemporary sharply put it) turned themselves into heretics in their effort to turn Aristotle into a Christian.

### ***4.3 The method of synthesis in the SCG***

The question is how Thomas, in spite of vehement opposition, could succeed in effecting this synthesis. Vollenhoven (2005a:62,65 and 2005b:66,69) distinguishes three different ways in which synthesis thinking took place in the past – and still does.

#### ***4.3.1 Biblicism***

The first is the method of reading alien thoughts which even conflict with the Scriptures into the Bible (eisegesis) and then -- now with biblical sanction – read it from the Bible again (exegesis). The intention of the early Biblicist Christian philosophers often was not wrong, for in this way they could show their pagan contemporaries that the Bible also contains (good) philosophy. “We do not believe it because you preach it, but we know it from God's Word” (sic!). Vollenhoven resumes:

In such cases, one attempted therefore to biblicistically derive one’s entire philosophy from the Bible. However, in the meantime one had introduced a certain philosophy into the Bible and imagined that Scripture now sanctioned it! (Vollenhoven, 2005a:62.)

This kind of Biblicism is evident in Thomas’s exegesis in the SCG of numerous passages from the Scriptures and is still fashionable today, even among Reformed theologians.

#### ***4.3.2 Paradox***

The second method of synthesis on the face of it does not seem to be accommodation but eventually still results in it. Above (2.3) we said that Thomas met with this method (among the Averroists) but rejected it. This was the method of paradox, which accepted a

double truth, consisting of both the pagan philosophy as die revelation of Scripture – even though there was the awareness that these two are irreconcilable. On reading someone like Tertullian (usually regarded as the father of this approach), one soon discovers that he did not succeed in keeping apart his understanding of the Bible and pagan philosophy – the latter undoubtedly defiling the former.

#### 4.3.3 *Two realm doctrine*

As we mentioned above (cf. 3.1) from approximately 1255 already Thomas accepted the method of nature and grace which according to Vollenhoven (2005a;65) had originated as early as the Synod of Orange (529 AD). One could say that this approach was a middle-of-the-road solution between the all too easy *reconciliation* between the Bible and Greek philosophy by the Biblicists (on the one hand) and the *tension* between them as presented by the paradoxical philosophers (on the other hand). According to Thomas one had to adhere to both the *unity and the difference* between pagan philosophy and God's revelation.

According to the nature–grace scheme the relationship between pagan philosophy and Christian faith was therefore not paradoxical. The former was a *forerunner* or *threshold* to the latter's *perfection*. An age-old heathen dualism between the profane and the sacred is thus accepted here and used as a solution.

In this way Thomas could attempt to reconcile two spheres of knowledge (nature and grace) and two ways of knowing (reason and faith). “Nature” here represents all of life in this world as seen in the light of heathen philosophy, that is without God's Word, the ecclesiastical offices or the sacraments. “Grace” on the other hand means the preaching of the Word, fulfilling the ecclesiastical offices and taking the holy sacraments.

If one expresses this in the form of an image, one could say that this view supposes a kind of two-storey in reality (nature being the lower storey and grace the first floor). Or that Thomas wanted to examine reality with double-focused glasses all the time.

#### ***4.4 Nature and grace in the SCG***

The doctrine of nature-grace emerges in the SCG particularly in Thomas's anthropology. In Book 3 he deals with the fact that a human being cannot reach its highest goal without grace. Amongst other things he says:

... the end to which man is directed by the help of divine grace is above human nature.

Therefore, some supernatural form and perfection must be superadded to man whereby he may be ordered suitably to the aforesaid end. (IIIb, 232)

The doctrine of grace as a *donum supperadditum* (an added gift) clearly emerges from this.

##### ***4.4.1 Grace and faith***

Coupled with grace goes faith:

... to man, in order that he may attain his ultimate end, there is added a perfection higher than his own nature, namely, grace, as we have shown. Therefore, it is necessary that, above man's natural knowledge, there should also be added to him a knowledge which surpasses natural reason. And this is the knowledge of faith, which is of the things that are not seen by natural reason (IIIb, 236).

In Book 4 it becomes clear why grace and faith has to be *added* to the structure of a human being before he can reach his highest goal. "... because that nature has been stripped of that help of grace which had been bestowed on it in the first parent to pass on to his descendants along with the nature". (IV, 221). Afterwards he says "... that good of nature which grace added over and above nature could be removed by the sin of our first parent". Thomas emphasises that the first human being already had the gift of grace *before* the fall and that after the fall he was deprived of this gift. (Cf. IV, 223).

#### 4.4.2 *Two separate domains*

From this it is clear that in the work of Thomas we find approximately the same idea regarding a human being that we find in the statement of the Synod of Orange (529 AD). By virtue of his creation a human being is structurally divided into a *domain* of nature and a *domain* of grace. At the fall only the grace is lost. By means of the deliverance by Christ it is added again to a human being so that he can reach his highest goal.

Kok (1998:105) is of the opinion that the nature–grace theme emerged most distinctly in the theology and philosophy of Thomas. Therefore to this day it remains typical of Thomistic thinking (with modifications of course). The natural human being, according to this, did not fall radically into sin, for his rational nature remained unblemished. This applies to all human beings. However, naturally a human being does not progress far enough but needs grace as a means to perfection. In contrast to the doctrine of paradox Thomas teaches that grace does not *conflict* with or *rejects* nature, but merely *perfects* it.

### **5. An appraisal**

Various points of critique can be levelled at the nature–grace scheme of Thomas.

#### **5.1 *It is not biblically founded***

*Before* the fall it is impossible to speak of grace in the sense used by the Scriptures. Grace is the favour shown to a human being by God. Of this one can only speak *after* the fall, because before the fall the relationship between God and human beings was still good. Therefore grace does not stand opposite/above nature (as Thomas says) but opposite the wrath of God. Grace is not the antipode of sin either, but grace towards sin means forgiveness. As on God's side grace is the opposite of wrath, on the side of a human being forgiven sin stands over against sin which is still held against him (cf. Vollenhoven, 2011:87).

Aertsen (1991:116) rightly describes the difference between the view that Rome and the Reformation has of nature and grace as follows:

...grace, according to Thomas, is a perfection, elevating a human being above its own nature to a supernatural state. Human nature is such that a person cannot of its own accord complete the *conversion* to the origin. The infusion of divine grace is required. According to the Reformation, grace must first and foremost be related to sin, that is, to *aversion* with God. Grace is to be understood as the remission of sins by which people are restored into fellowship with God. To the Reformers, grace is not the *elevation* of human nature but its *restoration* and liberation.

### ***5.2 It conflicts with God's sovereignty over the whole of life***

Because reason to Thomas is the highest authority in the domain of nature, while the authority of the Bible – and God Himself – is restricted to the sphere of faith, church and theology, it conflicts with the distinctly biblical idea of God's sovereignty over his *whole* creation, Christ's kingship over the entire life and the Scriptural idea that his kingdom is all-encompassing. In the work of Thomas God's kingdom is narrowed down to ecclesiastical life. And the redemptive work of Christ is also restricted to our "spiritual" life – it is not needed for natural, everyday life.

### ***5.3 It implies a confusion of structure and direction***

The fact that Thomas sees nature and grace as two *spheres* or *domains*, therefore indicates that in his work there is a confusion between the (ontic) *structure* of a human being and the (religious) *direction* of good or evil. He attempted to *localise* the twofold direction in the life of a human being to two spheres, namely that of nature (the less good) and that of grace (the obviously good). In this way the religious antithesis between evil and good is sought in the wrong places. Politics, labour, science et cetera belong to the natural sphere and are therefore "neutral" domains. In contrast ecclesiastical life would obviously be

good, to the glory of God. Over against this we have to state that good/evil are not that easily localised. The religious direction influences *all* structures of reality from the human heart.

#### ***5.4 It entails an inherent dualism***

Since it is impossible to unite two conflicting religious directions – that of a pagan Greek and of God's Word – Thomas could not prevent a deep-seated dualism or disunity in his philosophy. Underlying the apparent unity he did effect, the tension (seen distinctly by paradoxical scholars) could never really be evaded. A synthetic philosophy is not sustainable!

Venter (s.a.: 73,74) therefore says that no true synthesis is possible between non-Christian and Christian religious motives. Due to an inherent dialectic tension the two poles (the Christian and the non-Christian) drift further and further apart and eventually once more (as in the beginning) antithetically stand opposite to one another. According to him even Thomas's greatest effort failed.

#### ***5.5 It does not prevent mutual influence***

Neither could Thomas in his philosophy succeed in upholding the purity and authority of God's revelation in opposition to pagan philosophy. The heathen philosophy (in the domain of nature) thoroughly influenced his so-called Christian, holy or supernatural theology (in the domain of grace). Instead of "Christianising" Aristotle, the message of the Bible was "aristotelised".

#### ***5.6 It has enormous implications***

The nature-grace approach in itself already bore the seed which would assist secularisation. In other words to live part of one's life as if God and his commands were irrelevant. Up until approximately the sixteenth century the powerful Roman Catholic church could, however, ward off the tension between nature and grace – even by using violence. But

during the Renaissance this age-old union was shattered. Nature was emancipated from its enslavement to the supernatural and the former so-called Christian West began secularising.

Venter (s.a.: 73-75) describes the situation as follows: The *Christian* culture of unity to which Thomas aspired, was at most an *ecclesiastical* culture of unity which was upheld only by the authority of the pope. Outside the specifically ecclesiastical domain Medieval “Christianity” never was more than a label which represented ecclesiastical sanction. As long as the church (the sacred) still held sway over the state (the secular) – even though it was a struggle that lasted for centuries – the semblance of a Christian society was maintained. But when (from the end of the Middle Ages and afterwards) the overarching authority of the church was no longer recognised, only the profane, secular domain remained – the semblance of Christianity just disappeared.

### ***5.7 Contemporary theological thinking still infected by it***

The tragedy is not only that Thomas could not foresee that his dual philosophy and double normativity would eventually lead to irreligious secularism. An even greater tragedy is that contemporary Christians – after seven centuries – still do not understand the great risk of such a way of thinking about the world. (They therefore look for the cause of secularisation of life somewhere *outside* their own faith and life in the church.)

On closer analysis numerous theologies – the Protestant too – are still consciously or unconsciously prisoners of this age-old nature–grace dualism – it is accepted as obvious without criticism.

Do I mean that Protestants and Reformed theologians do not differ from the Roman Catholic followers of Thomas? Yes and no.

Yes, because they still have not overcome the dualism of Thomas. The fact that they usually emphasise only the Word, grace and faith often indicates that they emphasise the one pole of the basic dualism – without rejecting the pole of nature.

No, because confessional, dogmatic and ecclesiastical differences between Roman Catholic and Protestants do exist (cf. e.g. their differences on the sacraments). But this does not exclude the existence of deeper common lifeviewish-philosophical dualism among both these two groups.

### ***5.8 It also is present in ecclesiastical life***

However, the same dangerous virus is also present in the blood of millions of ministers, pastors and ordinary church members. Due to this they lead a schizophrenic existence between things or domains (the “spiritual” sphere) which they regard as obviously “Christian” (e.g. reading the Bible and going to church) and other spheres (e.g. their professions) which are supposed to be more or less “neutral” and for which the redemption of Christ is not that important.

This attitude is reinforced nowadays by the false distinction between the so-called private and public life. In the former religious convictions are still tolerated, but in the latter they are banned – there the secularist religion must prevail.

Kok rightly remarks (1998:109) that, unless Christianity gets rid of the poison of Thomas’s nature–grace view “... the Christian community will continue to become increasingly impotent and irrelevant”. This statement is increasingly proved to be true in present-day South Africa as well.

## **6. Conclusion and looking ahead**

Vollenhoven (2011:75,76) warns that one should not fight a synthesis philosopher – and this would also apply to Thomas – as if he thought in a purely heathen way, for then one’s critique becomes unfair and one does an injustice to such a Christian. Greek-Roman-

Hellenistic philosophy was pagan, but not the Christian synthesis thinking of the Church Fathers and the Middle Ages. A Christian philosopher should therefore oppose the pagan philosophy much more severely than the synthesis philosophy.

Simultaneously Vollenhoven says that synthesis philosophy is much more hazardous to a Christian since it usually cannot be recognised as distinctly as full-blooded heathen or secular thinking. We hope that this article has spelled out the risk of synthesis in the work of Thomas: It had a decisive influence on the normative direction of his philosophy.

The basic *direction* of Thomas's philosophy has become clear. Due to his accommodation (synthesis thinking) of especially the religiously alien Greek philosophy (of Aristotle) he could no longer – though he did not realise this himself – point a clear, unambiguous biblical *direction* for life in its *entirety*. His answer to the extremely important normative question: “How *should* one live?” cannot satisfy a human being who is faithful to the Bible.

The next article deals with a second fundamental (structural) philosophical question: “Of what does reality consist?” It also builds on this article, for it will become evident that neither did Thomas, due to his synthesis thinking, give the rightful place to the independence of God's law owed to it according to the Scriptures – while it points the direction for our entire life.

## Chapter 2

### THE IDEA OF LAW AS A KEY TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE CATHOLIC

#### “DOCTOR COMMUNIS”

*The doctor communis, Thomas Aquinas’ (1224/25–1274), philosophy has already been interpreted and reinterpreted in the past in many different ways by both Catholics and Protestants. The present effort is aware of the danger of trying to explain a philosopher’s or theologian’s conception from one single or leading idea, and to reduce the rest of his/her thinking to such a central motive. I am, however, of the opinion that one’s idea about law and normativity does play an important contributing role in her/his whole system of thought. Therefore this chapter (following the previous, introductory one on the basic religious direction of Aquinas’ philosophy) investigates Aquinas’ view of law as a kind of steel structure which keeps together, determines and explains other aspects of his philosophy and theology in his Summa Contra Gentiles. With this “key” the rest of his complicated thought may be “unlocked”. In summary his idea of law boils down to the following: The laws exist (1) prior to creation (as archetypes) in the mind of God, (2) they were created by God into the cosmos, and (3) the human mind can contain them after abstracting them from creation.*

*The investigation develops as follows: (1) It first explains how the law exists (as essence – or pure form) in God since He is regarded to be essence or law, He is therefore the absolute truth. (2) Secondly, it is indicated how the law and the cosmos (subjected to God’s laws) are not clearly distinguished either but confused in Aquinas’ thinking. The law (viewed as a “thing”) is “cosmologised”. This is evident from Aquinas’ use of concepts like exemplar, similitude, ratio and verbum. (3) Thirdly, his hierarchical view of the cosmos, derived from Aristotle, is also based on a pyramidal view of law. (4) The conclusion explains the writer’s own philosophical point of departure. In the place of Aquinas’ hierarchical ontology,*

*implying only a relative difference between God, his law and his creation, and as a consequence a primarily ontic relationship between God and creation, the writer proposes a radical ontic distinction between them, as well as a close religious relationship.*

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## **1. Introduction:**

By way of introduction we bring the following to the reader's attention: (1) A painting which reflects the direction of Thomas's philosophy; (2) the fact that – in spite of his synthesis philosophy – his intention was to think as a Christian; (3) a possible key to his worldview; (4) a remark on the sources to be used; (5) the further lay-out of this chapter.

In the previous introductory chapter the focus was mainly on the basic religious-normative direction of Thomas's philosophy. First something more on this issue before coming to the second important question which every philosopher has to answer, namely how reality is structured. It will become clear that, while structure (how what *is* is viewed) and direction (what *ought* to be) is closely related, they should at the same time be clearly distinguished.

### ***1.1 Thomas's synthesis***

What was said in the previous chapter, is visually emphasised in a painting by Francesco Traini dating from 1344 (cf. Van den Berg, 1958 opposite title page for a reproduction). The following scene is depicted. Thomas sits in the middle with a wide circle around him and rays of light shooting out in all directions from the four books he is holding. The top one of the four books is the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) and the other three possibly his *Summa Theologiae* (i.e. both his main philosophical and theological works). Above him and on both sides are the individuals who inspired him to write these books. Directly above Thomas (in the middle) Christ appears. To the left and right above him are Moses, Paul and the four evangelists with their gospels. To the right of Thomas stands Aristotle and to his left Plato

each with a book. Directly under his feet the conquered Averroës appears and to the left and right of this two groups of theologians and philosophers are portrayed, praising Thomas.

This painting (on the altar of the Dominican church of St. Catherine in Pisa in Italy) in a striking manner shows how Thomas was inspired by both the Bible and Greek philosophy and attempted to effect a synthesis between the two.

### ***1.2 Still a Christian scholar***

In spite of his synthesis thinking, we may not forget that Thomas was a devout Christian and that his intentions were honest. For instance, at the beginning of the SCG (1,62) he writes the following:

... in the name of the divine mercy, I have the confidence to embark upon the work of a wise man, even though this may surpass my powers, and I have set myself the task of making known, as far as my limited powers allow, the truth that the Catholic faith professes, and of setting aside the errors that are opposed to it. To use the words of Hilary: “I am aware that I owe this to God as the chief duty of my life, that my every word and sense may speak of Him”.

### ***1.3 A possible key to his ontology***

Apart from the fact that every philosopher should answer the question how a human being *should* live and think (the religious-normative direction), he/she should also have to answer the question as to *what exists*, what reality includes. Dealing with this constitutes a philosopher’s ontology.

How Thomas answered this question will now be dealt with in part and more extensively in a following (third) chapter. Against the broad background of his complete conception we here highlight only his idea of law. This is done because a person’s view of the law in a crucial way determines the direction of his thinking. The author regards Thomas’s specific view of

the law as a crucial element of his philosophy and as a key to understanding his philosophical and theological system. In this respect I propose a different perspective than for instance, the analysis by Aertsen (1982 and 1991) who presents the idea of a cycle as the central motive in Thomas's philosophy. I am aware of the risk attached to efforts to explain a scholar's philosophy in the light of a single, central, guiding idea – especially when the rest of his philosophy is reduced to it. Nevertheless I am of the opinion that a philosopher's idea of law plays a significant role in his/her whole system. It is therefore used here as a “key” – not the only possible one – in an effort to “open up” the complicated philosophy of Thomas.

#### **1.4 Sources**

As in the previous chapter we here limit reference to secondary sources as much as possible, seeing that we want to listen primarily to Thomas himself. For the original Latin text of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* an edition of 1935 was used (cf. S. Thomae Aquinatis, 1935). The English translation of this work, quoted here, is the Doubleday edition (cf. Thomas Aquinas, 1955-1957). The citation reference is first made in Roman numbers to the specific book of the SCG and then in Arabic numbers to the page numbers of this translation (e.g. II, 120). Since book 3 was translated in two parts, they are referred to as IIIa and IIIb. In this contribution the author builds on previous research (cf. Van der Walt, 1968 and 1974) – with corrections and new insights.

#### **1.5 Lay-out**

The investigation proceeds as follows: (1) First Thomas's (dualist) God-cosmos philosophy is dealt with; then (2) his view of God as law is explained; (3) how he turns the cosmos into law (in concepts like *exemplar*, *similitudo*, *ratio* and *verbum*); (4) his hierarchical ontology derived from Aristotle, and (5) an explanation of the author's own point of departure. Instead of a dualist and hierarchical ontology which only permits a *relative distinction* between God

and his creation and regards the relationship between God and his creation as something *ontic*, the author proposes a *radical ontic distinction* between God, his creation and his law for creation with simultaneously a *close religious relationship* between them.

## **2. A cosmological and dualist ontology**

According to Thomas theology studies God and philosophy merely studies creation. So his thinking is purely cosmological (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a:415) and confines Scriptural Revelation to the creation, fall and redemption of the cosmos. What then about God? He is regarded in by Thomas (in his natural theology) as the Creator and (in his supernatural theology) as the Redeemer of creation.

### ***2.1 One reality divided into two***

Actually Thomas recognised only one existence or reality. As a Christian, however, he could not be a monist (it easily leads to pantheism) but assumes an ontic dualism (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a: 415). In the Greek philosophy of Aristotle it meant that a distinction was made between a transcendent part (the deity) and non-transcendent part (the cosmos) of one reality. Stated in Christian terminology, however, Thomas designates the two components as God and creation. But if God and creation are taken together in one concept of existence, then the radical (ontological) distinction between them can no longer be maintained. As will become evident later, this has far-reaching consequences for the rest of Thomas's philosophy and theology.

### ***2.2 The law disappears in God and cosmos but nevertheless remains determinative***

If Thomas recognises only one reality (with two "levels") what did he do with biblical revelation, namely that God subjected all of creation to his laws?

Thomas does have knowledge of the fact that God subjected his creation to his ordinations (a third reality according to the Scriptures), but in his philosophy in the SCG justice is not done

to the independent character of God's laws. Therefore one has to analyse his idea of God and his view of the cosmos to trace his hidden idea of law which – remarkably enough – determines his idea of God and cosmos. In what follows his idea of God and the cosmos is not treated in detail, but mainly to find out how Thomas regarded God's law.

### **3. God as law**

Below follow some glimpses of Thomas's idea of God from which it clearly transpires that he does not make a clear distinction between God (the transcendent) and his law – God is made into a kind of law. What is more: God becomes a law unto Himself, He is subjected to his own law.

First it is pointed out (cf. SCG, Book I, Ch. 13) that Thomas's natural idea of God is fraught with the thoughts on how Aristotle described his own deity, amongst others as the first (non-caused) cause, the first (immovable) mover of all non-transcendent things (cf. Den Otlander, 1965). One is simply amazed at the fact that Thomas could think that two such diverging and conflicting ideas on god/God – a pagan and a biblical one – could be reconcilable.

Although we will not deal with it here, Thomas's Christian idea of God (which is dealt with in his supernatural or holy theology, cf. Persson, 1957) is not devoid of Aristotelian influences either. As in the case of his natural or philosophical theology (in the SCG) passages from the Scriptures are read from an Aristotelian perspective, also in the case of the *sacra doctrina* (in the *Summa Theologiae*).

Note further that Thomas attempts to analyse or fathom God in a scientific way (as the highest part of a hierarchy of being). Such a theo-ontology not only is in principle impossible, but reveals a severe degree of intellectual arrogance. For to an insignificant human being the

true God is unfathomable. Furthermore it leads to speculation – as clearly emerges from the following.

### ***3.1 God is pure act***

In God, according to Thomas, there is nothing potential: “God has no admixture of potency but is pure act” (I, 101). For this view he calls upon the authority of Aristotle who spoke of his deity as the *actus purus*. That God is pure act, however does not mean that He is changeable. He is “absolutely immutable” (I, 106). Note the link with Aristotle’s monarch as the “immovable mover” of everything.

Since in Aristotle’s philosophy the potential is linked with matter and the actual with form, the next step is also understandable:

### ***3.2 God is pure form***

In chapter 17 of Book I Thomas argues that there is no matter in God, for “Whatever matter is, it is in potency” (I, 101). Between God and the *materia prima* there is a radical difference: “... God and prime matter is distinguished: one is pure act, the other pure potency and they agree in nothing” (I, 103).

If God is pure act there cannot be any composition or compound in Him either (Chapter 18), nor can He be a body (Chapter 20) or even have the form of a body – for He is only pure form (Chapter 27).

“Form” to Thomas is none other than law. If it is kept in mind that the law has the character of being enforced, of laying down boundaries, the following statements by Thomas clearly reveals that in his opinion the form has the character of law: “... in things composed of matter and form, the form has the character of a term”. Later: “... matter, as that which is determined, and form as that which determines” (II, 324). Or: “It is the function of a form to

limit” (IIIa 275). Elsewhere: “... the form of a body is not the being itself, but a principle of being” (I, 133. Also compare I, 129).

So if God is pure form, He also is pure law. Thomas expresses it even more explicitly by saying:

### **3.3 God is his being**

“God is his essence, quiddity or nature” (I, 116). The concept “being” (with which *essentia*, *quidditas* and *natura* can be translated) had been associated with the law all through history up to Thomas. (It is the same as the concept *ousia* in Aristotle.)

In creatures there is a difference between their existence (*esse*) and essence (*essentia*) but not in God (cf. Chapter 22). Therefore God is just being or law. We could therefore speak of Thomas’s god as a “law god”. In saying this we have already stated the heart of Thomas’s idea of God. But there is more.

### **3.4 God’s being is intellect and will**

God’s being is the same as his intellect. For instance, Thomas says: “... divine understanding is His essence” (I, 173). Also compare Chapter 46: “... the divine intellectual operation is God’s essence” (I, 175); “... the divine essence, which is the intelligible species by which the divine intellect understands, is absolutely identical with God and is also absolutely identical with His intellect” (I, 176) and ... “His knowledge is His essence” (I, 197).

Elsewhere Thomas says: “... the understanding of God is His substance” (I, 204): “... the divine intellect and will are of an equal simplicity, for both are the divine substance ...” (I, 250). *Substantia* is the Latin translation of the Greek *ousia*, so that in these two statements Thomas says the same as in the preceding. God’s being therefore also is his will. (Compare Chapter 73 *et seq.* “... God’s will ... is His very essence” (I, 243). So the will of God also is connected with his being (law).

Note how Thomas ascribes human features (of will and intellect) to God. However, elsewhere it becomes evident that God's intellect or reason is more important than his will. Thomas holds an intellectualistic idea of God over against a voluntaristic one.

### ***3.5 God is the highest good and absolute truth***

In Book I, Chapter 38 Thomas states that God is not only good, but that He is goodness itself. "He is good essentially" (I, 153. Note the "essentially"). He is the highest good, the universal good (I, Chapter 41). The universal good indicates that the good here has to be seen as law. Thomas identifies the universal and the law.

In Chapter 60-62 Thomas argues the same regarding the truth and concludes: "The divine truth, therefore, is the first, highest and most perfect truth" (I, 208).

The fact that Thomas accepts the three ideas (of the true, good and beautiful) in God (*ante rem*) indicates the Platonising trait in his philosophy in the SCG. To Plato the three ideas were the laws for visible reality. But Thomas does differ with Plato (his conception is not Platonic but Platonising) since he sees the ideas not the way Plato does as things existing separately (Plato's realism). In the very last phase of his philosophical development Plato derived the duality of foreground and background from still more primary principles. This more primary principle in the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Plotinus became located in the deity (*Hen*). In the synthesis philosophy of Augustine the deity became the God of the Scriptures. Meanwhile the theme of apriority had originated (during the Hellenistic philosophy) and was also adopted by followers of Plato. The result was that the ideas were now also aprioritised *in mente Dei*, in die knowing spirit of God.

Thomas's philosophy is similar to the Neo-Platonism of Augustine in that he places the ideas in the intellect of God. However, he goes further: The laws are not only *in God*, God *Himself* is law. And He also creates his laws *into* the cosmos.

#### **4. The cosmos made into law**

Thomas's idea of God in turn also provides the key to understanding his idea of the cosmos. The laws for creation are not only in God, but the law of God is also created into cosmic things. This becomes clearly evident from, amongst others, the concepts *exemplar*, *similitudo*, *ratio* and *verbum in the SCG*.

##### **4.1 "Exemplar"**

*To Thomas God's being or law is the exemplar* of all things: "His essence, being one and simple, is the exemplar of all manifold and composite things" (I, 200, 201). "His essence is the exemplar of all things" (I, 249). Elsewhere: "The form through which God produces the creatures is an intelligible form in Him" (II, 141). That is why he can say God has "...the proper form of a plant ... God has the proper form of animal and so forth" (I, 191).

##### *4.1.1 God encompasses everything*

Therefore God's being encompasses (the laws or forms of) all things ... "God embraces in Himself all creatures ... in a simple mode ..." (II, 142). In his intellect (which is the same as his being) God has "... the perfections of all things" (I, 172). Therefore he can also say: "God's intellect is the principle of the production of creatures" (II, 140). And:

Since ... the proper exemplar of one thing is distinguished from the proper exemplar of another thing, and distinction is the source of plurality, we must observe in the divine intellect a certain distinction and plurality of understood exemplars, accordingly that which is in the divine intellect is the proper exemplar of diverse things (I, 191).

However, this does not mean that there is a plurality or composition in the divine simplicity (*simplicitas*) (cf. 1, 250). One therefore has to represent it in this way that God, apart from his own (peculiar) law, also has in Himself laws for every particular thing. These laws

Thomas calls exemplars. The exemplars thus are not identical to the law-god but are implied in the god-law. As a result of the exemplars being law, there is a similarity to the god-law. Because of the fact that they are not the same as the law-god, there is a difference.

#### 4.1.2 *God is omniscient*

Since God contains the exemplars of the things, He can also be omniscient, for by knowing his own being, He also knows created things: “By knowing Himself, God knows whatever proceeds from Him ...” (I, 182). “... the divine intellect knows all things by knowing its own essence” (I, 199. Also compare p. 225). “God knows other things by His essence as through a certain exemplary means” (I, 228). Further: “... the divine essence is the principal object known by God and in this object ... all others are known” (I, 234).

Therefore it is possible for God to know beforehand things which do not yet exist, since their forms are present in Him from eternity. Thomas explains this with an image:

... the artisan knows things through his art, even those things that have not yet been fashioned, since the forms of his art flow from his knowledge to the external matter for the constitution of the artifacts. Hence, nothing forbids that there be in the knowledge of an artisan forms that have not yet come out of it. Thus, nothing forbids God to have knowledge of the things that are not (I, 217).

This train of thought has significant implications. Amongst other things it means that God determines everything in creation beforehand. Since He Himself is confused with his laws, however, He Himself is not *above* the law, but *subject* to his own law. He therefore also has to act according to this law in his providence (cf. IIIa, Ch. 64) and election (cf. IIIb, Ch. 163). These speculative ideas run from Thomas through the history of Christianity (in the form of a so-called eternal, divine decree on predestination) to the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) and even up to today with some Reformed theologians.

#### 4.1.3 A deterministic idea of God and the reaction to it

It should be kept in mind that everything also reaches its destiny according to the law or *exemplar* which exists from all eternity in God and which he has created into everything.

Venter (1988:182) therefore writes that Thomas

... by means of his exemplarism came to the conclusion that God knows everything in their exemplars in Himself and by this therefore determines the contingent future events. Not only can this theory hardly accommodate the biblical notion of the personal relationship between God and human beings; it also entails complete determinism.

Summed up, both God and the created things are therefore bound to the eternal archetypes/exemplars/laws in God's mind. No wonder that already Thomas's contemporaries but also the succeeding generations rebelled violently against such determinism which abolishes human responsibility.

Ockham, for instance, later says that it is unacceptable to think that God who made everything – including the laws – may be made subject to his own laws. However, in reaction to the determinism of Thomas he lapses into an arbitrary (voluntarist) concept of God.

Reformational philosophy has always taught that the law is not *in* God (Thomas), neither exists *apart* from God (Ockham) but that, although God is “above” his law (in this respect Ockham was right), He still is faithful to it and maintains it (in this respect Ockham's ideas are rejected). Therefore there is a clear distinction between God and his laws which applies to his creation.

A second core concept in Thomas's idea of law is:

#### 4.2 “*Similitudo*”

Thomas uses *exemplar* and *similitudo* to denote the same phenomenon. For instance, he says:

... whatever being a thing has God knows through his essence. For his essence can be represented by many things that are not, nor will be, nor even were. His essence is likewise the likeness (*similitudo*) of the power of every cause, through which effects pre-exist in their causes. And the being that each thing has in itself comes from the divine essence as from its exemplary source (I, 220).

#### 4.2.1 “*Similitudo*” and “*forma*”

The *similitudo* is identical to the Aristotelian forms: “... things are likened through their diverse forms to the one simple reality that God is” (I, 149). Elsewhere: “... all things are like God ... so far as they have forms ...” (II, 130).

For this reason the intellectual creatures are nearest to God “... an intellectual creature chiefly becomes like God by the fact that it is intellectual, for it has this sort of likeness over and above what other creatures have, and this likeness includes all others” (IIIa, 99). Once again a clear indication of Aquinas’ inheritance of Greek intellectualism and the subsequent influence thereof also on Reformed Scholasticism.

#### 4.2.2 *The human being looks like God*

If Genesis 1:26 reveals that God made human beings in his image (*imago*) and likeness (*similitudo*) it also points, according to Thomas, to the divine form in the human being (cf. I, 138). Therefore he says: “... God can be seen in His substance in this life, but only as in a mirror ... this mirror, which is the human mind, reflects the likeness of God” (IIIa, 161). So with respect to his intellect, a human being exhibits the image of God. This implies an intellectualist anthropology.

This is the reason Thomas can also say: “Likeness is a certain kind of relation” (II, 42). It is as a consequence of the relation between the forms which are in God and in the creatures that there is a likeness between God and his creatures.

#### *4.2.3 God does not look like his creatures*

Since a creature owes his likeness to God (because the form that God creates into him) it may only be said that the creature shows the likeness of God but not the other way round, namely that God bears a likeness to the creature. “... a form of a lower grade cannot by acting extend its likeness to a higher grade; rather, the higher form by acting can extend its likeness to a lower grade ...” (I, 216).

This brings us to the third important concept in Thomas’s idea of law:

### **4.3 “Ratio”**

#### *4.3.1 The same as likeness*

The word *ratio* (= reason) was mostly translated into English as “model”. Sometimes it also is translated as “likeness”. So for instance in the following: “... the divine essence ... is the proper model (*propria ratio*) and likeness (*similitudo*) of diverse things” (I, 189; so also I, 190). Elsewhere: “... all things in a certain manner pre-exist in Him through their proper models (*proprias rationes*)” (I, 246).

#### *4.3.2 The same as exemplar*

From this it emerges clearly that by *ratio* Thomas most probably means the same as by *exemplar* or *similitudo*. Book 3, Chapter 47 where he calls these *rationes* eternal because they exist in God, is particularly revealing. Therefore he can write: “Law is a rational plan of divine providence” (IIIb, 124). No wonder that the idea of God’s providence plays such an important part in Thomas’ thinking – the third book of the SCG (dealing with this) is the most voluminous of all four books.

### 4.3.3 A mirror image of the Trinity

However, Thomas takes it further. Things not only look like the god-law in general but also like the three persons in the divine being. When he deals with the Trinity in Book 4, he says that the image of God in a human being is the image of the triune God (cf. IV, 146). Further he is consistent in that he teaches: “One also finds in other things a likeness of the divine Trinity ...” (IV, 146). However, since God is not represented as clearly in the other (lower) things as in the human intellect, Thomas does not call them an image (*imago*) of God but only tracks (*vestigia*) of God: “Accordingly, by reason of the remote and obscure representation in irrational things, one speaks of the ‘vestige’ of the Trinity in them, not of the ‘image’; so we read in Job (11:7): ‘Thou wilt comprehend the steps of God’ ...” (IV, 146). Note that Thomas cannot help but read the Word of God from the perspective of his particular philosophy and here clearly reads his philosophy into the Bible (exigesis) in order – with biblical sanction – to read it out of God’s Word again (exegesis).

A last key concept which links up with the preceding three, and which further explains Thomas’s law-idea is:

### 4.4 “*Verbum*”

In Chapter 13 of Book 4 Thomas deals with the Son being the Word (*Verbum*) of God. He then makes the statement that there also are “words of the Word”: “Thus, then, not only is the conception of the divine intellect called a Word, which is the Son, but even the unfolding of the divinely conceived in exterior works is named the word of the Word” (IV, 96). “Necessary, then, the things made by God have pre-existed in the Word of God from eternity, immaterially, without any composition” (IV, 96). The essentiality of created things therefore exists particularly in one person of the Trinity (Christ).

In the following quotation the word *Verbum* is indeed connected with *exemplar en image*:

... the Word of God must be referred to the other things understood by God as *exemplar*, and must be referred to God Himself whose Word He is as *image*. Hence, one reads of the Word of God in Colossians (1:15) that He is “the image of the invisible God” (IV, 86).

So as Word Christ contains the essence of all things!

#### **4.5 “*Lex naturalis*” and “*lex divina*”**

The laws that God creates in the things, Thomas also calls the natural law (*lex naturalis*), while he calls the commandment of love the divine law (*lex divina*). (The study by Kuhlmann, 1912, in this respect still contains valuable information.) This once more proves his synthesis between preceding Greek philosophies and the Scriptures according to the method of nature and the supernatural.

### **5. A hierarchy of reality**

In the above it has already been seen that some things exhibit the image of God more than others, because the divine law is found more distinctly in them. The perfection of a creature, according to Thomas, depends on the extent to which it shows the image and traces of God.

#### **5.1 A pyramid of being**

Consequently Thomas’s doctrine of reality shows the image of a pyramid. The Being is construed (as in the work of Aristotle) hierarchically from the lower to the higher according to degrees of perfection. At the base of the pyramid there is *materia prima* and at the top God as pure form and highest being. Lovejoy (1973) calls it “the great chain of being”.

God as “super law” also is the yardstick for the degree of nobility or value of the lower things: “... the gradation of nobility and lowliness among all things is measured according to their nearness to and distance from God, Who is the peak of nobility” (I, 232). The other way

round: "... the nearer a body is to prime matter, the less noble it is, being more in potentiality and less in complete act" (II, 310).

The higher, the more divine the creatures are. Thomas says for instance about the separate substances (angels): "Now the higher the rank of a separate substance, the more is its nature like the divine; and thus it is less limited, inasmuch as it approaches nearer to the perfection and goodness of the universal being, enjoying, therefore, a more universal participation in goodness and being" (II, 333).

However, the lower, the further creatures are from God, the lesser they are in being: "The more a thing is from that which is a being by virtue of itself, namely, God, the nearer it is to non-being; so that the closer a thing is to God, the further is it removed from non-being" (II, 86).

Thomas's doctrine about being is like a stepladder with different rungs or like a chain the different links of which hold themselves together. "... the higher nature in its lowest part touches the lower nature in its highest part" (II, 313).

The matter in the higher thing becomes the form for the lower. Or the other way round: the form for the lower is the matter for the higher thing. So actually everything has a law-like nature. The only true subject which could exist for Thomas is the *materia prima* (because it cannot in turn become the form for something lower). This first matter is, however, something metaphysical, an abstraction. It does not exist, for "... matter exists only in potency, while form is that by which something is, since it is act" (II, 129).

## ***5.2 A pyramid of law***

Thomas's whole hierarchy of being therefore is none other than a hierarchy of law! Not only is God regarded as law, but also the angels (as separate intellectual substances) and the human being (in whom the intellect is compounded with matter).

Plato's laws (ideas and numbers themselves) existed in the intelligible world. But Thomas's laws lie in the world that can be observed by the senses. (The clear influence of Aristotle.) Whereas in Plato's realism we find laws that have been viewed as real things (the law has been cosmologised), in Thomas we find the opposite: things were turned into laws (the cosmos has been made into a law).

Summed up: (1) according to Aquinas the law for creatures exists *ante rem* (before the things) in God. (2) God creates these archetypes *in rebus* (into the cosmic things). (3) The law also exists by means of rational abstraction *post rem* (after the cosmic things) in the intellect of human beings. It is clear that when such a central position is assigned to the idea of the law, it will be determinative for the whole of Thomas's philosophy and theology.

### **5.3. Conclusion**

The conclusion from the above is that Thomas's ontology or doctrine of reality is narrowed down to a great extent to a kind of nomology (a view of the law). His philosophy tends towards nomism or an absolutisation of the idea of law.

As a result of this idea even the being of God is determined. Thomas turns God into a law-god. The same happens with the cosmos: He turns it into law-things.

## **6. The new interpretation**

First something in defence of my particular interpretation as opposed to another exegesis of Thomas's philosophy. Then a brief explanation of the author's own ontology from the perspective of which Thomas's law-ontology on the foregoing pages was assessed.

### **6.1 The author's own interpretation**

My interpretation of Thomas's philosophy differs from that of another scholar, namely Aertsen (1982, 1986, 1990 and 1991) who regards a cyclic motive as the main theme and key to Aquinas's philosophy. According to this view everything flows from God and also returns

to Him. Such a motive appears to be solidly biblical in the light of Romans 11 verse 36: “For from him and through him and to him are all things”.

### 6.1.1 *The cyclic motive*

It is true that Thomas himself mentions this motive. For instance, he says (SCG II,46):

The effect is most perfect when it returns to its source; thus the circle is the most perfect of all figures, and circular motion the most perfect of all motions, because in their case a return is made to the starting point. It is therefore necessary that the creatures return to their principle in order that the universe of creatures may attain its ultimate perfection.

Aertsen (1990:86) claims that this cyclic motive also determines the structure of Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae*. Its first part deals with how all things come from God, while the second part describes the movement of reasonable creatures back to Him. According to Aertsen this is the consequence of the influence of the Neo-Platonic doctrine of participation (cf. Chapter 3).

Meijer (1944:55) indicated earlier that the SCG is the most important source of this doctrine of the “cycle of the things” (from God and unto God) in the work of Thomas. In the first three books of the SCG it is worked out in such detail that one could see in it the keynote or great synthesis of what the *doctor communis* as philosopher teaches on the relationship between Creator and creature.

### 6.1.2 *Two underlying reasons*

I would like to differ with the interpretations of Meijer and Aertsen. In my opinion this cyclic motive is not the main key to the philosophy of Thomas, but it is the *result* of his underlying view of the law which is much more basic. Everything is “from God” since He creates the *exemplar*, *similitudo*, *ratio* or *verbum* from himself into the cosmic things. However,

everything also is “unto God” since these same exemplars, similitudes or rational germs which come from God, point back to Him.

Further I also connect this doctrine of a cycle (cf. Van der Walt, 1974:264-268) with Thomas’s doctrine of nature-grace (or the supernatural). Grace not only *perfects* nature (*gratia non tollit sed perfecit naturam*) but the natural itself *pursues* this perfection.

### 6.1.3 A natural desire for the supernatural

Thomas teaches that there is a natural longing for God in a human being (*homo insitus est desiderium naturale*). However, should one ask *why* it is that the natural longs for or pursues the supernatural, one once more has to consider Thomas’s law-idea: The law which God created into the things (*exemplar, similitudo* etc.) points back to their exemplars in God’s intellect.

About this doctrine of a *desiderium naturale* of Aquinas many questions may be asked. For instance (cf. Van der Walt, 1974:265): How can there in nature be an ontic pursuit of the supernatural, since such a pursuit would then no longer be purely natural? Formulated in a different way: To long for perfection, the natural has to know that it is imperfect. However, such a kind of knowledge supposes at least something of a supernatural nature.

The other way round the same applies: If nature is to be *perfected* and not *abolished* (as Thomas continuously emphasises) then even in the supernatural there must be something natural.

In modern times this issue sparked off no less than some sixty different interpretations among Neo-Thomists. It is not possible to go into this issue in further detail at this stage. Bastable (1947) is still one of the best sources to be consulted. He deals with Thomas’s view on p. 31 et seq. and on p. 83 he gives a schematic outline of the different later interpretations. Meijer (1940), too, thoroughly investigated the issue of the so-called natural longing for the

supernatural in the work of Thomas. He not only deals with Thomas's own view (p. 53-75) but subsequently also with those of various commentaries during the heyday of Scholasticism which attempted to elucidate this paradox in the philosophy of Aquinas. In addition he also discusses the "solution" by the twentieth-century Thomist scholar, Blondel.

## ***6.2 An alternative ontology***

The above critique of Thomas was given from the perspective of an alternative philosophical ontology.

Vollenhoven (2005b:14-15) puts the following three basic questions to the Scriptures: (1) Who is the Creator? (2) What is it that He created? (3) What is the limiting boundary as well as the bridge between them?

According to Vollenhoven the answer given by the Bible entails the following distinction between three realities:

(1) Holy Scripture unambiguously answers: "God". ...it never sees him as a regulative idea [i.e. law – BJvdW] or speculative concept [as in the work of Thomas – BJvdW] but always as the living God ... in short, the Sovereign in the absolute sense of the word (p. 14).

(2) The answer to the second question is determined by what was just found: That which is created is completely dependent on the Creator, that is to say, wholly subjected to his sovereign law, Word revelation and guidance (p. 14).

(3) One should understand 'limit' as something such that one can say that everything that stands on that side of this line is God and everything that lies on this side is created ... Now, this demarcation is the law of God, which is permanently posited by God for that which is created. For the only being who sovereignly gives laws to the cosmos and maintains them is God. On the other

hand, all that which is created is subjected to laws ... Accordingly it is impossible to mention anything divine that stands under the law or anything created that stands above the law (p. 14–15).

These concise words contain a fundamental critique of Thomas's philosophy. At the same time this is remarkable critique since Vollenhoven himself initially also thought on semi-Thomistic lines. (For details, cf. Tol, 2010.) It should be noted that such a view of the *ontological distinction* between God, law and creation according to Vollenhoven does not exclude their *being religiously connected*. (Cf. Vollenhoven, 2005b:77-79 on the nature of religion.)

In the work of Thomas one finds neither this clear *distinction* nor the correct *relationship*. The relationship between God and his creation is viewed by him as something *ontic* instead of *religious*. As will become evident from the next chapter, Thomas's incorrect ontological point of departure has implications for all other facets of his philosophy in the SCG.

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## Chapter 3

### AN ANALYSIS OF THE ONTOLOGY OF THE “SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES”

(1261-1264)

*From a Reformational perspective this chapter provides a critical appraisal of the view of reality (ontology) of the Summa Contra Gentiles, the main philosophical work of the famous medieval thinker, Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274). For centuries afterwards his ideas had a decisive influence, not only on Catholic philosophy and theology, but also on that of Reformed Orthodoxy or Scholasticism.*

*Due to the complex nature of his philosophy (it assimilated various ideas of previous centuries including the classic Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle) the different parts of the puzzle are separated and the following cluster of ideas in his ontology are described and evaluated.*

*Aquinas accepts a hierarchy of being from (1) pure matter (an abstraction) below to (2) all created things consisting of matter and form up to (3) God as pure form/essence/law.*

*In this one chain of being, consisting of interlocking form and matter, a dualistic distinction is made between a highest, transcendent part (God) and a non-transcendent (creation). In his philosophy Thomas confines himself to the existing creation (not its origin or genesis) which is predetermined by the exemplars in God (see previous chapter).*

*In the Contra Gentiles Thomas neither accepts individualism nor universalism, but thinks partially universalistic. However, he does not propose a horizontal type of partial universalism (the theory of macro-micro cosmos), but a vertical type (the form-matter theory), according to which the universal has a place above the individual. God, therefore, is also the most universal being for Aquinas.*

*Aquinas' dualistic distinction between God and creation (in one ontic chain of being) is further explained by two doctrines in his Summa: analogy and participation. According to the first, God and the world are simultaneously different and similar. According to the second, created beings do not only exit from and therefore resemble God, but also aspire to return to and participate in Him. The higher in the chain of being a creature is, the clearer its likeness to God and its participation in the divine nature.*

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## **1. Introduction: reference, focus, sources and lay-out**

By way of introduction it is explained (1) how this chapter refers to the previous two; (2) which aspect of Thomas's philosophy in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (abbreviated as SCG) will be investigated; (3) the sources to be used; as well as (4) how the investigation will proceed.

### **1.1 Reference**

Chapter 1 already motivated why studying the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (1223/5-1274) is still relevant today. It was explained how his SCG (ca. 1261-1264) originated as his main philosophical work. Subsequently the synthetic direction of his philosophy was investigated. Concerning the *structure* of his philosophy, Chapter 2 was devoted to the "heart" of it, namely his idea of law. His nomology was seen as a major key to his whole system, since the law exists before created things *in God*, is created *into the things* by God and also is present *in the human mind* by abstraction. (The fact that Thomas places the laws or archetypical ideas in the intellect of God, indicates the Platonising feature which is still typical of Thomas's Aristotle interpretation in the SCG. Cf. Vollenhoven, 2011:94).

### **1.2 Focus**

In this chapter the focus is on the cosmology of Thomas. This will be followed in the subsequent chapters by a contribution on his anthropology and epistemology, as well as a chapter on his doctrine of God's providence.

### **1.3 Sources**

As in the previous two chapters this one also links up with previous research (cf. Van der Walt 1968 and 1974) while new insights and sources are included as well. However, there is a minimum of reference to secondary sources, since the author wishes to hear Thomas himself and not the interpretation of others. For the original Latin text of the SCG an edition of 1935 was used (cf. S. Thomae Aquinatis, 1935). The English translation quoted in this chapter follows the Doubleday edition (cf. Thomas Aquinas, 1955-1957). The references given with the quotations are first to the specific book in Roman numerals followed by the page number(s) of the particular translation in Arabic numerals (e.g. I, 150). Since Book 3 of the SCG was translated in two parts, these are given as IIIa and IIIb.

### **1.4 Lay-out**

The following facets of Thomas's cosmology will be dealt with: (1) his hierarchical ontological thinking, (2) his purely cosmological philosophy, (3) his ontic dualism, (4) partial universalism, (5) analogy of being, and (6) participation (cf. Van der Walt, 1974:248-268). These facets together form like a magnet a cluster of ideas which attract and strengthen one another. (The way Thomas uses concepts like *universalia*, *analogia entis*, *participatio* and the like in his different works, can easily be looked up in the *Thomas Lexicon* by Schütz, 1895).

The first idea in this cluster is:

## **2. A hierarchical ontological philosophy**

Ontological thinking (from the Greek: *ontos* = *being* + *logos* = *philosophy*) attempts to fathom the being of existing things in a scientific way. However, the concept "being" which

the Greeks already turned into a philosophical term, should be handled with caution. It is a concept of appreciation – it indicates the real, best, highest existence, the true reality. (Non-being is its opposite). Therefore Thomas and many other Christian philosophers were of the opinion that calling God the highest “Being”, would show special deference to Him.

### ***2.1 Risks attached***

The risk attached to this is, however, that one could regard God as a part – albeit the highest part – of one being or reality. This is the reason why Reformational philosophers like Vollenhoven would not speak of a philosophical ontology which would include God. Of course Thomas tried to evade this risk by propagating a *hierarchy of being*. Even then, however, the difference between God and his creation remains merely one of relative degrees.

A hierarchy of being entails numerous other hazards, as for instance a high degree of rigidity: God determines (by way of divine exemplars in the created things) all of creation. A hierarchy of being also leads to a hierarchy of authority and power in church and society. It is supposed that God “delegates” his (nota bene: divine) authority to human beings. Or human authority is supposed to be “derived” from God’s authority. Such a view would mean that questioning human authority entails disobedience or rebellion against God Himself. As a consequence of Thomas’s hierarchy of being – making a merely relative distinction between God and man – he could not clearly distinguish between infallible divine authority and fallible human authority.

### ***2.2 God’s being to be fathomed***

Being (*ontos*) to Thomas is the most important thing to be known philosophically. His idea of God is theo-ontological – he even attempts to fathom God’s being in a theological and philosophical manner!

Venter (1988:158 et seq.) approaches the basic concepts of Thomas's ontology in detail from the perspective of the following four combinations: act-potential, form-matter, substance-accidence and essence-existence (also cf. Venter, 1985:11-12). However, I merely mention that Thomas holds a hierarchical ontology, an order of being which escalates from pure matter at the very bottom, via things consisting of both form and matter, to pure form at the top of the ladder (God).

### ***2.3 Relativism of being***

However, Venter rightly asks: "Does Thomas succeed in distinguishing between Creator and creation? Does not a division of being based on degree leads... to the radical difference between God and creature being gradually bridged so that God and matter are merely the two end points of one continuous line?" (Venter, 1988:162). Thomas himself realises the problem when he teaches that God *is* being, while creation only *has* being. But did he succeed in solving the problems implicated?

This brings us to a second aspect in the whole ontological cluster of Aquinas' philosophy:

## **3. Purely cosmological philosophy**

In created reality there is constancy and change, a static and a dynamic side. Certain things (as for instance God's ordinations and his central law of love) do not change. On the other hand creation also reflects development, progress, change, coming into being and passing away.

### ***3.1 Two viewpoints***

When a philosopher does not see the constant he/she is biased and easily lapses into relativism. However, he who emphasises the constant and regards change as merely secondary, holds a very rigid view of reality.

These different views are closely connected with the issue of origin. *Cosmogonic* thinking emphasised its *genetic* development. On the other hand, *purely cosmological* philosophy (or structural thinking) tried to limit the knowledge it pursued to the *existing*, more or less static universe. The latter view was also the one held by Thomas. (Cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a:415).

Various other elements of Thomas's philosophy would support and strengthen this static, pre-determined view of the universe. Among these were the following facets:

### ***3.2 The role of the idea of law***

Concerning his view of the universe it becomes evident that his idea of law played a crucial part. The exemplars, essences or archetypes (cf. previous chapters) *exist* since all eternity in God. (This is the reason why Thomas called them *rationes sempiternas*.) Thomas does not attempt to explain their origin or inception, but regards it as obvious as a result of his acceptance of a Neo-Platonic idea of law taken over from Augustine. That God created the things, and created them in such a way that they imitate or reflect God (as a consequence of the divine laws created into them), still does not give a *scientific* explanation of their coming into being. It is clear from Book II in which Thomas deals with his viewpoint on creation that he is not concerned with the *process* of creation but with the *product*.

Book III consists of three main parts. In Chapters 6-38 Thomas deals with the *origin*; in Chapters 39-45 with the *distinction* and in Chapters 46-101 with the *nature* of the creatures. The first main part of this book therefore does deal with the origin of things. However, it is not a *scientific* account of the coming into being of things. It merely departs from the Scriptural truth about creation. Thomas offers his own Aristotelian-coloured philosophical interpretation of what is given in the Scriptures.

Thomas is correct insofar as he only philosophises about the *existence* of creation and does not want to *speculate* on the issue of its *origin* – it should be accepted in faith. However, the

defect in his purely cosmological viewpoint is that in his philosophy he only has room for the (nomolised) universe. God is the object of study only in his sacred theology. My own view is that a truly Christian philosophy should not exclude acknowledgement of the existence of God.

### ***3.3 The light of the Scriptures for philosophy***

In his philosophy Thomas confines himself to the sphere of nature (or what he calls the “world”) and for this he regards three biblical facts of special significance, namely creation, sin and redemption. From the SCG it becomes evident that this perspective appears in the work of Thomas in the following order of importance: creation, redemption, fall.

In Book II he deals with creation – even though his doctrine of creation has been expressed in philosophical terms. In a part of Book IV he deals with Christ and the redemption of human beings by means of the sacraments and also the final deliverance at the resurrection. Thomas does not deal with the fall in a separate book or part of a book of the SCG, merely mentioning it in passing in a few instances. Mostly he does not speak about *sin* either but about *evil*.

The reason why the fall does not fill such an important part in the philosophy of Thomas has to be sought in the fact that he does not recognise the *radical* depravation of creation as a consequence of the fall. With the fall only the “supernatural part” of a human being was lost and this is restored as a supernatural gift on the merit of Christ. The domain of nature has, however, remained (to a great extent) untainted. The human mind was therefore, in Thomas’s opinion, not totally *obfuscated* by sin, but merely *weakened*.

### ***3.4 A philosophy of creation?***

One could, in the light of Thomas’s purely cosmological thinking, characterise his philosophy as a “philosophy of the creational idea”. Some commentators of his philosophy (cf. Van der Walt, 1968:78,79) therefore regard the idea of creation as the basic notion of his philosophy.

(In his theology he is primarily concerned with the Creator and in his philosophy with creation.)

In my own interpretation of Thomas his emphasis on the existing creation (as a product) is the consequence of his cosmological position regarding the issue of origin. It is just a facet of the cluster of his ontology and not the central idea. In my opinion, behind the emphasis laid by Thomas on the Creator and creation once again lies his idea of law. Thomas's Creator God is a Law-God – because creation lies locked up in Him as laws which have been reified (cf. Thomas's viewpoint of exemplars in the second chapter). The other way round, the universe constantly reminds us of its creational character – since it bears the image or vestiges of its Creator.

### ***3.5 A static view of creation***

While God's original creation was meant to develop and unfold, a purely cosmological viewpoint means a static view which depreciates these dynamics. It leaves no room for development and change but emphasises the eternally unchangeable versus the temporary (cf. Vollenhoven, 2000:330-332). The influence of the eternally static, immovable deity of Aristotle (who simultaneously directs creation) clearly emerges in the work of Aquinas.

### ***3.6 The positive side***

In spite of the above critique it should be pointed out that Aristotle's emphasis on visible reality (in contrast to Plato's emphasis on an invisible world of ideas) in another respect did have an influence to the good (cf. Hart, H. et al., 1974:85).

Thomas criticises the Neo-Platonic, Augustinian philosophers of his time for disregarding or disparaging creation and their resulting unworldly focus on God alone. On their part they blamed Thomas for being "worldly minded". Thomas distinguishes (in my opinion correctly)

between three meanings of the word “world” in the Scriptures: (1) all things created by God, (2) creation as reality fallen into sin and (3) creation as delivered by Christ (cf. his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1:5). Both the first and third meanings are positive.

His comment on the conservative Augustinians is also apt:

They hold a plainly false opinion who say that in regard to the truth of religion it does not matter what a man thinks about creation so long as he has the correct opinion concerning God. An error concerning the creation ends as false thinking about God (II, Ch. 3).

Elsewhere in Thomas’s work it becomes clear that he would also subscribe to the opposite statement, namely that a wrong idea about God would lead to the wrong idea of creation.

A third mayor aspect of Aquinas’s ontological cluster is:

#### **4. An ontological dualism**

In the first chapter a dualism between nature and grace in the work of Thomas has already been pointed out. However, he also teaches a dichotomy *within* creation (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a:415). This is his answer to the fundamental question of how reality originally looked like. Was it originally a unity or duality?

##### ***4.1 Two different theories***

Since Greek antiquity some philosophers thought in a monistic and others in a dualistic way. Monism departs from the original unity of everything. Originally there was only one “something” from which the later plurality emerged. Consistent monism would therefore teach that the deity/God and the world are one in their origin, since both are supposed to be offshoots of a still deeper original unity. Therefore there is no essential difference between God and universe. (Pantheism is an example of this type of philosophy.)

Dualists, however, choose for a different point of departure. Originally there was a duality, two roots or origins of everything. Vollenhoven (2005a:265) concisely summarises these two original Greek theories:

Monism (Greek for *monos*, alone, unique) is a philosophical theme that sees god and world as a unity, denying the creation. In this monism stands in contrast to dualism which, likewise denying the creation, takes God and the world as originally given eternal counterparts.

Seeing that Thomas was a Christian, he could not accept monism but chose for dualism within a hierarchy of being. Where monism had to explain the origin of the diversity (they see it as divergences from the unity), Thomas from his dualistic view had to produce an explanation of the unity between the duality (the transcendent God and the non-transcendent universe). This leads to the age-old debate on the so-called immanence and transcendence of God: God is present *in* the universe, but not completely (this would land one in pantheism); God also is *above* the universe, yet not fully (this would land one in deism). Thomas attempts to retain the balance between transcendence and immanence by means of his idea of law and his teaching of the analogy of the being based on his law-idea.

This teetering of course is rooted in an erroneous ontology, where no *radical* distinction is made between God and his creation. The spatial and other facets of creation would also be applicable to God! Up to the present day theologians are struggling with this false issue of God's so-called immanence versus his so-called transcendence. (cf. Kruger, 2011). And of course correct answers can never be found to wrong problem statements.

#### ***4.2 Influence of his idea of law***

Thomas's particular idea of law therefore results in a philosophy that is basically dualist. Not the unity but the plurality was primary – as a consequence of the plurality of the exemplars of the things in God since all eternity.

Also regarding the situation after creation, Thomas's viewpoint is clearly dualistic. Under the previous point we have already indicated that his attention is focused on two things: the Creator and the creation. Although he does not use the designations "transcendent" and "non-transcendent" for Creator and creation, it clearly emerges from the whole of his philosophy that God is the transcendent and creation the non-transcendent. For instance, he says: "God transcends all sensible things ... His effects ... are sensible things" (I, 85). God who cannot be detected by the senses, transcends observable reality.

When dealing with his telos-doctrine or viewpoint of purpose (cf. Chapter 5) it will also become evident that, in the line of Aristotle's dualism, Thomas accepts a viewpoint of a transcendent, immovable God who draws all non-transcendent things like a magnet back to Him as their highest goal.

#### ***4.3 Comment***

Both monism and dualism – at least in their original forms – are equally far from Scriptural Revelation. It is as unbiblical to look for a deeper unity behind God and the universe (in a monistic way), thereby attributing something divine to the universe, as to teach (in a dualist way) that the universe, as the second root of reality, has an independent existence next to God. Philosophical speculation on the original state is wrong, for the Scriptures reveal (and one has to accept this in faith) that (1) God is there from all eternity, that He (2) created a rich diversity and that He (3) laid down his law for creation.

A fourth important facet of Thomas of Aquinas's philosophy in the SCG is the following:

## **5. Partial universalism**

The question of the relation between the general (universal) and the particular (individual) has to be answered by a philosopher since the existence of neither can be denied. For there is this individual tree, but we also speak about “tree” in general, meaning a particular kind of plant. Formulated in a different way: One can distinguish between the “it” (individuality) and the “what” (universality) of something. Both are *facets* of the *same* created thing. In the history of philosophy, however, it was not seen like this, and various theories were put forth. In the time of Thomas it was one of the most debated problems (cf. Venter, 1985:47-64 and Van der Walt, 1986:243-254).

### ***5.1 Different theories***

The history of philosophy (cf. Spier, 1959:12), shows how philosophers gave preference to either the universal or the individual. The universalists held that the universal is the most important, while the particular, the individual, is of secondary importance since it merely emerges from the universal. When applied at a social level such philosophers would regard societal relationships (e.g. church, school, government) as more important than their individual members.

Individualists taught the exact opposite: the individual is the actual, the true. The particular comes first. When applied to society they would for instance say that a societal relationship merely exists as a cluster of separate individuals.

As it usually happens in philosophy, we also find a reconciling position situated between the two, that of the partial universalists. According to this viewpoint both the universal and the individual have a certain independence and therefore they exist *next to* each other. However, there were differences within this group, for according to one theory (the macro-micro

cosmos doctrine) the universal is *bigger* than the individual. According to another theory (the doctrine of form-matter) either the universal or the individual is the *higher*. The first-mentioned theory can therefore also be called *horizontal* partial universalism, while the latter can be labelled as *vertical* partial universalism. Thomas was, as will become clear, a *vertical* partial universalist.

But even vertical partial universalists do not all agree. To the empiricists the universal is situated in the lower (matter) and the *principium individuationis* in the higher (form). In contrast to this, the intellectualists place the universal (form) in the higher and the *principium individuationis* in the lower (matter) (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a:330-332). As will now become clear, Thomas was an advocate of the latter, the intellectualist theory.

### ***5.2 The doctrine of form and matter***

In several instances in the SCG it is distinctly put that the form is the universal. Therefore form has to be individualised by matter. "... every form ... is individuated by matter ..." (II, 232). This is also valid for the human intellect: "... the intellect is individuated by that matter which is the human body and of which the intellect is held to be the form" (II, 232).

Thus Thomas does not adhere to either a universalistic or an individualistic viewpoint. Neither does he see the universal and individual next to each other as the partial universalists with their theme of a macro-micro cosmos. The universal and the individual occur (like the higher and the lower components) in one and the same thing. "... universal and singular are differences or essential attributes of being" (I, 214). It is clear that Thomas holds a partial universalism in his doctrine of form-matter.

### ***5.3 Once again his idea of law as the key***

Nevertheless he remains a partial *universalist*, for the universal is still the more important to him. This, too, is understandable against the background of Thomas's idea of law. The

(universal) form, as we have already seen (cf. second chapter) to Thomas is the law. Since the law is everything to him, the universal will also be more important than the individual. For instance, he says: “The good of the species is greater than the good of the individual, just as the formal exceeds that which is material” (II, 138). Elsewhere he says: “... it is clear that singulars exist for the sake of the universal nature” (IIIa, 251).

#### **5.4 Comment**

First I reiterate that the universal (e.g. being human) and the individual (this specific human being) are not “things” or (as in the work of Thomas) *parts* of things, but *facets* of every created thing. Secondly these concepts cannot – the way Thomas does – be applied to God either. The fact that Thomas sees God as the universal Mover, who brings individual creatures in motion, therefore had great implications for his view of the relationship between God and human beings (more on this in the fifth chapter).

A fifth important characteristic of the philosophical cluster of the *doctor angelicus* now asks our attention:

### **6. Analogy of being**

One would have to deal first with Thomas’s doctrine of participation (cf. 7 below) since his doctrine of analogy explains in *which way* the cosmic being has a part in the divine. However, we keep this link in mind here.

#### **6.1 The heart of his philosophy?**

An enormous amount has been written on the *analogia entis* doctrine of Thomas (cf. e.g. Habel, 1928; Klubertanz, 1960; Lyttkens, 1952; McInery, 1961 & 1968; Phelan, 1943 and

Venter, 1985:17 et seq.). Some secondary sources regard it, albeit not the key to his philosophy, then still something lying near to the heart of his philosophy or running through it like a golden thread (cf. Van der Walt, 1968:85 et seq.). However, I am of the opinion that Thomas's doctrine of the analogy of being is only one of the implications of his idea of law – which really forms the heart of his philosophy. We find the *analogia entis* doctrine of Thomas mainly in Chapters 29 to 34 of Book I. The heading of Chapter 29 already is revealing: “On the resemblance (*similitudo*) of the creatures to God”.

In the preceding chapter (2) enough attention has been given to the meaning of *similitudo* in the work of Thomas to be able to see clearly the relationship between his doctrine of the *analogia entis* and his law-idea.

## ***6.2 Likeness in difference***

In Chapters 29-34 Thomas deals with the question how we can get to know God. God can be known from his effects, since the Cause brings forth something similar to himself. Therefore Thomas first emphasises the likeness between God and the creation and explains it by way of an image:

Thus, the sun causes heat among these sublunary bodies by acting according as it is in act. Hence, the heat generated by the sun must bear some likeness (*similitudo*) to the active power of the sun, through which heat is caused in the sublunary world; and because of this heat the sun is said to be hot, even though not in one and the same way. And so the sun is said to be somewhat like those things in which it produces its effects as an efficient cause (I, 138).

Apart from the similarity there is, however, also a dissimilarity:

Yet the sun is also unlike all these things in so far as such effects do not possess heat and the like in the same way as they are found in the sun. So, too, God gave things all their perfections and thereby is both like and unlike all of them (I, 138).

“Both like and unlike ...” Hereby Thomas has given us the heart of his doctrine of *analogia entis*.

However, there is a significant difference between God and the creatures, because it is a “one-way likeness” (compare I, 139): the creatures look like God, but God does not look like his creatures. The creatures receive from God that which causes them to resemble Him. A stone imitates God, but God may not be called a stone (cf. I, 142).

### ***6.3 His idea of law as background again***

Against the backdrop of Thomas’s peculiar law-idea the likeness and difference between God and the creatures are quite comprehensible. Creatures can exhibit *likeness* to God, since they received from God that which causes them to resemble Him, namely the exemplars. However, they *differ* from God, since they are not like God, pure law. Although their exemplars are implied in the god-law, the exemplars still are not identical to the law-god. As a consequence of the exemplars being law in the creatures there is *likeness* to God (who is law), but due to the fact of not-being-God there is a *difference*.

Concisely put: to Thomas *analogia entis* is possible because the *entis* (being) to him is a law-being, as we have already indicated in the second chapter. His analogy of being rests on his analogy of law, his analogy of being is an analogy of law.

### ***6.4 Epistemological implications***

The doctrine of analogy to Thomas makes possible, apart from a supernatural theology (derived from the Scriptures) also a natural knowledge of God. Since God and the created things are not the same, nothing may be said of both of them in a univocal (*univoce*) way.

Since, however, there also is a likeness of being between God and the world (Thomas as a dualist accepts one being with a higher, divine and with a lower, non-transcendent part), we may not speak of them only in purely equivocal terms either (*pure aequivoce*). Names for God and his creatures have, however, to be used analogically (*analogice*). "... therefore, it remains that the names said of God and creatures are predicated neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically, that is, according to an order of reference to something" (I, 147).

In a nutshell this is Thomas's famous *analogia entis* doctrine. God and his creatures are in an analogical relationship: They are *similar* while they *differ*.

### **6.5 Application**

It seems obvious that Thomas would apply his viewpoint of analogy in many fields. Here follow two examples.

It forms the foundation of his proofs of God's existence. Although the doctrine of analogy can hardly be maintained, his natural or philosophical theology cannot do without it. If he should emphasise equivocality, he would be cosmologising God. And should he put the emphasis on univocality, his proofs of God's existence could not be valid.

A second illustration is how his doctrine of analogy also determines his anthropology. The biblical idea of a human being as the image of God is explained in the light of his doctrine of analogy. As far as his intellect is concerned a human being resembles God, but as far as his body is concerned, he/she differs from God. Of course this is not at all what the Bible means by the image of God (cf. Van der Walt, 2010).

I confined myself to pointing out that the doctrine of analogy may in no way be applied to God or human beings. It is only acceptable within a (dualistic) *relativism* of being in which the biblical message of their *radical* ontological distinction is not duly recognised.

This ontological merging between God and his creation becomes even more distinct in a following (sixth) facet of the philosophy of Thomas.

## **7. Participation**

The idea of participation or “having-part-of” is a last consequence of Thomas’s particular idea of law. On this, too, many chapters and books have been written (cf. e.g. Fabro, 1961; Geiger, 1942; Henle, 1956 and Krämer, 1967).

In my own interpretation it becomes evident from Thomas’s doctrine of participation how he (as a result of his nominalising of both God and universe) does not distinguish *radically* between between Creator and creature. Creatures also have a part of God, are therefore to a degree divine in nature (cf. Venter, 1985:15 and 1988:163).

Participation is distinctly linked with Thomas’s doctrine of exemplars and his doctrine of likeness which have been dealt with in the previous chapter. There it already transpired that *exemplar* and *similitudo* mean basically the same to Thomas.

### **7.1 The link with “*exemplar*” and “*similitudo*”.**

As a consequence of Thomas’ law, which is as an exemplar and likeness in God and also in the creatures, the creatures can have a part in God. This, for instance, clearly emerges from the following statement by Aquinas:

Since, then, that which is found in God perfectly, is found in other things according to a certain diminished participation, the basis on which the likeness is observed belongs to God absolutely, but not to the creature (I, 139).

This also occurs where Thomas deals with the good in God. God is good *in essence* and not by means of participation in the good like the creatures.

... God is good through His essence, whereas all other things are good by participation ... Nothing, then, will be called good except in so far as it has a certain likeness of the divine goodness. Hence, God is the good of every good (I, 156).

After all the foregoing the following words of Thomas do not need any additional explanation to prove that his idea of law renders his doctrine of participation conceivable:

... being itself belongs to the first agent according to His proper nature, for God's being is His substance, as was shown in Book I. Now, that which belongs to a thing according to its proper nature does not belong to other things except by way of participation, as heat is in other bodies from fire. Therefore, being itself belongs to all other things from the first agent by a certain participation (II, 155).

## ***7.2 The difference between the doctrine of similitudo/exemplars and participation***

*Similitudo* to Thomas means the same as *exemplar*. However, the doctrine of participation is not the same as Thomas's doctrine of exemplars.

The difference between the doctrine of participation and that of exemplars could perhaps be formulated as follows. In die doctrine of exemplars the direction from above to below is important: God creates the *exemplar* in the creature. In die doctrine of participation the direction from below to above is important: the creature has a part in God (as a consequence of the *exemplar* in him). Therefore the doctrine of participation is the *result* of the doctrine of exemplars.

## ***7.3 A Platonising trait***

Quite a number of authors on the philosophy of Thomas (cf. Geiger, 1942, Fabro, 1961 and Van der Walt, 1968:92-85) laid a connection between Thomas's doctrine of participation and the Neo-Platonism of, for instance, Augustine and others. This was possible because Augustine as a Christian transferred Plato's ideas or laws to the mind of God (*in mente Dei*).

Thomas accepts this idea of exemplars in God, but expands it by teaching that God also creates the exemplars *for* the things *into* the things themselves.

Venter (1988:163,167) rightly links Thomas's doctrine of participation with both Aristotle and Plato. According to Aristotle a consequence has a part in its cause. But also the Augustinian doctrine (of the Platonic ideas in God) was taken over by Thomas so that the things in their archetypical examples (exemplars) have a part in God.

#### ***7.4 A full circle***

This originally Neo-Platonic characteristic in the work of Thomas occasioned him as a Christian to view reality as the dynamics of two simultaneous but opposite motions. First there was the step-by-step emancipation (*exitus*) from the One or the Origin (God) to an ever increasing cosmic diversity. But at the same time there was, in the second instance, a return (*conversio*) to the Origin. To human beings the return means that they detach themselves from the material, the natural to become spiritual and divine.

Thomas combines this originally Neo-Platonic circulation idea of *exitus* and *reditus* with Aristotelian idea of cause (form or principle) and effect. (For detail cf. Aertsen, 1991:105 et seq.) In Book II, Ch. 46 he writes:

An effect is most perfect when it returns to its principle; thus the circle is the most perfect of all figures, and the circular motion the most perfect of all motions, because ... a return is made to the starting point. It is therefore necessary that creatures return to their principle in order that the universe of creatures may attain ultimate perfection.

According to Thomas's teaching on nature-grace (cf. Chapter 1) two realms have, however, to be distinguished in a human being. Therefore a human being has both a natural and a supernatural purpose. Grace alone can bring about complete perfection. However, Aquinas

does not understand grace as forgiveness of sins by which the religious relationship with God is restored – the correct biblical view. To him grace means the supernatural perfection of a human being, the fulfilment of a human being's ontic incapacity to close the second part of the circle (the return to above) by himself. (In Chapter 1 it was shown that grace not only *supposes* nature but also *perfects* it.)

## **8. The implications of Thomas's idea of law**

I have already mentioned (in Chapter 2) that, in my opinion, this cyclic motif cannot be the major key to the philosophy of Thomas the way Aertsen (1991) claims, but his idea about law which lies much deeper. I will now merely point out the deterministic implications of Thomas's law-idea.

### ***8.1 Serious reservations***

With the aid of his doctrine of exemplars Thomas reaches the intellectualist conclusion that God knows everything (in their exemplars in his mind) and thereby determines the “contingent” events of the future. Does it not follow from this that what God knows in himself *inevitably has to take place*? But if all events on earth are inevitable, are there any freedom and responsibility left for a human being? Does it not also conflict with the biblical notion of a personal, religious relationship between God and human beings?

### ***8.2 Already queried by his contemporaries***

These questions are not only asked by the present author, but were already raised by his critics during and after Thomas's lifetime. Many of them rejected his intellectualistic determinism (i.e. that the intellect of God is supposed to determine everything), emphasising to the contrary (in a voluntaristic manner) the primacy of the free will of God and in some instances also of human beings.

But the ideas of Thomas did not disappear from the scene. Suarez (1548-1617), a later Roman Catholic scholar, followed Thomas in his Aristotelianising ideas and yet did make some modifications. For instance, he rejects the determinism of Thomas. Instead he proposes the following. God knows from all eternity (therefore retaining the original law-idea) what the individual human being will choose but intervenes in his grace to prevent that the direction the human being chooses deviates from it.

### ***8.3 Even Protestant philosophy influenced***

Subsequent Lutheran and Protestant Scholasticism (of circa 1650-1700) linked up with this Roman Catholic Scholasticism to create its own orthodox theology. Even at the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) the spirit of Thomist determinism was to some extent still present when it was decided how the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (in election and rejection) had to be understood. Even the reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck's theology was closely related to that of Aquinas and Suarez (cf. Vollenhoven, 2000:257).

## **9. Summary**

As a result of the many philosophical trends of thought from many centuries, which converge and are worked into a synthesis in the philosophy of Thomas, it is a complex system which cannot easily be unravelled. In the two previous chapters and in this third one an attempt has been made to take apart the pieces of the puzzle in order to understand his philosophy better.

As we said at the onset (cf. 1.4), the different elements of the philosophy of the SCG are, however, not to be taken as disconnected. They are connected, support one another and form one complex or "cluster" of ideas. The ensuing result is a hierarchical, static view of creation, determined from above.

Looking back and in summary the Thomistic puzzle contains the following elements:

### ***9.1 Direction and idea of law***

Regarding the normative direction of his philosophy, firstly his synthesis between the Word of God and Greek philosophy by means of a method of nature and grace (the supernatural) becomes clearer all the time. It also becomes evident that his interpretation of Aristotle on certain points show marked Platonising features.

In the second instance it became even more evident (than in the previous two chapters) how Thomas's law-idea pervades his whole view of reality. Without it his idea of God and his view of the universe cannot be gauged with sufficient thoroughness.

### ***9.2 View of reality***

In the third instance the contours of his view of reality or ontology also emerged more clearly. His ontology looks like this: He departs from one existence (being), composed hierarchically of (1) pure matter (an abstraction) right at the bottom, (2) after that everything (matter, plant, animal and human being) consists of form (or law) and matter, which (3) finally ends right at the top with God (as pure form/law). The exemplars/similarities/rational germs (cf. previous chapter) therefore exist in God, in the things and (by abstraction) in the mind of human beings.

In the one chain of being or the existing reality, however, he draws a distinction between a highest, transcendent part (God) and a non-transcendent (creation). He therefore holds an *ontic dualism*.

In his philosophy he confines himself in a *purely cosmological* way to creation as it exists today, the development (genesis) of which is underrated, since it is determined by (exemplars in) God.

He neither regards the universal nor the individual as primary, but in his *partial universalism* he occupies a middle position which seeks to recognise both. However, these two are not

positioned, as in the case of the macro-micro cosmos doctrine *horizontally* next to one another (as the greater or more important and the smaller or less important), but *vertically* the one above the other: the universal (form) is the higher and the individual (matter) the lower. Thus to Thomas God is the most universal, most important being.

The fact that Thomas's distinction between his transcendent God and the non-transcendent creation is still further relativised (the two already form one being from the beginning), clearly emerges from his doctrine of *analogia entis*, that is, a simultaneous difference and likeness between God and creation. That God and the created things are not radically different becomes even more evident from his *doctrine of participation*. The higher and therefore the nearer to God in the hierarchical order of being, the more distinctly the created things (especially human beings) have a part in him, become "divine". As in a circle everything emerges from God and again returns to him.

The foregoing complex of ideas has significant implications for Thomas's anthropology and epistemology. This will be dealt with in a following (fourth) chapter.

## Chapter 4

### THE THOMIST ANTHROPOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

*This chapter further investigates and questions the anthropology and epistemology of the famous Medieval theologian-philosopher, Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) as explained in his Summa Contra Gentiles. The doctor angelicus was a very influential thinker – not only in Catholic circles, but also in Reformed scholastic theology (± 1550-1700) and afterwards up to its present revival in our time. His ideas even partly influenced two of the founders of a Reformational philosophy in the thirties of the previous century, viz. Stoker and Dooyeweerd.*

*The three previous chapters discussed Aquinas' basic direction of thought (synthesis philosophy), his idea of law, as well as the cluster of ideas comprising his ontology or view of reality (God and cosmos). From the present chapter it will become evident how his ontology determined his anthropology, and how his anthropological views in turn influenced his epistemology. Special attention is again given to the role of (what the author indicates as) Aquinas' nomology or view of law (in God, in creation and conceptualised in the human intellect).*

*This chapter develops through the following stages: (1) The origin, composition (of soul and body) of mankind is explained. (2) The nature of the intellective soul (a separate, independent, immortal, supra-temporal substance) is investigated. (3) This is followed by Aquinas' distinction between a practical and speculative intellect. (4) The speculative intellect, through a long and complicated process, finally arrives at scientific knowledge of the form, essence or law of a thing. In this way correspondence is reached between what is known outside the mind and its logical duplicate in the human intellect. (5) Apart from this natural, rational or philosophical knowledge of the cosmos, Aquinas, as a Christian thinker,*

*also accepted (in his theology) faith as a means to acquire knowledge of the supernatural world (God included).*

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## **1. Introduction**

A few remarks beforehand on (1) the continuation of and link with the previous three chapters; (2) a limitation; (3) sources used; (4) an outline of the lay-out.

### **1.1 Link**

The view Thomas has on reality as a whole (cf. second and third chapters) determines his anthropology. This is what we will be dealing with in this chapter. (On the other hand, his anthropology can also further elucidate some facets of his ontology.) A person's anthropology in turn also determines the epistemology that he/she holds – a second important point of investigation in this chapter.

### **1.2 Limitation**

Of course we will not be able to deal with Thomas's anthropology in full here. Nevertheless it does offer the philosophical point of departure for his different theological viewpoints.

One example is his teaching on the biblical revelation that a human being is the image and likeness of God, on which many books have been written (cf. e.g. De Grijs, 1967 and Scheffczyk, 1969:206-330). The way Thomas understands this information from the Scriptures, however, is also clearly determined by his philosophical nomology. According to the exemplar in Himself God creates a human being analogous to Him. *Imago* (image) therefore denotes the rational human nature which exists in all people, while *similitudo* (likeness) denotes the supernatural image of grace (cf. Van der Walt, 2010a:330-331).

In spite of the fact that this explanation (of a dual image) is not what the Scriptures teach, it is still accepted today even by some Reformed theologians. To exhibit the image of God, however, does not mean having something divine *in* one. According to the Scriptures a human being reflects the image of God to the extent to which he/she obeys God's central law of love.

### **1.3 Sources**

At the onset the reader is once more reminded that reference to secondary sources is kept to a minimum. The reason for this is that such sources mostly consist of *interpretations* of Thomas's philosophy while the author wants to listen to the *original* Thomas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG). For the original Latin text an edition of 1935 was used (cf. *S. Thomae Aquinatis*, 1935). The English translation cited is the Doubleday edition (cf. Thomas Aquinas, 1955 1957). The references given with the quotations consist of first the number of the specific book in Roman numerals and then the page numbers of this translation in Arabic numerals (e.g. II, 55). Since Book III of the SCG was translated in two separate volumes, these are referred to as IIIa or IIIb. As mentioned in previous chapters this chapter expands on the author's earlier, still unpublished research – with more recent literature and own insights (cf. Van der Walt, 1968 and 1974).

### **1.4 Lay-out**

The following facets of Thomas's anthropology in the SCG will be dealt with here: (1) how a human being (especially his highest, intellective soul) originates; (2) the relation between soul and body; (3) the soul as an independent, immortal substance and (4) finally the capacity of the soul from which also (5) Thomas's epistemology is derived.

## 2. The origin of human beings

A human being consists – like all creatures – according to Thomas, of form and matter, of which the former (the form) is also called the soul. His dualistic ontology (cf. previous chapter) also leads to a dichotomy in his anthropology: the human being consists of two separate parts. In turn the soul itself is distinguished in three parts.

### 2.1 *Three parts of the soul*

It is by its intellective (rational) soul that a human being is distinguished from animals. “Now, it is with respect to the intellective soul that we are said to be *men*; to the sensitive soul, *animals*; to the nutritive soul, *living beings*” (II, 173).

Human beings possess all three parts of the soul while animals have only two parts and plants only one soul. Thomas writes:

... the vegetative soul, which is present first (when the embryo lives the life of a plant), perishes, and is succeeded by a more perfect soul, both nutritive and sensitive in character, and then the embryo lives an animal life; and when this passes away it is succeeded by the rational soul introduced from without, while the preceding souls existed in virtue of the semen (II, 304).

From this Thomas’s intellectualism is already quite clear: a human being is primarily an intellectual, noetic being. Neither is the human embryo human before the intellect has entered it *from outside*.

Since the intellective soul makes man a human being, Thomas focuses almost exclusively on this. How does such a soul originate? In Book II, Chapters 83-89 Thomas explains his point of view in this respect. First he says how the intellective soul *does not* come into a human being (Chapters 83-86) and afterwards how it *does* happen (Chapters 87-89). However, even how, according to Thomas it does *not* happen, reveals much of his point of view.

## ***2.2 How the soul does not originate***

It is noteworthy that Thomas criticises Plato (Ch. 83) because the latter taught a pre-existence of the soul. Thus, according to Thomas, the fact that the *exemplar* of man's intellective soul exists from all eternity in the Law-god, still does not imply the pre-existence of the soul. (Evidently it is only the *exemplar* and not the intellective soul itself which exists from eternity in God.) Nor can Thomas accept Plato's viewpoint that a human being is "a soul enclosed by a body" (compare Chapter 83). Likewise the view of Origenes who taught (in line with Plato) that all souls exist from eternity and that they are united with bodies as prisons to punish them for their sins, Thomas finds unacceptable (cf. Chapter 83).

In Book III, Chapter 85 it is demonstrated why the souls cannot be made of God's substance either.

Those who appeal for this to Genesis 1:26 err, according to Thomas. The image of God according to which a human being is created, is not a part of the substance of God in a human being. "The breathing of which Genesis speaks signifies the pouring forth of life from God into man according to a certain likeness, and not according to unity of substance" (II, 290).

It is clear why Thomas could not accept that the human (intellective) soul is made of God's substance or being. The *exemplars* of the various human souls do lie in the divine intellect, but they are not identical to it.

The intellective soul is, according to Thomas definitely not transmitted with the semen either. In Chapter 86 it is stated that the semen does transmit the body (the vegetative and sensitive parts of the soul) but not the intellective soul:

Now, the nutritive and sensitive soul cannot operate independently of the body, as we have seen before. On the other hand, as we have likewise pointed out, the intellective soul does not operate through any bodily organ. Therefore, the

nutritive and sensitive souls are brought into being through the body's engendering; but not the intellectual soul. The transmission of the semen has as its aim the body. It is therefore through the transmission of the semen that the nutritive and sensitive souls begin to be; but this is not true of the intellectual soul (II, 291).

### ***2.3 Each soul is created by God Himself***

Thomas's point of view is that the intellectual soul can only come into being by a creational deed and since only God can create, the intellectual soul can only owe its origin to Him. "The soul is created immediately by God alone" (II, 294. Cf. also p. 305, 306). Hence we can call Thomas's viewpoint in this regard creatianism – in opposition to the viewpoint of the traducianists who believe that the soul is transmitted by the semen. (Creatianism is not to be confused with creationism, the belief of some Christians that the world was created by God in six days of 24 hours.)

It is interesting to which texts from the Scriptures Thomas appeals for his viewpoint – also since these are still used today for the same purpose by some Reformed theologians. Amongst other verses he quotes Psalm 33:15: "He who forms the hearts of all" (II, 284) and Genesis 2:7: "... the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (II, 295). It is striking that he does not quote the last part of the verse as well. "... and the man became a living soul" (KJV). Apparently because the "living soul" presented a problem to him. According to Thomas the soul *is* something living, it cannot therefore *become* living.

### ***2.4 Arguments employed against the creatianism of Thomas***

It is interesting to go into the controversy between Thomas and his traducianist opponents (as we find it in Chapters 88 and 89). Because both sides are busy with a false issue, namely how

the soul comes into the body, both could find arguments – even from the Bible – and still offer no conclusive solution to the problem. To show how the debate gives rise to all kinds of clever arguments, some of the most interesting speculations are given here.

The first argument is that a human being (according to Thomas) has one soul with three parts. How can it be possible that two parts of the soul are transmitted with the semen and the third part is not transmitted?

However, Thomas was criticised in particular with relation to his creatianism (compare arguments 6, 9, 10 and 12) because the soul and the body were supposed to originate *the one after the other*.

Thomas had a clever answer to this:

It follows that the human body, so far as it is in potentiality to be soul, as not yet having one, precedes the soul in time; it is then, not actually human, but only potentially human. However, when the body is actually human, as being perfected by the human soul, it neither precedes nor follows the soul, but is simultaneous with it (II, 306).

Another argument against Thomas's creatianism is that God would then create sinful souls – for according to the Scriptures all people are sinners from birth. It could then also be said that God cooperates with adulterers by (willingly) supplying a soul for that which is the consequence of their sinful deed.

To this, too, Thomas devised an answer:

Regarding the *fifth objection*, there is nothing incongruous in God's co-operating with adulterers in the action of nature; for it is not the nature of adulterers that is evil, but their will, and the action deriving from their seminal power is natural, not

voluntary. Hence, it is not unfitting that God should co-operate in their action by bringing it to its final completion (II, 306).

Some people attacked Thomas with Genesis 2:2 where it says that God had completed his work of creation and rested. Therefore God cannot make new souls daily (cf. II, 273). To this Thomas answers: “God’s resting must be understood to refer to cessation from forming new species, but not new individuals” (II, 286).

Above, as we have already seen, Thomas asserted (cf. again II, 304) that a human embryo has as yet only a vegetative and a sensitive soul (like plants and animals) – it only becomes a human being when God from outside also creates a third (intellective) soul into it. However, as far as we could ascertain, nowhere does Thomas say *when* God does this. Is it after some months or only at birth? Would abortion then be permissible prior to the entrance of an intellective soul?

Thomas also has arguments against the traducianists who believe that the soul is transmitted with the semen (from the male). That would mean that out of something mortal (the body) something immortal comes forth, and that with every seminal discharge at which no conception takes place, rational souls would be multiplied and lost, while the soul is immortal (cf. II, 301).

We confine ourselves to these few snatches from the futile dispute (because it concerns itself with a false issue) between creatianism and traducianism. (For a more biblical view of concepts like “body”, “soul”, “spirit”, “flesh”, etc. cf. Van der Walt, 2010b.)

### **3. The relation between intellective soul and body**

The intellective soul is the *exemplar* which God creates into a human being. In Chapter 2 it was already demonstrated that the *exemplar* which God creates, is the form of the creature.

#### **3.1 Form and matter**

The relation between the soul and body in a human being, according to Aquinas, is that of the difference between form and matter:

Now, that the soul is united to the body as its proper form is proved as follows. That by which something becomes a being in act from a being in potency is its form and act. But it is through the soul that the body becomes a being in act from being potentially existent, for living is the being of the living thing. Now, the seed before animation is living only in potency and, through the soul, becomes living in act. Therefore, the soul is the form of the animated body (II, 172).

Elsewhere: “Nothing therefore, prevents an intellectual substance from being the human body’s form, which is the human soul” (II, 205).

Since Thomas, according to his partially universalistic view, sees form and matter as the higher and lower components of the same thing (cf. previous chapter), the relationship between soul and body also is that of the higher and the lower. This emerges very clearly in the SCG. “... these (bodily) pleasures are not agreeable to man by virtue of what is noblest in him, namely, his understanding...” (IIIa, 111). The sensitive part of a human being which he shares with the animals, is in opposition to the higher intellect (cf. IIIa, 120). Note once more his intellectualism.

The following more or less summarises Thomas’s thoughts in this regard:

Moreover, that man’s highest good does not lie in goods of the body, such as health, beauty and strength, is clearly evident from similar considerations. For these things are possessed in common by both good and bad men; they are also unstable; moreover, they are not subject to the will (IIIa, 119).

### ***3.2 Significant implications***

Since Thomas's dichotomist anthropology considers the soul more important than the body, it also results in the "spiritual" or "eternal" things being more important to him than the "bodily" or "temporary". Voluntary poverty (Thomas was a member of the Dominican mendicant order) is meant expressly to free a person from what is worldly so that he can devote himself to the eternal (cf. III, Ch. 133, 134). For this reason celibacy is better than marrying (Thomas was also a monk), for sexual desire is something lower and therefore less good (cf. III, Ch. 137).

Moreover, according to Thomas, sin does not come from the intellect but is located in the lower, sensitive part of the soul from which rises all desires (cf. IIIb, 105, 112). According to him sin means yielding to one's lower passions and inclinations. Therefore redemption does not mean that one's heart is regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Christ is supposed to have come into this world "...to change men from love of bodily things to love of spiritual things" (IV, 245). The unbiblical implications of the dualism in Thomas's ontology and of his dichotomist anthropology can be clearly seen.

Besides, it is most evident why Thomas is described as an *intellectualistic* philosopher. To him the intellect is the most important and moreover unblemished. However, he was not yet a *rationalist* – rationalism would only appear on the scene from approximately 1600 AD.

#### **4. The intellectual soul as an independent, immortal and supratemporal substance**

Corresponding with his teaching on form and matter, the soul is not only the higher, but also is the bearer of life. The semen which only exists potentially, becomes alive in the act (cf. III, 172). The *exemplar* which God creates into a human being therefore acts in a helping or assisting capacity. Without it a human being cannot exist. God who Himself is pure act, causes man actually to exist by means of the *exemplar* which He creates into the human being. This idea is called the subsistence theory of Thomas. Berger (1968) gives a good

account of how this concept of substance originated in Greek philosophy (Plato and particularly Aristotle) and (on p. 107-159) how it was adapted by Thomas. And more recently Ter Horst (2008) offers a critical appraisal of Thomas's doctrine on substance.

#### ***4.1 The intellectual soul as a substance***

Therefore Thomas calls the soul the *substantial* form (*forma substantialis* – compare for instance II, 158, 204 and 213) of the human composition. In many instances he indicates the human intellect(ive soul) as *substance* (*substantia intellectualis*). (Compare the headings of Chapters 47, 53, 55 and 56 of II.) In not one single instance, however, does Thomas call the body (*corpus*) a substance.

But if the intellectual soul is seen as a separate substance, the *corpus* should at least to some extent be seen as something independent as well – even if it is not called a substance. So Thomas keeps wrestling with the problem how the unit of a human being originates from two independencies. If one starts with a dichotomy, however, it is impossible ever to reach an integral view of being human.

#### ***4.2 The intellectual soul is immortal***

The intellectual soul as substance is also immortal. It is not only a *forma substantialis* (a form of the substance human being) but also a *forma subsistens* (a subsisting form with continued existence). As an intellectual substance it is indestructible: “It has been shown, however, that no intellectual substance is composed of matter and form. Therefore, no intellectual substance is corruptible” (II, 158). Further: “... intellectual substances subsist and are and live; and they have life unfailing and undiminishable, being free from universal corruption, free from generation and death ...” (II, 164). Elsewhere he says: “... when bodies perish the intellect retains its substantial character ...” (II, 312).

Only the human intellectual soul keeps on existing after death. In Chapter 82 of Book II Thomas states that "... the souls of brute animals are not immortal". While the (sensitive and vegetative) souls of animals die with their bodies, about man he says: "... man alone has a subsistent soul, that is, a soul having life in itself" (II, 268).

#### **4.3 Comment**

However, nowhere does the Bible teach that a human being *has* a soul, much less that the soul in itself possesses *immortality*. Only God is called immortal. A human being (please note not the soul) according to the Scriptures *receives* immortality only after being raised (by God). (For more detail compare Van der Walt, 2010b:159-289.)

On this point Thomas could not accept Aristotle who taught that the human soul perishes at the time of death. However, he does not directly oppose Aristotle but criticises his Averroistic followers (cf. II, 258).

From the foregoing it once more emerges very clearly that Thomas's idea of law plays a decisive part. After the death of animals the *exemplar* created into them by God perishes. After the death of a human being, however, this *exemplar* continues existing as a "separated form" in an individualised way apart from its *exemplar* in God.

According to Thomas, however, the form needs the matter to be individualised. The question could therefore be put how the human soul, after being severed from the body at death, can still exist *individually*. He attempts to solve the issue (cf. II, Chapter 75) by saying that, although the soul, when it originates, is dependent for its individuality on matter (body), it need not lose its individuality when the body has been destroyed. Since the soul has an independent existence (is a substance) it retains the individuality acquired at its origin even after the separation from the body at death.

#### **4.4 A supra-temporal soul**

Thomas even claims that the soul, apart from being immortal or everlasting, is also supra-temporal. For instance, he says: "... the human soul ... is situated in the boundary line between corporeal and incorporeal substances, as though it existed on the horizon of eternity and time" (II, 265. Cf. also IIIa, 201). He speaks of "... the intellect, whose being does not come under time" (IIIa, 201). Elsewhere he says: "... the mode of an intelligent substance consists in the fact that its being is above movement and consequently above time, whereas the being of every corruptible thing is subject to motion and time" (II, 162).

But supra-temporality of the intellectual soul does not mean that it is eternal (*aeternus*) like God, merely that it is "everlasting" (*perpetuus*) (cf. II, 286). In Thomas's dualistic ontology of a transcendent, eternal God and a non-transcendent, temporary world, the human soul therefore takes up an intermediate position. It is neither eternal (*aeternus*) nor temporary (*temporaliter*) but supra-temporal (*aevernus*). This idea was later also supported by Dooyeweerd in the form of a supra-temporal heart. (Cf. Van der Walt, 2014:116 ff.)

#### ***4.5 Subsistence theory***

So clearly Thomas holds a substantialist anthropology. As mentioned already, we denote his anthropological viewpoint with the designation "subsistence theory", because the *anima intellectiva* (not the vegetative and sensitive souls) is seen as a substance or a subsistent form. It is created into the body by God to assist or quicken it and after the death of the body it continues to exist as an individualised form or substance (also compare Vollenhoven, 2011:92, 93).

Above we have already mentioned the excellent work by Berger (1968) for more particulars on the history and meaning of the concept "substance". He demonstrates clearly (p. 71 et seq.) that Aristotle is the source of the idea of substance voiced by Thomas (p. 71 et seq.).

Two categories are distinguished in the work of Thomas, namely *substantia* and *accidentia*. (The latter are the features of the former.)

The concept “substance” is not as innocent as it appears. It literally means something (a thing) that *can exist independently*. However, it is a question whether such an idea is biblically justified, since God’s Word distinctly teaches that everything was created by God and remains fully dependent on Him (cf. Spier, 1959:96). Thomas’s *anima intellectiva* which is regarded as something existing independently and naturally having immortality, therefore has to be queried. God alone is immortal (cf. 1 Timothy 6:16) and He *bestows* immortality on a human being – only *after* resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:53,54).

Subsequently we look at the capabilities of the intellective soul, because without it Thomas’s epistemology cannot be comprehended.

## **5. The abilities of the intellective soul**

Thomas distinguishes between a speculative and a practical intellect (cf. II, 318). In the speculative intellect reason plays the most important role and in the practical intellect the will is most important.

### ***5.1 Intellect and conduct***

The relation between the two intellects (speculative and practical) is the relation between the inner and the outer man: reason is connected with intellect and will with action. The intellect comes before the action or the action is a consequence of the intellect. The other way round, however, it is the will that sets the intellect in motion. Thomas describes the interaction as follows:

Again, among moving powers in beings possessing an intellect, the first is found to be the will. For the will set every power to its act; we understand, because we will ... The will has the role because its object is the end; although it is also a fact

that the intellect, though not in the manner of an efficient and moving cause, but in that of a final cause, moves the will by proposing to it its object, namely, the end (I, 241).

In the preceding age-old speculations on the primacy of the human intellect or will, Thomas chooses – in spite of his concessions to the role of the will – not for voluntarism but continues to think in an intellectualist manner: “... the intellect apprehends the forms of things in a more universal mode than that in which they exist in things; and for this reason we observe that the form of the speculative intellect is more universal than that of the practical intellect ...” (II, 318).

In dealing with the speculative intellect Thomas further distinguishes between the *intellectus agens* and *intellectus possibilis*. Below we will look into the function of each of these. We first deal with another Thomist distinction.

## ***5.2 Intellect and faith***

By means of speculative intellect, where reason is vital, Aquinas was able to obtain knowledge of the things which can be detected by the senses. Reason has the domain of nature as its field of investigation. (On the theme of nature-grace, see again Chapter 1.)

Earlier we also mentioned (cf. again Chapter 1) that Aquinas also saw faith (which is a supernatural gift of grace from God) as a faculty of knowing. By means of faith knowledge can be obtained of the things which are not perceptible to the senses. Faith therefore offers knowledge in the domain of grace. (Cf. Lais, 1951 and Niede, 1928.)

In what follows special attention will be given to how knowledge in the domain of nature is acquired by means of the intellect (cf. also Neumann, 1963 and Siewerth, 1933). The following facets will be discussed: (1) knowledge of the universal or law; (2) “empiricism”; (3) *phantasma*; (4) *intellectus agens*; (5) *intellectus possibilis*; (6) his theory of

correspondence; (7) knowledge acquired by faith in God's revelation. We remark in passing that not all facets of Thomas's epistemology will be covered. Still less the complex problems in this area during the Middle Ages in general (cf. e.g. Venter, 1985:81).

## **6. Knowledge of the universal form or law**

It is very clear that Thomas thinks in an intellectualist manner. I repeat the quotation under the previous section: "... the intellect apprehends the forms of things in a more universal mode than that in which they exist in things; and for this reason we observe that the form of the speculative intellect is more universal than that of the practical intellect ..." (II, 318).

### ***6.1 Difference between two kinds of knowledge***

Conforming with this the difference between the practical and speculative (scientific) knowledge is explained as follows:

... speculative knowledge and the functions that pertain to it reach their perfection in the universal, while the things that belong to practical knowledge reach their perfection in the particular. In fact, the end of speculative cognition is truth, which consists primarily and essentially in immaterial and universal things; but the end of practical cognition is operation, which is concerned with singulars. So, the physician does not heal man as a universal, but, rather, this individual man, and the whole science of medicine is ordered to this result ... Besides, speculative knowledge is perfected in the universal rather than in the particular, because universals are better known than particulars (IIIa, 252. Cf. also I, 215).

Where practical knowledge therefore concerns individual, tangible things, the speculative searches for the universal, the abstract:

Scientific knowledge ... consists in the assimilation of the knower to the thing known. Now, the knower is assimilated to thing known, as such, only with respect to universal species; for such are the objects of science (II, 187).

Elsewhere: "... it is the nature of the intellect to grasp universals" (II, 145. Cf. also p. 148).

Thus the intellect does not stop with the external as do the senses. "... there is a difference between intellect and sense, for sense grasps a thing in its exterior accidents, which are color, taste, quantity and other of this kind, but intellect enters into what is interior to the thing" (IV, 86, 87).

## ***6.2 Knowledge of the laws***

Therefore it is clear why in scholarship Thomas is concerned with knowledge of the forms, or the laws: "... forms are made understood in act by abstraction from matter ... the intellect deals with universals and not with singulars, for matter is the principle of individuation ..." (I, 171). Further: "... a material thing is made intelligible by being separated from matter" (I, 176). Elsewhere: "... the intellect understands things by those forms of theirs which it has in its possession" (II, 147).

To Thomas the law was most dominant in his teaching on reality. His nomology also determines his epistemology – in scientific work one is concerned with knowledge of the law.

## **7. "Empiricism"**

But in some way or other the form of the knowable things have to enter the human intellect. This happens by means of the senses (Thomas distinguishes five senses – cf. I, 215). Thus in his intellectualism he does not yet neglect – like many later rationalists – the sensory factor, an Aristotelian emphasis.

### ***7.1 Sensory perception***

For reasonable knowledge sensory observation is indispensable. "... our act of understanding takes its beginning from the senses" (IV, 86). He says the "... intellect, taking the origin of his knowledge from the senses, does not transcend the mode which is found in sensible things ..." (I, 140). Or: "... intelligibles are taken from sensible things ..." (II, 314). Elsewhere: "... it is natural for man to receive knowledge through his senses, and ... it is very difficult to transcend sensible objects ..." (IIIb, 131).

### ***7.2 Natural sensory knowledge of God***

Even knowledge about God by means of the reason, is arrived through sensory observation. "... the knowledge of God which can be taken in by the human mind does not go beyond the type of knowledge that is derived from sensible things ..." (IIIa, 161). This is most significant for understanding Thomas's natural theology and proofs of God's existence.

Since Thomas (when it concerns rational knowledge) departs from the empirical, sensory perception, this viewpoint of his is labelled "empiricism". However, it is written in quotation marks since Thomas did not – like Aristotle – teach that knowledge can exclusively be obtained in this way, but also by faith.

### ***7.3 The beginning of the process of knowing***

Thomas does not present the process of knowing as if the intellective soul directs itself at the knowable but claims that the knowable enters the intellective soul by way of the ingression channels of the different senses (sensitive intellective soul).

The very first step in the process of knowing is therefore that the form of the knowable thing is impressed as something perceptible on the senses as *species sensibiles impressae*.

## **8. "Phantasma"**

In the next step the *species sensibiles impressae* as *phantasmata* enter the imagination (*imaginatio*), memory (*virtute memorativa*) and intellect (*virtute cogitativa*). The memory

and intellect are called virtues (*virtutes*) because not all people possess them. For instance, Thomas says: "... not all are possessed of the requisite act of cogitative power (*virtute*), but only those who are instructed and habituated". For this reason not all humans comprehend "...the things whose phantasms they have" (II, 241). Apparently all have the imagination.

### ***8.1 A subsequent step needed***

The *phantasma* is another step removed from the knowable. For instance, Thomas speaks about: "... the phantasm, which, in the order of objects, is higher than the sensible thing existing outside the soul..." (II, 326). The *phantasma* is a likeness of the knowable in the one who knows.

### ***8.2 Not yet sufficient***

By means of the intellect and memory (cf. II, 246, 247) the *phantasma* has to be prepared further for the intellective soul:

... to enable us to understand, the soul needs the powers which prepare the phantasms so as to render them actually intelligible, namely the cogitative power and the memory-powers which, being acts of certain bodily organs and functioning through them, surely cannot remain after the body perishes (II, 261).

Elsewhere, too, he speaks of "... the powers of cogitation and memory, by which the phantasms are prepared ..." (II, 265). The *phantasmata* are now changed to *species sensibiles expressae*. They therefore retain their sensory character.

Up to this point the process of knowing has not progressed further than the sensitive. The *phantasma* to a certain extent still has the material and individual character of the knowable things outside the intellect. However, the intellective soul does not concern the individual like the sensitive soul but the universal. "The human soul is cognizant of singulars and of universals through two principals, sense and intellect" (II, 340).

The next step in the process of knowing therefore is to the intellective soul where the *intellectus agens* abstracts the universal.

## 9. “Intellectus agens” and “possibilis”

The *intellectus agens* and *possibilis* are positioned towards each other in the relation of form (actual) and matter (potential).

... the intellective soul is a nature in which we find potentiality and act, since sometimes it is actually understanding, and sometimes potentially. Consequently, in the nature of the intellective soul there is something having the character of matter, which is in potentiality to all intelligibles – and this is called the *possible intellect*; and there also is something which, in the capacity of an efficient cause, makes all in act – and this is called the *agent intellect*. Therefore, both intellects on Aristotle’s showing, are within the nature of the soul, and have being separate from the body of which the soul is the act (II, 250).

### 9.1 *The role of the active intellect*

The task of the *intellectus agens* is making the *phantasma* or *species sensibilis expressae* into a truly intelligible species. “... there is in the soul an active power *vis-à-vis* the phantasms, making them actually intelligible; and this power is called the *agent intellect* ...” (II, 247). Elsewhere: “... the function of the agent intellect is to make phantasms actually intelligible” (II, 240).

### 9.2 *Illumination*

The *intellectus agens* illuminates the *phantasma*. For instance, Thomas writes about “... a phantasm which the agent intellect has illumined ...” (II, 242) and elsewhere he says about the *intellectus agens*:

So, the function of that intellect is to make intelligibles proportionate to our minds. Now, the mode of intellectual light connatural to us is not unequal to the performance of this function. Nothing, therefore, stands in the way of our ascribing the action of the agent intellect to the light of our soul, and especially since Aristotle compares the agent intellect to a light (II, 248).

This teaching of Thomas, namely that the *intellectus agens* illuminates the *phantasmata*, reveals the influence of Plato's teaching on illumination. In the work of Plato, however, the illumination was only applicable to the intelligible world. (This type of illumination will become even clearer when we come to Thomas's knowledge by faith in God's revelation.) In the work of Thomas one could therefore speak of a distinct Plato-and-Aristotle-interpretation. Thus not only in Thomas's ontology in the SCG does one find a clear Platonising tendency (the ideas in the divine intellect), but also in his epistemology.

I leave aside the question whether the human intellect can really play such an illuminating and even revelatory role. To my mind, only *God's* revelation and Spirit can have such a character.

### **9.3 Abstraction**

When the *phantasma* has been illumined, the universal form can be abstracted from it by the *intellectus agens* (cf. II, 243). Elsewhere reference is also made to the *quidditas* (being) instead of the universal form or species: "... the species ... which is the *sign of a thing's quiddity* (II, 321). Or: "... which quiddity our intellect is naturally capable of abstracting ..." (IIIa, 134). The *intellectus agens* thus first makes the *phantasma* intelligible.

The *species sensibilis expressae*, which is accepted as the *species intelligibilis impressae* by the *intellectus possibilis*, now becomes *species intelligibilis*. Again and again Thomas speaks about "...the intelligible species received into the possible intellect..." (II, 245). Elsewhere

he speaks of the “... phantasms which the agent intellect has illumined ... impress their likeness on the possible intellect” (II, 242).

## **10. “Intellectus possibilis”**

The *intellectus possibilis* which, as we have seen, is potential, is now actualised by the essences or *species intelligibiles impressae* coming from the *intellectus agens* (compare II, 245).

### ***10.1 Knowledge of the essence***

The result of the actualising of the *intellectus possibilis* is that finally the knowable is comprehended, that a concept of the essence (knowledge of the law) is arrived at. This happens by the *intellectus possibilis* forming for itself a certain intention of the comprehensible thing.

### ***10.2 Intentionally oriented***

Due to the fact that the “... species (which is in the form of the intellect and the principle of understanding) is the likeness of the external thing” it also follows for Thomas that the intellect forms an intention

... like that thing, since such as a thing is, such are its works. And because the understood intention is like some thing, it follows that the intellect, by forming such an intention, knows that thing (I, 189).

The end result of the process of knowing is that a “word” or concept is reached. The intellect brings forth the word. The “intention understood” is nothing other than the word or result of knowing. For instance, Thomas says:

Now, I mean by the ‘intention understood’ what the intellect conceives in itself of the thing understood. To be sure, in us this is neither the thing which is

understood nor is it the very substance of the intellect. But it is a certain likeness of the thing understood conceived in the intellect, and which the exterior words signify. So, the intention itself is named the ‘interior word’ which is signified by the exterior word (IV, 81. Cf. also IV, 83, 84, 85 and 87).

### ***10.3 Knowledge not yet apriorised***

From the above quotation it becomes evident amongst other things that Thomas not yet held the (later) rationalist teaching of an immanent logical object. This also emerges from the following:

... in the act of understanding, the intelligible species received into the possible intellect functions as the thing by which one understands, and not as that which is understood, even as the species of color in the eye is not that which is seen but that by which we see. And that which is understood is the very intelligible essence of things existing outside the soul ... (II, 234)

After all these very intricate steps in the process of knowing there follows the test of the sum total:

## **11. Agreement**

Thomas says the following about the word or concept in which the result of knowing is expressed: “... the word conceived in the intellect is the image or the exemplar of the substance of the thing understood” (IV, 87). Here the *exemplar* which existed *ante rem*, in God, which He created *in re*, into the thing, is now also *post rem* in the knowing mind. Spier (1959:101) aptly summarises it as follows: “All abstraction [in the work of Thomas] is a deeper reaching down to the form, to the divine idea that was realised in the creature. Thus we know the *universalia*, that are *ante rem*, *in re* and *post rem*.”

### ***11.1 A likeness of reality***

Therefore Thomas uses the well-known word *similitudo here*: "Understanding remains in the one understanding, but it is related to the thing understood because the abovementioned species, which is a principle of intellectual operation as a form, is the likeness of the thing understood" (I, 188). The species "... is the likeness of the external thing" (I, 188).

### ***11.2 Correspondence***

Seeing that the *exemplar* which now is not only in the thing but also in the knowing mind of the human being, it is understandable why Thomas holds the well-known theory of correspondence, agreement or equation as a criterion for the truth of the result of knowing.

This clearly emerges in the following quotation: "... the truth of the intellect is 'the adequation of intellect and thing' (*adequatio rei et intellectus*)" (I, 201). Later Thomas says:

... there is truth in our intellect because it is adequated to the thing that the intellect understands ... the truth of our intellect is measured by the thing outside the soul, since our intellect is said to be true because it is in agreement with the thing that it knows (I, 208).

### ***11.3 Determinative role of the doctrine of exemplars***

Thomas's theory of correspondence boils down to the fact that the *exemplar* or law within the intellect must correspond with the *exemplar* or law outside the intellect.

This also applies to God's knowledge of the things although there the order is reversed: the things should correspond with God's intellect and not his intellect with the things. This is understandable seeing that the *exemplar* of the things exists from eternity in God's intellect and only later comes into the things, while the *exemplar* in human beings does not exist beforehand in their intellect but is at first situated in the things. (Compare I, 208.)

Tol (2010:8, 48) rightly describes this classic scholastic correspondence epistemology as the *similarity* or *harmony* between two kinds of rationality, namely an objective and a subjective.

One order is that of the ‘objective rationality’, that holds for the nature of things, as secured in the *ideas* of distinctive being, and the other order is that of ‘subjective rationality’ in the human being, who attempts to make its *conceptual* understanding more adequate by increasing the harmony of that conceptual understanding with the objective order.

## **12. Knowledge by faith**

In the way described above the reason can also reach knowledge of God since there is a conformity between the *exemplar* of the creature which is known and its *exemplar* in God. (Compare Thomas’s teaching on the *analogia entis* and his participation doctrine as presented in the previous chapter.) This knowledge of God is presented in Thomas’s natural theology. Apparently the fall into sin had no effect on this natural domain (cf. Stinson, 1966).

Apart from the reasonable knowledge of sensory things (the domain of nature) to him as a Christian there is, however, also the knowledge of God’s revelation by faith (the domain of grace). (Cf. IIIb, 236, 237; Lais, 1951 and Niede, 1928.) I would like to draw special attention on his teaching of illumination when it comes to knowledge by faith because in this respect the Platonising feature of Thomas’s philosophy in the SCG surfaces again.

## **13. The value of the preceding research**

At the end of four long chapters on the philosophy of the same person – who moreover died almost 740 years ago – any reader who has read thus far will be inclined to ask whether all this is not merely “raking up the past”.

For an answer to this the reader is again referred to the introductory part of the first chapter.

(1) His philosophy all through the ages had a huge influence on Roman Catholic thinking. (2)

He also influenced Reformed Orthodox theology (from approximately 1550 to 1700) via the Thomism of amongst others Suarez and Zaberella. (3) In the third instance Thomism influenced eminent Reformed theologians like Bavinck and Kuyper (Bavinck for instance holds exactly the same philosophical conception as Thomas did in the final phase of his development. Cf. Vollenhoven, 200:257). (4) In the fourth instance the philosophy of Thomas played a particular role even in the origin of a Reformational philosophy towards the thirties of the previous century (cf. Van der Walt, 2014). Vollenhoven (according to Tol, 2010:75-200) initially also held the kind of scholastic law-idea and epistemology which is found in the work of Thomas, but later dissociated himself from it. It would seem, however, as if neither Dooyeweerd nor Stoker were free from the influence of Thomas and his Thomist followers. (5) Lastly, this kind of synthesis philosophy is reviving today among Reformed theologians and philosophers, for example in Radical Orthodoxy.

In summary therefore the value of these four chapters can be stated as follows: Getting to know Thomas enables us today to understand better our own Reformed theological and philosophical tradition.

## Chapter 5

### **DIVINE PROVIDENCE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE “DOCTOR ANGELICUS”**

*Thomas Aquinas, the doctor angelicus (angelic doctor), devoted an exceptionally large part of his Summa Contra Gentiles (its entire book 3, the largest part of all four books) to the question how God’s providence should be understood. His ideas in this regard had a remarkable and long-lasting influence on both Catholic and Protestant theologies – the Reformed tradition included. Since this is one of those insoluble, enigmatic but at the same time unavoidable, practical problems, it remains a topical issue till today. From various theological perspectives many volumes already dealt with the issue. This chapter, however, aims at revealing the deeper philosophical presuppositions of Aquinas’ doctrine of providence. It provides the results of a careful reading of his Contra Gentiles, regarded as his main philosophical work.*

*The chapter develops as follows: (1) As an introduction Aquinas’ ideas about God is reviewed. (2) The next section explains the fact of God’s providence. (3) The third part investigates the ways in which He executes his providence. (4) Then the general relationship of God’s providence to humankind is discussed. (5) The following section focuses on three specific, more practical issues, viz. human freedom, prayer, evil and predestination. (6) The chapter continues with some reflections on how one should today – after more than seven centuries since Aquinas wrote his Contra Gentiles – approach the difficult issue of God’s predestination in election and reprobation. (7) The chapter closes with a few final conclusions.*

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#### **1. Introduction: topicality, links, lay-out and references**

At the onset it is necessary to say something about the following: (1) the lasting topicality – through the ages – of the subject here treated; (2) the fact that this contribution links up with four previous chapters on the philosophy of Thomas and spells out the practical implications of his philosophy; (3) the lay-out of the investigation; and (4) the sources used.

### ***1.1 Topicality***

The issue of the relationship between a deity/God and a human being is a problem as old as mankind itself. It remains a problem in pagan and other non-Christian religions, but also in Christianity up to the present. Therefore what the work of God/a god is and the part of a human being in it, proves to be an *insoluble* problem. But at the same time it is an *unavoidable* issue – every human being is confronted by it in some way or another, at some time or other of his/her life and is compelled to think about it.

On my bookshelf my eye falls on, amongst others, the work of Berkouwer (1950), a well-known Reformed dogmatician. The first chapter deals with the crisis in the belief in providence during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most probably the situation has not changed much at the beginning of this century.

The famous Medieval Christian philosopher, Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) also thought intensely about God's providence. In his reflection he not only used the Bible but even the Greek philosophy of Aristotle in an attempt to reach clarity on this issue. It could be worthwhile listening to him.

Christians from the Reformational tradition may think that they cannot learn anything from this theologian-philosopher. Is he not the *doctor angelicus* of the Roman Catholic Church? This is true, but one should bear in mind that his ideas also had a far-reaching influence on Reformed theological thinking. It would even seem as if Reformed theologians and philosophers today want to return to Thomas for guidance via the Reformed Orthodoxy of the

sixteenth and seventeenth century. (Cf. Chapter 1.) With right, however, Klapwijk (1994:94) writes on this kind of conservatism and reprimination:

It refuses to investigate modern issues and ruminates on its own past. Symptoms of such conservatism can be recognised in the reprinting of the ‘ancient authors’, in the attention given by some to the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* and the tendency of falling back on Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper, Schilder, etc., who certainly are worthy of our full attention but do not need a halo or the mantle of a prophet.

[Translated from the Dutch.]

## **1.2 Links**

This contribution links up with the four previous chapters. In these we dealt with Thomas’s synthesis philosophy (between the Scriptures and especially Aristotle), his idea of law, ideas about reality, anthropology and epistemology. This chapter brings us to an application or the implications of the previous chapters. In the light of his whole philosophical system how does Thomas see the relationship between God and cosmos and in particular the human being?

In the previous chapters we repeatedly pointed out that the idea of law (nomology) of Thomas plays a central role in his whole complex of ideas. Is it also decisive in the case under consideration?

## **1.3 Lay-out**

Thomas treats the issue on which we now focus mostly in Book III of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. (Book I deals with God, Book II with creation and Book IV with redemption.) In this book the topic is God’s providence (*providentia*) and also the human being’s responsibility in, for instance, predestination and reprobation (cf. Chapter 163).

The main lines of the chapter will run as follows: (1) By way of introduction we take a brief look at Thomas’s *idea of God* (actually his proofs of God’s existence). (2) Subsequently we

deal with the *fact* of God's providence in general. (3) A third part will go into the *ways in which* God employs his providence. (4) Subsequently what the relation of God's providence in general entails *for a human being*. (5) Then the foregoing will be applied to the following four practical problems: human freedom, prayer, evil and predestination (election and reprobation) in their relation to God's providence. (6) The investigation is taken further with some ideas on how Christians after more than seven centuries should currently think about the difficult issue of divine predestination in election and reprobation. (7) The chapter is brought to a close with some conclusions and a view of the future.

#### ***1.4 References***

As we mentioned in the previous chapters references to secondary sources are kept to a minimum, since the author wants to give the word to Thomas himself as expressed in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG). For the original Latin text an edition of 1935 was consulted (cf. *S. Thomae Aquinatis*, 1935). The English translation quoted in this chapter is the Doubleday edition (cf. *Thomas Aquinas*, 1955-1957). In the quotes reference is first made to the specific book of the SCG and then to the page number(s) of this translation (e.g. IV, 160). Since Book III was translated in two parts, these are designated as IIIa or IIIb. While adding new secondary sources, own insights and corrections to previous ones, the author where necessary also uses previous (hitherto unpublished) research (cf. Van der Walt, 1968 and 1974).

The fact that the question of God's providence was a burning issue to Thomas, becomes evident from the volume of Book III of the SCG which is devoted to it in totality. It is the

most voluminous of all four the books which deal with God, creation, providence and redemption in that order. (In the Doubleday translation Book III covers 546 pages altogether.)

Thomas's idea of God determines his thoughts on God's providence. Thus we cannot confine ourselves to Book III but will begin with Book I in which his idea of God is explained.

## **2. Idea of God**

Thomas's idea of God as he explains it in Book I is fundamental to understanding his entire theology. We confine ourselves to pointing out just some aspects which are important for an understanding of his teaching on providence.

In Book I Thomas's idea that God should be regarded as law clearly emerges. Further: that God is intelligence (cf. Chapters 44-59), that God's essence also includes his will (cf. Chapters 72-88), and that his will does not subtract from the freedom of the creatures or impose an absolute necessity on them. To Thomas God also is the ultimate good (cf. Chapters 37-41).

### ***2.1 Proofs of God's existence***

Further we also find in Book I Thomas's proofs of God's existence which are indispensable for understanding his teaching on providence. He gives four proofs of God in Chapter 13 of Book I. These four proofs of God correspond with proofs 1, 2, 4 and 5 of the well-known *quinque viae* of Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* (Part I, Question 2, Article 3) Of these four proofs in the SCG Thomas took over from Aristotle the first three (cf. I, Ch. 13, p. 85-96).

### ***2.2 The various substantiations***

Thomas bases his proofs of God on three principles. These principles are laws of being, so they are valid for everything that exists, including God. They are: (1) that there is enough *reason* for existence, (2) that there is a *cause* for existence and (3) that the series from which something stems *cannot go on indefinitely*.

The proofs are the following: (1) the proof from movement, (2) the proof from cause, (3) the proof of necessity, (4) the proof of perfection and (5) the proof of a final aim. All these proofs follow the same pattern: Motion in creation indicates a first (immovable) mover (God); creaturely causes refer to a first (uncaused) cause; imperfection in the cosmos supposes a perfect being, and so forth (cf. Van der Walt, 1968:151-153 for particulars).

At his account of the last proof (cf. I, 96) Thomas also explicitly draws the conclusion that there must be a being by whose providence the world is ruled. In the light of his proofs of God's existence Thomas's teaching on providence can for instance be summarised like this: God as the first *cause* (compare the second proof) and *indispensable* Being (compare the third proof), *draws* all things (compare the first proof) which He created towards Himself as their ultimate *purpose* (compare fifth proof), so that in Him as the absolute *perfect One* (compare fourth proof) they find their own ultimate aim and perfection.

### ***2.3 Comments***

According to Thomas the following applies to each of these proofs: (1) that it starts with sensory experience which is digested by the natural reason; (2) each proof would end with a being who is accepted as "god" by everyone. (3) In his natural theology, however, Thomas does not attempt to prove *what* God is *like* (this is the task of his supernatural or Christian theology), but merely *that* he exists. Yet each proof also contributes to the *contents* of his idea of God, for instance as the first mover, uncaused cause, cause of perfection, etc.

In the ages following Aquinas these proofs of god were severely criticised. On my own bookshelf I see all the following sources with one glance: De Vos (1971), Hick (1964), Krüger (1970) and Weischedel (1971 and 1972). This is not the right moment to reiterate all the critique. We therefore confine ourselves to some basic remarks (cf. Venter, 1988:181).

Where does Thomas get the idea that God is everything that he (Thomas) deduces from each one of his proofs of God? Clearly not from the Bible but from Aristotle. The biblical idea of God has been replaced by a heathen idea of a god or at the least blended with it. It does not always emerge so distinctly that one here has to do with Aristotle's impersonal deity who is directed at himself. However, when Thomas calls God "absolute" (e.g. the absolute good) this term means that He can have no relationship, for something/somebody who has relationships is relatively dependent of that with which it is in a relationship.

If God is the pinnacle of a continuous hierarchy of being beginning with the observable world, is He not thereby included in the created world instead of being clearly distinct from it? And if the radical distinction between God and his creation is upheld, are the proofs of Thomas then still valid, or does he take a clear – but impermissible – leap between the finite and the infinite, the temporary and the eternal?

If one maintains the radical biblical distinction between God and his creation, it simply is inadmissible to call God a "cause", an "end" and so forth – all of them cosmic phenomena.

What are the implications of Thomas's idea of God for his teaching on providence?

### **3. Providence as a fact in general**

As said, providence is the theme of Book III. First it is stated that God is the ultimate End of everything (Ch. 1-63). Subsequently that God therefore also is the Ruler of everything, so that He can draw everything to Himself. Thomas explains this in Chapters 64-163. However, he first deals with God's cosmic rule according to which He rules every creature (Ch. 64-100) and then with God's particular rule according to which he rules intelligent creatures (i.a. human beings). It is here that Thomas (due to his philosophy) runs into several problems. If God rules and determines everything by his providence, how can one speak of a human being

having *freedom*? Do man's *prayers* then have any sense? Is God then also the cause of *evil* or sin?

But we will say more about this below. We here first confine ourselves to the *fact* that there is something like God's providence and subsequently to *how* it happens, or the *ways* in which God wields it.

Aquinas's train of thought can be summarised as follows: God, as the first cause, is also the ultimate end of everything and therefore draws everything (both intelligent and natural things) back to Himself as the ultimate good, in which they find their absolute perfection and bliss (cf. Chapter 2, 6.1.1).

### ***3.1 Everything directed at an end***

Thomas writes the following:

... each of the things produced through the will of an agent is directed to an end by the agent. For the proper object of the will is the good and the end. As a result, things which proceed from will must be directed to some end. Moreover, each thing achieves its ultimate end through its own action which must be directed to the end by Him who gives things the principles through which they act (IIIa, 31, 32).

Every acting thing acts, consciously or unconsciously, with a view to an end: "... it makes no difference whether the being tending to the end is a knowing being or not. For just as the target is the end for the archer, so is it the end for the motion of the arrow" (IIIa, 34).

This end idea is a typically Aristotelian idea in the work of Thomas, which he has reworked on some points only to fit into his synthesis philosophy.

### ***3.2. Everything pursues the good***

On this the *doctor angelicus* writes the following:

Again, the end is that in which the appetitive inclination of an agent or mover, and of the thing moved, finds its rest. Now, the essential meaning of the good is that it provides a terminus for appetite, since ‘the good is that which all desire’. Therefore, every action and motion are for the sake of a good (IIIa, 38).

The role that the good plays in the work of Thomas is likewise due to the influence of the philosophy of Aristotle. The *Nicomachian Ethics* of “the philosopher” is therefore quoted in the preceding quotation to support Thomas’s teaching on the good. This, too, is “adapted” as a result of Thomas’s synthesis, for the ultimate good is now identified with the God of the Scriptures.

### ***3.3 Everything pursues God***

God is the ultimate good. So everything pursues Him as its ultimate end (Ch. 17). However, God is not mentioned as the end in the sense that He did not exist before: “Therefore, God is not the end of things in the sense of being something set up as an ideal, but as a pre-existing being Who is to be attained ...” (IIIa, 74, 75).

### ***3.4 Creaturely perfection means deification***

To pursue God as the ultimate end, means to become like God:

Created things are made like unto God by the fact that they attain to divine goodness. If then, all things tend toward God as an ultimate end, so that they may attain His goodness, it follows that the ultimate end of things is to become like God ... Moreover, all created things are, in a sense, images of the first agent, that is, of God, ‘for the agent makes a product to his own likeness’. Now, the function of a perfect image is to represent its prototype by likeness to it; this is why an

image is made. Therefore, all things exist in order to attain to the divine likeness, as to their ultimate end (IIIa, 76).

From this quotation it emerges very clearly how Thomas's philosophy and in particular his idea of law determine his natural theology concerning providence. We here encounter again his teaching (cf. Chapter 2) that God creates the things in his image (as a result of the exemplars/laws which exist in Him and which He creates into the things). Furthermore we also find the idea (cf. Chapter 3) of the creatures' participation in God. This has the consequence that everything in turn strives to attain God. The nearer the creatures come to God in this pursuit, the more perfect – divine – they become.

### ***3.5 God Himself the mover***

Behind the pursuit of God is God Himself who, as the immovable mover, sets all things in motion to Himself as the ultimate end. "... to rule or govern by providence is simply to move things toward an end through understanding" (IIIa, 210,211). Once again we have distinct proof that Thomas's (natural) theology is determined by his synthesis philosophy, for in his Word God is not revealed to us as an "immovable mover". However, to Aristotle god was the immovable who nevertheless moves everything.

God moves everything by means of an act of understanding. This is understandable, since in Book I Thomas described God as intellect. Without doubt this reminds us of Aristotle's god whom he regarded as the "intellect of the intellect". However, may a human being reduce God to something cosmic by speaking of his intellect?

### ***3.6 Intellectual creatures pursue God by means of their understanding of God***

Certain creatures (human beings) also possess an intellectual capacity. The intellect is the form or law which God created into them. Therefore the fact that creatures possess intellect brings them very near to the pure form/law viz. God:

Now, an intellectual creature chiefly becomes like God by the fact that it is intellectual, for it has this sort of likeness over and above what other creatures have, and this likeness includes all others (IIIa, 99).

This is valid of a human being as intellectual substance: "... the human intellect reaches God as its end, through an act of understanding" (IIIa, 99). Elsewhere: "The ultimate end of man is the knowledge of God" (IIIa, 102). "... the ultimate felicity of man lies in the contemplation of truth" (IIIa 123).

Is this really what the Bible teaches: An intellectualist union with God or rather childlike faith and obedience to his law?

### ***3.7 Biblicist eisegesis and exegesis***

To anyone with an elementary knowledge of the Bible it will be clear that what Thomas is teaching here is not derived from God's Word. Then how does he reconcile the Aristotelian idea of god with the biblical idea of God? It becomes evident that his natural theology is not purely reasonable and "neutral" – he also attempts to support it with quotations from the Scriptures.

However, this can be done in no other way than according to a Biblicist method of eisegesis and exegesis. As proof that God is the ultimate end, Thomas for instance appeals to Proverbs 16:4: ("The LORD works out everything for his own ends...") and Revelation 22:13 ("I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End"). (Cf. IIa, 74).

### 3.8 Comments

We have to state that what the Scriptures here reveal about the end of God with things (Proverbs 16:4), may not be understood according to the Aristotelian teaching of an end as Thomas does.

Aristotle was a heathen and his idea of god was a pagan fabrication. As is the case with all false gods (idols), there was not a radical difference between his god and the cosmos. Cosmic concepts like cause, end and intellect could therefore be made to apply to his god. Further (since there was no radical difference between him and his god) a human being could also strive to become like god. Such mysticism, however, is not biblical. (Cf. Van der Walt, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c and 2015d.)

If we depart from the Scriptural idea of the radical distinction between God and his creation a temporary creature can never become eternal, never become like God. In the life hereafter human beings will still be creatures and thus be “temporal”.

A human being can never transgress the law (the impassable “border” between God and his creation) to become one with God in a mystical manner. This pagan idea of Aristotle to become like his god, was the same sinful thought which caused the fall of Adam and Eve in paradise (cf. Genesis 3:5). Therefore the pursuit of a human being may never be to become *like God* but once more to become a *child of God* who obeys the law. Instead of Aquinas’ *ontological union* with God, the Bible teaches a *religious relationship* (a covenant) between God and humans.

So when the Scriptures speak about the/an end one would have to be careful not to explain it in an Aristotelian-Thomist way. This also applies to exegesis of Romans 11 verse 36. “...For from him and through him and to him are all things”.

In my opinion it is not a case that *above* human beings there is an end by which they are drawn, but rather that God, through the work of his Holy Spirit, inspires people to live a life *here and now* that honours Him. By virtue of his being created as a child of God, a human being is destined for an all-inclusive vocation *on earth*. So it is not as Aristotle claimed that a human being has a supra-cosmic end to which his life leads. Human beings received the mandate for their lives *at the beginning* (cf. Gen. 1:26; 2:15) and this duty has to be fulfilled *here on earth*.

In the work of Thomas all attention is focused on *heaven*. The fact that the Word of God presents a new *earth* as our final home, did not fit very well into his philosophy. Middleton (2014) shows what the Word of God really teaches about a new earth.

The next main point deals with:

#### **4. The ways in which God wields his providence**

Having stated the *fact* of God's providence we now move to *how* Thomas pictured himself the rule of God by way of providence which he described as: "... to rule or govern by providence is simply to move things toward an end through understanding" (IIIa, 210,211).

How does this happen?

##### **4.1 God sets an order for things**

Thomas explains: "... to govern things is nothing but to impose order on them" (IIIa, 212).

The other way round: "... to order the actions of certain things toward their end is to govern them" (IIIa, 213). Texts in which God is called King and Ruler of the earth, are then cited to confirm this idea.

Thomas therefore rightly sees God as the Law-giver. From what now follows it will however, become evident that his absolutisation of the law and his nomolising of even God (cf. again Chapter 2) prevents him from holding a Scriptural view in this regard.

## ***4.2 God is omnipresent***

Thomas further writes: “God must be everywhere and in all things” (IIIa, 223); “... wherever being is found, the divine presence is also there” (IIIa, 224). However, God’s omnipresence should not be understood wrongly (e.g. in a pantheist way):

But we must not think that God is everywhere in such a way that He is divided in various areas of place, as if one part of Him were here and another part (t)here. Rather, His entire being is everywhere. For God, as a completely simple being, has no parts... Instead, He is in all things in the fashion of an agent cause (IIIa, 226).

God’s omnipresence should therefore be understood in the sense that He is the “agent cause” (*per modum causae agentis*). Here again the Aristotelian *causa*-teaching plays a decisive role. God not only is the end cause (*causa finalis*) but also the working cause (*causa efficiens*).

As textual “evidence” for the omnipresence of God Thomas quotes amongst others the following: Jeremiah 23:24 (““Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD”) and Psalm 139:8: (“If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”)

## ***4.3 Comments***

The concept “omnipresence” (like the word “providence”) itself does not occur in the Word of God. It should therefore be treated with caution: it could be of pagan origin.

The background to the teaching of God’s omnipresence is that a human being in heathenism was regarded as autonomous and independent – detached from any bond with God. The Christians during early synthesis thinking (who had come to know the Word of God) did, however, realise that a human being can never be seen as autonomous, detached from God. So one way or another God has to be brought into contact with human beings and thus be declared omnipresent.

In this way, however, God is easily reduced to something cosmic, for a spatial term (which belongs to created reality) is brought to bear on Him. Possibly God is called omnipresent to honour Him, for then He is elevated above the human being who is spatially limited. However, in this way one is thinking about God in terms of an earthly concept.

Thomas's teaching on the omnipresence is also connected with his dualistic ontology of God-cosmos. Due to the fact that he knows the Word of God he cannot detach God (as the transcendent) from his creation (the non-transcendent), for the Word of God teaches that He governs his creation. If nowadays Reformed theologians speculate on the transcendence and the immanence of God, it could be revealing the fact that a dualist philosophy is their point of departure. (For a recent example, cf. Kruger, 2011.)

#### ***4.4 Primary and secondary causes***

Following Aristotle, God executes his providence or rule by means of secondary causes (*causae secundae*). Something of this we already find in Chapter 21, where Thomas states that things naturally strive to become like God in so far as they are the causes of other things.

Due to the fact that the human being also is a cause, human beings therefore resemble God, the primary cause. Recourse is taken to 1 Corinthians 3:9: "For we are God's fellow workers..." (cf. IIIa, 83). This text too is therefore explained according to the Aristotelian *causa*-teaching.

In Chapter 66 one finds more detail where Thomas states that everything acts only through divine power. Amongst other things he says:

... being is the proper product of the primary agent, that is of God; and all things that give being do so because they act by God's power ... the act of being is what secondary agents produce through the power of the primary agent (IIIa, 219)

In Chapter 77 Aquinas spells it out even more clearly that divine providence takes place by means of two causes (cf. chapter headings). Amongst other things he says:

So, He Himself through His wisdom must arrange the orders for all things, even the least; on the other hand, He may execute the small details by means of other lower powers, through which He Himself works, as does a cosmic and higher power through a lower and particular power. It is appropriate, then, that there be inferior agents as executors of divine providence (IIIa, 258, 259).

So there are two (intermediate) causes which (at different levels) carry out God's providence.

According to Thomas God's providence concerns *all* creatures. He likes using the image mentioned above of the archer and the arrow. The archer intentionally aims his arrow at the target, but the arrow itself, albeit unintentionally, is also aimed at the target (cf. e.g. IIIa, 211).

#### ***4.5 God rules by means of intellectual creatures***

Furthermore it is understandable that God would exercise his providence by means of intentional, intellectual creatures as secondary causes. (cf. Chapter 78.) This is possible as a consequence of a hierarchically constructed creation. The higher intellectual creatures are better equipped to be of service in God's rule, because:

... an ability to establish order which is done by cognitive power, and an ability to execute it which is done by operative power, are both required for providence, and rational creatures share in both types of power, while the rest of creatures have operative powers only. Therefore, all other creatures are ruled by means of rational creatures under divine providence (IIIa, 261).

The intellectualism of Thomas (cf. previous chapters) distinctly surfaces here. Not the will, but the intellect ultimately rules.

#### ***4.6 The higher ones rule the lower ones***

Thomas's hierarchy of being also determines his teaching on providence when he writes: "... in regard to the execution, He orders the lower things through the higher ones, and the bodily things through the spiritual ones" (III, 278). Elsewhere:

Indeed, those who excel in understanding naturally gain control, whereas those who have defective understanding, but a strong body, seem to be naturally fitted for service, as Aristotle says in his *Politics*. The view of Solomon is also in accord with this, for he says: 'The fool shall serve the wise' (Prov. 11:29); and again: 'Provide out of all the people wise men ... who may judge the people at all times' Exod.18:21-22 (IIIa, 273).

These words of Thomas once again give clear proof of who speaks the final word in his teaching on providence: Aristotle does not concur with Solomon but Solomon's words are quoted, because they are supposed to conform with the heathen philosophy of Aristotle.

Thus God's rules hierarchically from above to below: God – angels – heavenly bodies – human beings – animals – plants – matter. The first four are all intellectual creatures according to Thomas.

#### ***4.7 Why specifically by intellectual creatures?***

The question now has to be answered why it is that God rules the lower things by means of the intellectual creatures. The answer is quite interesting. Once again it is connected to Thomas's idea of law.

It has been mentioned that God exercises his providence by imposing order on things. God is pure form (essence/law). Therefore Thomas can say: "... the first rational principle of divine providence is simply the divine goodness ..." (IIIb. 70). However, it has already become evident that apart from God being pure form (essence) the things (except for matter) also

have forms which are derived from God. And these forms in the things have a nomothetic character. Therefore this solves Thomas's problem completely. By means of the forms/laws which are in Himself and also in the things, God can wield his providential rule. This becomes evident from the following citation:

Now, it is obvious that intellectual power is more cosmic than any operative power, for the intellectual power contains cosmic forms, while each power is operative only because of some form proper to the agent. Therefore, all other creatures must be moved and regulated by means of intellectual powers (IIIa, 262).

#### ***4.8 God's rational plan***

Of course to rational beings a rational plan would be appropriate (cf. IIIa, 260, 261). Thomas deals extensively with this *divinae providentiae ratio* in Chapter 97. The "rational plan" (from the Latin *ratio*) is nothing but the forms (laws) which God created into the things and which enable Him to rule them, so that they can be aimed at Him as the ultimate end. The foundation of Thomas's teaching on providence is therefore his particular law-idea (an absolutisation of the law). Once more it is clear evidence that his (natural) theology is determined by the philosophical angle from which he writes.

This idea of a predetermined rational plan in God's intellect would play an enormous role through all the ages of scholastic thinking – even among Orthodox Reformed theologians. Except that later on it was labelled differently, like God's "eternal counsel" or "decree" according to which He is believed to have elected or rejected people since eternity.

What is more disconcerting is that God (because – as Aristotle taught – He is supposed to be immovable) cannot change his own "rational plan". On closer analysis He is his own captive, subject to his own counsel!

#### ***4.9 God subjected to his own plan***

In a previous chapter it has been pointed out how God is nomolised or subject to his own law. (For God and law is one – God is pure form.) This clearly surfaces again here in what Thomas teaches on providence when (in Chapter 98) he states that God cannot act outside his providential plan. Thus God (as the Law-giver) does not really stand “above” his law, but is subject to his own law.

#### ***4.10 Conclusion***

Not only the fact that Thomas works with a nomolised god but also his view of a nomolised cosmos prevents him from seeing the *religious* relationship between God and cosmos correctly but regards it as an *ontological* relationship.

However, if the *distinction* between God, law and cosmos is recognised, the *covenantal relationship* between God and his creation can also be seen in the right way. Then it is clear that God according to his law rules the creation which is subject to it. God does not need intermediate, secondary causes to make his laws applicable. Neither is He subject to his own law/counsel.

After this account of Thomas’s teaching on providence in general, we can subsequently deal with God’s providence with regard to human beings.

### **5. The providence of God in relation to the human being**

First we look at the issue which here confronts Thomas and then at his “solution”.

#### ***5.1 The issue***

As mentioned already, all secondary agents act by means of the power of the primary agent, namely God (cf. IIIa, 219). Texts from the Scriptures like Isaiah 26:12, John 15:5, Philippians

2:13 (cf. IIIa, 222) and Proverbs 21:1 (cf. IIIb, 35) are used as evidence that God does everything. However, this confronts Thomas with several problems.

If God does everything through his power, does the creature then actually do nothing? Thomas states the problem as follows: "... if God produces the entire effect, then nothing is left of the effect for the natural agent to produce" (IIIa, 235).

Elsewhere he formulates the problem as follows:

... it may be made clearer that nothing escapes divine providence; also that the order of divine providence cannot possibly be changed; and yet that it is not necessary for all things to happen of necessity simply because they come about as a result of divine providence (IIIb, 53).

Please note that Thomas states explicitly that God's providential plan is unchangeable (like God Himself). Thus God becomes his own prisoner and his rational plan leads to a markedly deterministic view. How does Thomas try to escape from his own philosophical net?

### ***5.2 Thomas's solution to the problem***

He suggests several -- in my opinion unsatisfactory -- solutions. For instance, he says that a distinction should be made between that which acts and the power by which it acts. A natural thing does act, but not without the power of God (cf. IIIa, 236).

Further:

It is also apparent that the same effect is not attributed to a natural cause and to divine power in such a way that it is partly done by God, and partly by the natural agent; rather, it is wholly done by both, according to a different way, just as the same effect is wholly attributed to the instrument and also wholly to the principal agent (IIIa, 237).

Later on he attempts to solve the issue by accepting two kinds of causes:

God, Who is the governor of the cosmos, intends some of His effects to be established by way of necessity, and others contingently. On this basis, He adapts different causes to them; for one group of effects there are necessary causes, but for another contingent causes. So, it falls under the order of divine providence not only that this effect is to be, but also that this effect is to be contingently, while another is to be necessarily. Because of this, some of the things that are subject to providence are necessary, whereas others are contingent and not at all necessary (IIIb, 56).

With his distinction between deterministic, “necessary” causes and indeterministic “contingent” causes (for more on this see Gevaert, 1965) Thomas attempts to talk himself out of the problem. Apart from remarking that it may be an all too easy circumvention of the issue, several questions present themselves here. As for instance whether – according to Thomas himself – causes as such are not of a necessary character. So then what are non-necessary causes? Furthermore it is hard to comprehend how these two kinds of causes – which actually contradict each other – can both be upheld.

To Thomas the issue regarding the providence of God in relation to the human being which has now been stated in general terms, presents itself in diverse forms. I want to mention only a few to point out how several unnecessary problems arise in his thinking as a consequence of his philosophical point of departure which cannot be derived from the Scriptures. Since Thomas, due to his synthesis philosophy, did not hold a sound biblical idea of God nor a view of human beings that was biblically accounted for, he could not possibly have a correct view of the relationship between God and human beings either. It is illustrated now with how he viewed the relation between God’s providence and human (1) freedom, (2) prayer, (3) evil, (4) predestination, election and reprobation.

## **6. Divine providence and human freedom**

We will be dealing here with (1) freedom of will, (2) the freedom of choice, (3) contingency and (4) divine sovereignty (cf. also Vorster, 1965).

### ***6.1 Freedom of will***

Thomas's view of freedom has been taken over from Aristotle: "...‘that is free which is for its own sake’ according to the Philosopher in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*" (I, 271).

This freedom is closely linked with the will so that Aquinas mostly speaks about freedom of will:

Furthermore, "that is free which is for its own sake", and thus the free has the nature of that which is through itself. Now, first and primarily, will has liberty in acting, for according as someone acts voluntarily he is said to perform any given act freely (I, 241, 242).

As one who believes the Scriptures it is noteworthy that Thomas does not query the Aristotelian idea that freedom would mean existing *for one's own sake* – a completely unbiblical idea.

### ***6.2 Freedom as the freedom of choice***

The freedom of the will consists in his freedom of choice. To Thomas freedom is the freedom of choice, in other words being able to choose from different options. "Free choice is said in relation to the things that one wills, not of necessity, but of his own accord. Thus, there is in us free choice in relation to our willing to run or to walk" (I, 270).

I would question Thomas's view that freedom is the same as having the freedom of choice – at least when it comes to human religious freedom. Of course I can choose whether I want to

walk or run. But deep, religious freedom does not consist in my choosing for or against God, but is the very consequence of the fact that I desire nothing but to obey his commandments.

According to Thomas only human beings possess the freedom of choice. “But on this account is man said to have free choice as opposed to the other animals because he is inclined to willing by judgement of the reason, and not by the impulse of nature as are the brutes” (I, 270). In this statement what emerges clearly once more is, amongst other things, the intellectualism of Thomas under the influence of Aristotle: the intellect or human reason not only demands a freedom of choice, but even guarantees that what is chosen will be good or right.

Sometimes Thomas quotes Aristotle’s definition of freedom in a slightly different way. Instead of “that is free which is for its own *sake*” it is quoted (from the same place in the *Metaphysics*) as: “the free is that which is its own *cause*” (II, 144).

Does Thomas contradict himself here or do I misunderstand him? For on the preceding pages he clearly taught that God as primary Cause governs everything. Now a human being is his own cause. Does not this sound rather like unbiblical human autonomy?

### ***6.3 Freedom of will and contingency***

Thomas’s “solution” is to connect the will with the doctrine of causality. Since the will is a *contingent* cause (cf. 5.2 above), freedom of will is possible for a human being:

Now, the fact that the will is a contingent cause arises from its perfection, for it does not have power limited to one outcome but rather has the ability to produce this effect or that; for which reason it is contingent in regard to either one or the other. Therefore, it is more pertinent to divine providence to preserve liberty of will than contingency in natural causes (IIIa, 244, 245).

On the issue of the freedom of choice and freedom of will lively debates have been conducted and many books were written before and after Thomas (cf. e.g. Vorster, 1965). One gets the impression that Thomas (because his contemporaries had already accused him of a deterministic idea of God) was wavering between determinism on the one hand and indeterminism on the other. This clearly transpires from the summary by Gevaert (1965:48,49) of Thomas's view of freedom:

Freedom means the absence of determinism, not being determined, no fixed finality that was determined in advance by nature and is already written in her dynamic development. Positively seen, freedom means: self-determination regarding a particular good. A human being himself is the cause of his determination. Thomas often expresses this with a maxim from Aristotle: *liberum est quod sui causa est*. [Translated from the Dutch.]

#### **6.4 Comments**

On the one hand Thomas's deterministically coloured idea of God is unbiblical. On the other hand likewise his viewpoint, namely "the free man is he who acts for his own sake" (IIIb, 115), which he inherited from Aristotle, is far removed from what the Scriptures teach on human freedom. It could imply arbitrariness and lawlessness. According to the Scriptures one should not act for his own interest but in a way that honours God (in subordination to God's law). Then only will one be truly free.

Nor does freedom mean, according to the Scriptures, that one is not subject to "necessary causes" but to "contingent causes". Freedom has nothing to do with Aristotle's doctrine of causality. It means (on the negative side) to be released from sin and (on the positive side) again to be able to obey the law of God. The latter is only possible by the deliverance worked by Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The direction of a human being's answer

to his deliverance and new responsibility is indicated by God's law. Being free from sin to obey the law of God applies to both the central law of love and the different modal laws.

However, by “freedom to obey” I do not mean the same as the traditional “freedom *in bondage*”. For then the age-old problem of determinism or indeterminism has not been overcome yet. Freedom would then simply be seen (deterministically) as bondage to the law. However, freedom does not consist in mere *bondage* to the law, but in *obedience* to the law. Of course God’s law never becomes invalid. However, it can be obeyed or disobeyed. And obedience is only possible when a human being has been delivered from sin.

Therefore freedom does not consist in the ability to choose either, as Thomas claims. Which does not mean that there is no such thing as the ability to choose. However, I would prefer to regard a human being’s ability to choose as being limited in for instance, choosing between walking and running. In man’s (religious) relationship with God one cannot consider freedom of choice. God firstly chooses a human being. It is not the human being that *chooses* God. All human beings can do, is to *respond*, either positively or negatively.

### ***6.5 Human freedom and divine sovereignty***

It stands to reason that Thomas could not combine his teaching on human freedom (which was coloured by the influence of Aristotle) with the sovereignty of the true God. In particular he wrestles with the question whether the providence of God excludes human beings’ freedom of will in a deterministic manner. “... it would evidently be against the character of providence for all things to happen out of necessity. Therefore, divine providence does not impose necessity on things by entirely excluding contingency from things” (IIIa, 244).

Here again we encounter Thomas’s earlier problematic distinction between “necessary” (on God’s side) and “contingent” (on the side of human beings).

Because Thomas did not acknowledge the radical distinction between God and human beings (and therefore cannot distinguish between a choice that is possible for human beings regarding created things, but impossible regarding God) he has problems with the grace of God. Due to his synthesis philosophy he is wavering all the time.

On the one hand he teaches that a human being cannot attain his ultimate end without the help of God (cf. Ch. 147). His freedom of choice is not sufficient. "... free choice is not sufficient without the external help of God ..." (IIIb, 253). Several texts are quoted which put all the emphasis on the work of God in the human being, for instance John 6:44 and John 15:4 (cf. IIIb, 225), 2 Corinthians 5:14 (cf. IIIb, 226), Titus 3:5, Romans 9:16 and Lamentations 5:21 (cf. IIIb, 229).

For this reason Thomas also rejects the Pelagian view which holds that a human being is redeemed purely from his own free will (cf. IIIb, 225). In several instances Thomas opposes the Pelagians particularly regarding their view of the will (cf. e.g. III, Ch. 14, 149, 155, 159 and 160).

On the other hand in other instances again, Thomas maintains that God does not force his grace on man – for a human being's freedom and ability of choice may not be destroyed: "... God does not force us by His help to act rightly ... forced acts are not acts of virtues, since the main thing in virtue is choice ..." (IIIb, 227).

In spite of his reprobation of the Pelagian point of view Thomas is due to his great emphasis on man's freedom of will and ability to choose not that distant from the Pelagians. Therefore Reformed scholars often characterise Thomas's viewpoint in the SCG as semi-Pelagian.

The reason for the difference between Thomas and Pelagius was amongst other things that Thomas was an *intellectualist* philosopher, while the Pelagians' thinking was *voluntarist*. According to Thomas the will acts on the basis of the guidance it receives from the intellect.

(Following this viewpoint one could say that wickedness stems from ignorance.) This intellectualist tendency was also characteristic of the later Reformed Orthodoxy or Scholasticism which laid so much emphasis on the purity of doctrine in church and theology. The voluntarists (derived from Latin *voluntas* = will) held the exact opposite point of view, viz. that the will guides the intellect.

### **6.6 Comments**

The hierarchical ontology of Thomas prevents him from truly finding a solution to the issue under discussion. For according to him God and the human being are parts of one being. And even if one considers God as much greater than a human being – even ten thousand times greater – He (the transcendent One) remains a part of one and the same pyramid of being.

According to such a view one can regard God and human beings either as rivals or as fellow workers – while neither of these viewpoints actually solves the problem. For instance as rivals: God does everything and therefore a human being can do nothing. Or: the human being does everything and therefore God can do nothing. Or as fellow workers: God does the one half and the human being the other half. Likewise the following effort to reach a balance does not hold good: God does everything and the human being does everything; or God's work encompasses the work of human beings (the view of Thomas).

Thomas's synthesis with the pagan ideas of Aristotle prevented him from reaching a Scriptural view of the relationship between God and man. The relationship between God and man is not that between a Primary and secondary cause. (God is not a cause – a cause is something of a cosmic nature.) The work of God and human beings cannot be compared. Provided one departs from the *radical* (instead of merely a *relative*) distinction between God and a human being, we as human beings still cannot fathom this problem, but at least we are prevented from searching for answers to false problems.

### ***6.7 Determinism***

Simultaneously we have to clear up a misunderstanding about Thomas. Often it was claimed (from a Reformed angle) that Thomas advocated the autonomy (being one's own law) or independence of the human being's natural abilities from God. But according to Thomas even before the fall the human being could not by himself attain anything completely without God who formed him, actualised him and extended grace to him.

The greatest hazard in the work of Aquinas was not that he accepted a fully autonomous human being, but rather that he leaned over to the other side too much. It seems as if God by virtue of his eternal knowledge and the causal chain of being controls the whole of creation to such an extent that – in spite of what Thomas says on free will – no room is left for human responsibility. Therefore the protest of his contemporaries and later generations was not that Thomas supposed man to be partly independent from God, but rather that Thomas arrived at philosophical-theological determinism (cf. Venter, 1985:100).

The later Roman Catholic philosopher Suarez (1548-1617), for instance rejects Thomist determinism and instead claims that God knows from eternity what the individual will is going to choose and then by his grace intervenes to prevent human choices to deviate from it.

How did Thomas attempt to solve the second issue, namely that of divine providence and prayer?

### **7. Providence and prayer**

Some people assert that prayers avail nothing, since God in his providence is immutable. Others claim that the providence of God can be changed by human prayers. Of course Thomas could accept neither of these. Once again one has the same – futile – discrepancy between the omnipotence of God and the capability of human beings, because they are placed on virtually the same level and both are nominalised within a hierarchy of being.

### ***7.1 Aquinas's problem***

In this light Thomas also read the Word of God. But the Scriptures can offer no final solution, for it is no use searching for solutions to false problems in the Holy Scriptures. Thomas finds texts proclaiming both God's "changeability" (e.g. Is. 38:1-5 and Jer. 18:7-8 – cf. IIIb, 65) and his "unchangeability" (e.g. Num. 23:19, 1 Sam. 15:29 and Mal. 3:6 – cf. IIIb, 64). The error, however, lies in the fact that these texts are read by Thomas according to a philosophy that does not recognise the clear ontic distinction between God and man as well as their religious relationship.

### ***7.2 His solution***

Thomas's solution in this case too, as we found – and rejected – before, is that the providence of God *already includes or encompasses* human prayers:

In this way, then, prayers are efficacious before God, yet they do not destroy the immutable order of divine providence, because this individual request that is granted to a certain petitioner falls under the order of divine providence (IIIb, 62).

Later on Thomas distinguishes between a so-called universal and particular order in the providence of God with the intention of solving the problem. Prayers retain their power, not because they *change* the cosmic order, but they are *part* of the cosmic order:

Therefore, prayers retain their power; not that they can change the order of eternal control, but rather as they themselves exist under such order. But nothing prevents some particular order, due to an inferior cause, from being changed through the efficacy of prayers, under the operation of God Who transcends all causes (IIIb, 65).

### ***7.3 Comments***

Thomas's partial universalism is intimated here. But once again the question confronts one: Is this distinction (between universal-individual) not too simple an evasion? The key issue, namely what the relation is between the two (the universal individual) remains unsolved.

The solution supplied by Thomas (that the providence of God encompasses a human being's responsibility and his prayers – schematically represented by a circle with a point in the middle) is still supported by many Reformed people. It is, however, unacceptable. It finally amounts to a human being simply praying what God wants him to pray.

It is an interesting fact that Thomas is not at peace with the texts that speak of God's changeability, repentance, wrath, etcetera, stating that these should be understood metaphorically or figuratively (cf. IIIb, 66). Behind this lies again Aristotle's deterministic idea of god, namely God as the immutable (cf. Den Ottolander, 1965).

The wrath of God on sin and human repentance (when people are converted) may, however, not be understood figuratively Biblically understood. It should be taken literally – otherwise “our only comfort in life and death” becomes invalid.

The next problem Aquinas struggled with was:

## **8. Providence and evil**

If Thomas (according to his Aristotelian doctrine of causality) could say “God alone directly works on the choice made by man” (IIIb, 42), or “... man does choose in all cases the object in accord with God's operation within his will” (IIIb, 44), does it not imply that human choice and decisions are in any case not free or are determined by God? And that God, therefore, also is the Author of evil?

We will deal with the following four facets of Thomas's view of evil: (1) it is something coincidental, (2) a lack of the good, (3) negatively linked with the good, (4) both God and human beings are responsible for it.

### ***8.1 Evil is something accidental***

Already in Book II Thomas is confronted by the problem of evil (*malum*) (cf. Ch. 41). He says that God as the ultimate good can only be the cause of the good. Only in his *effects* can there originate accidental evil. "... the first principle of all things is the one first good, in whose effects evil results accidentally" (II, 123).

Please note how Thomas here once more takes refuge in the contingent or coincidental in order not to end up in determinism. (The questions I previously raised in this respect therefore still stand.) Difficult texts like Isaiah 45:7 and Amos 3:6 are explained as follows:

Now, God is said to make or create evils, so far as He creates things which in themselves are good, yet are injurious to others; the wolf, though in its own kind a good of nature, is nevertheless evil to the sheep; so, too, is fire in relation to water, being dissolutive of the latter. ... He is said to create evils when He uses created things, which in themselves are good, to punish us for our evil doings (II, 123).

However, he could not stick to such a viewpoint. After standing by his idea that everything acts with a view to the good as their end, in Book III, in connection with his teaching on providence, the question nevertheless arises: but what about evil? His answer once more is that evil is not the *intention* of the one who acts – it is *accidental* (cf. III, Ch. 4).

So, if this object is not good but bad, this will be apart from his intention. Therefore, an intelligent agent does not produce an evil result, unless it be apart from his intention. Since to tend to the good is common to the intelligent agent and to the agent that acts by natural instinct, evil does not result from the intention of any agent, except apart from the intention (IIIa, 42,43).

Note how the intellectualism of Thomas transpires again in this quotation. An intelligent being automatically pursues the good.

## ***8.2 Evil is a lack of the good***

Therefore to Thomas evil is nothing more than an accidental shortcoming or defect. He further distinguishes between evil in a qualified sense (if for instance one has some or other defect, like not having two hands) and evil in an unqualified sense (when there is a defect in the action itself) (Cf. IIIa, 44).

The following is his concise summary definition of evil: "... evil is simply a privation of something which a subject is entitled by its origin to possess and which it ought to have, as we have said. Such is the meaning of the word 'evil' among all men" (IIIa, 48). Or still more concise: "Evil is the privation of good" (IIIa, 52).

But then the good must be the cause of the evil (cf. Ch. 10) – although Thomas immediately sets a limit: "... it is clear, both in the natural order and in the moral order, that evil is caused by good accidentally" (IIIa, 61). Clearly Thomas must have had in mind a relative (cosmic) good here; otherwise God Himself (the Absolute Good) in the end again becomes the Cause of the evil.

## ***8.3 Evil is connected to the good in a negative way***

The next (third) step in Thomas's argument is that evil is dependent on the good in a negative way – the good becomes the basis for the evil (cf. Ch. 11). The Bible does teach that evil (as the negative or opposite) can only sponge on the good, but this is not what Thomas has in mind. He argues as follows: When evil is destroyed the possibility for good to exist also comes to an end: "... there must always continue to be a subject for evil, if evil is to endure" (IIIa, 63).

## ***8.4 Comments***

However, this view of evil differs completely from that which the Word of God teaches. Within the confines of this chapter it cannot be spelled out in detail. (Compare for instance

the reflections in Berkouwer, 1958 and 1960.) Only a few remarks are made here which boil down to the conclusion that the teaching of Thomas has to be rejected. (1) Evil is not something *accidental*. It was the result of a *deliberate* choice by Adam and Eve. (2) Neither is it a (coincidental) *shortcoming*, but *rebellion* against God and his law. (3) Nor is it *essential for the good* but the opposite thereof. (4) It has nothing to do with *causes and effects*, but is an indication of the wrong *religious direction* in the life of a human being.

Evil arises, according to the Word of God, when a human being as subject to the law disobeys the law of God. At creation everything was good, but as a consequence of the sin of human beings (disobedience to the law of God) evil entered creation. Christ redeems us so that we can once more do good, that is, obey the law of God. Evil therefore is not something applicable to God or his law, but only to human beings and the rest of creation which due to the disobedience of man, has to suffer.

Since good and evil is bound up with the *religious direction* of one's life, it also permeates everything – including one's own heart – and cannot be localised in certain areas.

Evil, therefore, is not merely a shortcoming or lack of the good, but something much more severe. Due to sin – a wrong *direction* – evil has become possible and as a consequence of that there also are all kinds of *structural* shortcomings in the creature, for instance illness and death. The good is the radically *opposite* direction of evil. One evil in *itself* produces another. Behind it all lies the evil power of Satan.

In his attempt to prevent God from being implicated as the cause of evil in the final instance, Thomas even claims the opposite: Good would not have been there if there was no evil. The good becomes dependent on evil. It seems that to Aquinas there is a kind of dialectic relationship of dependence between good and evil.

That Thomas at least wants to think in a consistently logical manner transpires from the next step :

### ***8.5 The cause of evil lies with both the secondary and the primary cause (God)***

First Thomas again emphasises that evil (as a defect) lies with the secondary causes. “So, it is possible in the case of things made and governed by God, for some defect and evil to be found, because of a defect of the secondary agents, even though there be no defect in God Himself” (IIIa, 238).

However, if he intends thinking consistently, evil cannot be ascribed solely to the secondary cause. “... it is evident that bad actions, according as they are defective, are not from God but from defective proximate causes; but, in so far as they possess something of action and entity, they must be from God” (IIIa, 241).

Attempting to justify God as the cause of evil Thomas again says that many good things in creation would not have been there if there were no evil. (For more arguments by Thomas, cf. Venter, 1985:96-97 and 1988:172-173.)

For instance, there would have been no patience in good people unless there was evil in the bad; there would have been no room for justice unless there was injustice; one would not have valued one’s health unless one knew illness (cf. IIIa, 239, 240). His conclusion is: “Therefore, it is not the function of divine providence totally to exclude evils from things” (IIIa, 240). As “proof” he cites two texts: Isaiah 45:7: (“I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things”) and Amos 3:6: (“When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?”).

Later on, towards the end of Book III, Thomas once more touches on the issue of evil (cf. Ch. 162). There he quotes more texts which give the impression that God is the cause of sin (amongst others Exodus 10:1, Isaiah 63:17 and Romans 1:28). However, it seems as if

Thomas here draws back from the consequences of his own deterministic viewpoint, for he says about these texts: “All these texts are to be understood in this way: God does not grant to some people his help in avoiding sin, while to others he does grant it” (IIIb, 266).

In summary, Thomas attempts to argue simultaneously that evil does not come from God but that God’s providence does not exclude evil altogether. God does not exclude it because evil is necessary in a variety of ways. However, it does not originate from God but from the creatures themselves.

Venter (1988:174) rightly asks: “If evil is a necessary element of the creational order which was planned by God, made by Him and is ruled by Him, is not God then nevertheless the cause of the evil?”

### **8.6 Comments**

A basic mistake made by Thomas is that he (like Aristotle about his deity) calls God a cause and thereby reduces Him to something created. From this flows the whole issue, namely whether God also is the cause, origin or author of sin.

At bottom, therefore, this problem originates from the wrong idea Thomas has of God. On the one hand, as a Christian he wanted to acknowledge the God of the Scriptures. On the other hand, his attempt was thwarted and obfuscated by a pagan, Aristotelian idea of God. However, these two ideas are in direct conflict with each other. In spite of his attempts to reconcile them he does not succeed in doing so. Synthesis philosophical is always a *cul de sac*.

Since God imposes his law on creation, it does not apply to Himself who is “above” his laws. We cannot speak of evil or sin in God, since sin only arises from disobedience to his law. Therefore, asking whether God is the origin of evil/sin, means thinking about Him in an earthly manner – and moreover subjecting Him to a law, even if it is his own.

So how should we understand texts like Isaiah 45 verse 7 and Amos 3 verse 6? Currently several biblical scholars accept that these words denote God's *judgement and punishment* and definitely not that He *brings about sin*. The question about the *origin* of sin will, however, remain inexplicable. Even with the aid of Aristotle's doctrine of causality Thomas could not fathom it.

We have now reached the very last and probably most difficult of all the problems:

## **9. Predestination, election and reprobation**

It is noteworthy that only in the very last chapter (163) of Book III of the SCG (which deals with God's providence) does Thomas come to God's election and reprobation. Moreover he deals with it very concisely – in only two pages. (For more detail on this compare e.g. the works by Friethoff, 1925 and Polman, 1936.) But what he says in these two pages would in the ages to follow have a decisive influence on both Catholic and Protestant – even Reformed – scholars. Therefore we finally discuss it here, for in predestination and reprobation the whole issue of the relationship between God and man reaches what you could call a climax – it concerns man's eternal weal and woe.

### ***9.1 Predestination as an eternal, divine decree***

Earlier Thomas had already pointed out that some people due to God's gracious work reach their ultimate aim, while others, who do not receive divine help, miss their ultimate aim. He then resumes:

... and since all things done by God are foreseen and ordered from eternity by His wisdom ... the aforementioned differentiation of men must be ordered by God from eternity, so that they are directed to their ultimate end... On the other hand, those whom He has decided from eternity not to give His grace, He is said to have reprobated or to have hated (IIIb, 267).

In the case of the elected Thomas quotes the well-known Ephesians 1 verses 4, 5 and in the case of the rejected he refers to Malachi 1 verses 2-3. Predestination, election and reprobation therefore to him form part of God's providence.

### ***9.2 Further explanation***

To this Thomas adds the following: (1) the will and providence of God is the first but also the last cause of election and reprobation – one cannot look for deeper reasons “behind” this Cause. (2) The Cause for election does not lie in human merit but solely in the grace of God. (3) Probably for fear of divine determinism and human passivity he reiterates: “... it is possible to show that predestination and election impose no necessity by the same reasoning whereby we showed above (Chapter 72) that providence does not take away contingency from things” (IIIb, 267).

### ***9.3 Comments***

Once more in the philosophy of Thomas one runs up against the dialectics between necessity and contingency or coincidence. Actually this tension is not only between God and man, but penetrates even Thomas's idea of God. On the one hand He determines everything from eternity and on the other hand He still allows for coincidence. Are the two sides logically reconcilable? Is coincidence a biblical idea?

It should be noted in particular that Thomas (in IIIb, 267 above) no less than three times reiterates that election and reprobation were determined by God *from eternity*. This is the main idea. The possible contingency or coincidence was necessary, however, to prevent God from being regarded as the origin of evil.

Thus it would seem as if Thomas's contemporaries were right when they came to the conclusion that Thomas's philosophy – in spite of all the intricate arguments to the opposite – could not conceal his deterministic idea of God.

#### ***9.4 The historical line continued***

Unfortunately it is this deterministic trend which was carried forward into the Reformational tradition as well. We encounter the doctrine of causality again in Calvin (cf. his *Institution*, Book 3, Chapter 14, par. 17 and 21). In the work of his successor in Genève, Beza, the influence of Thomas's Scholasticism is even more pronounced. He accepts the Aristotelian ontology, doctrine of causality and logic as a "gift" from God and applies it to his doctrine of predestination as an eternal decree from a God who determines everything. This train of thought runs right through the whole of Reformed Orthodoxy (1550-1700), is present at the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) and lives to this day with some Reformed people (cf. Chapter 1).

Of course there also were internal differences as, for instance, between the supralapsarists and the infralapsarists. The former group taught that God had decided already *before* the fall of man whom He would elect and whom He would reject. The latter viewpoint could only mitigate such extreme determinism by teaching that God took his decision only *after* the fall. However, both groups uphold to a greater or lesser extent Thomas's view of an eternal, unchangeable divine decision or decree.

Due to the idea that theology could study God (and his thoughts) – which is nothing but speculation – God's providence and predestination became an *intellectual issue* instead of a *comfort accepted in profound faith*. This confusion between childlike faith and rational theology, and the resulting overrating of theology above faith caused immense misery right through the history of the church.

#### **10. Conclusion**

Finally some conclusions may be drawn.

### ***10.1 The hazard of synthesis philosophy***

The outcome of this investigation was first that it clearly indicated how synthesis philosophy decisively influences theological reflection.

### ***10.2 The hazard of determinism***

In the second instance, in spite of many differences, one outstanding feature of this type of philosophy (and theology) repeatedly emerged: its deterministic character. Both God (by his own law) and human beings (by the divine law in them) are predestined – even regarding their own salvation. God therefore is immovable, immutable and in the (predestined) human being things like a sense of guilt and responsibility – which are realities – are inexplicable.

### ***10.3 The law-idea as the root cause – some historical glimpses***

In the third instance it became clear that “behind” this determinism there lurks a particular idea of law. Both the “law” (*nomos*) and the “idea” are important here.

Plato already viewed the ideas as a separate world of its own which would serve as examples for humans in the visible world. The Neo-Platonism of Augustine shifted these ideas as blueprints for creation to God’s intellect. Thomas furthermore taught that God created these archetypes as ectypes into creaturely things and rules and controls them accordingly.

Hereby the long history of the idea as a kind of guideline was not yet complete. During the period of rationalism (approximately 1600-1900) the idea still lived that the world could be governed by (rational) ideas – even that a new world could thus be created. However, there occurred also a significant difference with the Church Fathers and Mediaeval scholars of the preceding Christian synthesis philosophy. To the rationalists the rational ideas no longer lie in God, but in the reason of human beings. It is no longer God’s reason that is under discussion, but the human reason viewed as god. Unlike in Medieval (and afterwards in scholastic)

thinking, when the ideas ruled because they were God's ideas, reason had now become a god because its ideas ruled.

In modern times (from approximately the early decades of the previous century) reason was, however, gradually ousted by irrationalist schools (like "Lebensphilosophie", pragmatism and existentialism) but not completely discarded because it was still necessary – ideas remain important. Current postmodernism continues this tendency.

#### *10.4 A felicitous reversal*

A fourth and last outcome of this chapter is the following discovery. Due to several factors, especially as a result of more accurate exegesis of the biblical message, since about the middle of the previous century a reaction started against the determinism of Thomas and his followers.

Since an erroneous view of the issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility had such unpleasant consequences especially in theology and the church I will confine myself to this discipline and moreover to Reformed theology alone. Limited space only permits me to put the reader on the tracks of some sources. (Cf. also Van der Walt, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012a and 2012b.)

In Berkhouwer's well-known series *Dogmatische Studien* (Dogmatic studies) appeared *De verkiezing Gods* (The election of God in 1955) in which he raises serious questions about a deterministic doctrine of predestination. Holwerda (1958) later offered a new explanation of the expression "before the creation of the world" (in Ephesians 1:4) which questions an eternal, unchangeable divine decree. Spykman (1981) made a significant contribution to a new view of election and reprobation. Sinnema (1985) with his doctoral thesis and many other articles on Reformed scholastic thinking made even more valuable contributions. Velema (1992) offers surprising new insights. Opposing the age-old idea that God was

immovable and unchangeable (cf. Den Ottolander, 1965), Van Eck (1997) wrote a perceptive book *En toch beweegt Hij* (And yet He does move). Peels, (2000) too criticised different traditional ideas of God in the light of the Scriptures.

With this bit of good news we can conclude this chapter.

### ***10.5 Looking ahead***

In the next chapter to conclude this series on Aquinas, we will be going full circle. For the last time we will return to the subjects of the very first chapter (synthesis philosophy and Scholasticism) because to some readers it could have created misunderstandings which have to be answered in more detail.

## Chapter 6

### CHRISTIANISING HELLENISM IMPLIES THE HELLENISATION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

*One may approach the encounter between Christian belief and Greek-Hellenist culture in two different ways: Either from the perspective of Christianisation of Hellenism or the Hellenisation of Christianity. This chapter deals with the second perspective – which is considered a result of the first.*

*Since the publication of his famous and massive (three volume), *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* in 1886, as well as other works of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), the issue of the Hellenisation of Christianity continues to be debated. According to Von Harnack the accommodation between Christian faith and Greek-Hellenist philosophy during early Christian Patristic and Medieval thinking has to be evaluated negatively – it resulted in the intellectualisation of original Christian beliefs into fixed theological dogmas.*

*It seems as if the founding fathers of a Reformational philosophy, D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978) and H. Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), more or less agreed with the viewpoint of Von Harnack. They merely employed a different term, viz. “synthesis” to indicate the contamination resulting from an uncritical acceptance of Greek philosophy to explain Christian faith. A younger generation of Reformational scholars (e.g. Klapwijk and Helleman), however, questioned the fairness of characterising other Christian thinkers as synthetic thinkers. They are of the opinion that Christian theologians and philosophers of every age are children of their own times, therefore it is impossible to escape from their cultural-philosophical context.*

*In contemporary Christian theological publications something similar is taking place. What Von Harnack called “Hellenisation” and Vollenhoven indicated as “synthesis-thinking” is to*

*my mind not taken seriously enough. (Van Asselt is taken as an example of a wider group of theologians). According to these Reformed Orthodoxy (±1550-1700) only used Aristotelian-Thomist terminology and methods without any influence on the contents of its theology. Thus one should not reject it as a synthesis, but instead contribute towards its revival to indicate a new direction in contemporary Christianity.*

*At the end of five chapters on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) in his Summa Contra Gentiles, the question could therefore be posed whether justice has been done to this doctor angelicus by characterising his thinking (cf. the first chapter) as “synthetic”. To provide an answer, in this contribution I retrace his steps by offering a more detailed exposition and evaluation of synthetic and scholastic thinking. In conclusion I again turn to Aquinas’ fascination – in spite of difficulties and the opposition of some of his contemporaries – with Aristotle’s philosophy.*

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## **1. Introduction: motivation and lay-out**

By way of introduction (1) we offer a motivation why this chapter returns to the subject already briefly discussed in the first chapter and (2) its outline is given.

### ***1.1 Motivation***

One can approach the meeting of Christian faith and Greek Hellenist culture (from approximately 50 AD) from two different perspectives. The first is from the Christianisation of Hellenism and the second is the opposite, namely the Hellenisation of Christianity. In this chapter we are primarily concerned with the latter process – a consequence of the first. In Chapter 1 this process was called “synthesis philosophy”. It is necessary to return to it in detail. The following background sketch will explain why it is important.

#### ***1.1.1 Von Harnack on Hellenisation***

Ever since the publication of his famous and massive (three volume) *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (1886) and also the other works by the German scholar, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), the issue of the Hellenisation of the Christian faith (cf. in particular Von Harnack, Part I:496-796 of the 1964-edition) has been an important point of debate. According to Von Harnack the accommodation of Greek Hellenist thinking in the work of the early Christian Church Fathers and Medieval scholars led to the Christian faith being Hellenised or brought under Greek influence, that is, it was intellectualised to fixed theological dogmas. He therefore regarded the Hellenisation as a negative development for Christianity. (For more on his view, cf. Helleman, 1994:429 et seq.)

### *1.1.2 Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd on synthesis*

These two fathers of a Reformational philosophy both have a critical attitude towards Christian synthesis philosophy. For Dooyeweerd one can, for instance, refer to his publications of 1939 and 1949.

Right from the beginning Vollenhoven was even more strongly opposed to synthesis philosophy (cf. e.g. Vollenhoven, 2005a:405-406). He characterises early Christian, Patristic and Medieval thinking (a sizable period from approximately 50-1550 AD) as synthesis philosophy and accordingly distinguishes between a period of *pre-synthesis* thinking (among the Greeks and Romans) and a period *after* the domination of Christian synthesis in Western history of philosophy (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005b:29). Since this chapter will be discussing Vollenhoven's viewpoint in more detail below we confine ourselves for the time being by stating that he did think anti-*synthetically* but not anti-*thetically*.

We only add here that the anti-synthesis philosophy of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven also found followers worldwide. As far as South Africa is concerned one can for instance refer to Venter (s.a.) and Taljaard (1982).

### 1.1.3 Klapwijk's view of synthesis philosophy

Among the later followers of the founders of Reformational philosophy it was Klapwijk in particular (e.g. 1991, 1995) who thought differently. His train of thought is briefly summarised, followed by a commentary.

#### *Klapwijk's point of view*

Philosophy, according to Klapwijk, is the voice of a culture, articulating what lives within a culture. Christian thinkers also think within a specific cultural context from which they can never fully detach themselves, nor should they try to do it, since communication with non-Christian thinkers and concepts is essential. (*Religious antithesis, according to Klapwijk, does not lead eo ipso to philosophical antithesis.*)

He therefore cannot identify himself with what he calls the anti-thetic viewpoint of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. While Vollenhoven claims that true synthesis between the Christian faith on the one hand and contemporary philosophy on the other hand is not only *impermissible* but even *impossible* Klapwijk asks: Then how can Vollenhoven resist something which is supposed to be essentially impossible? (Klapwijk, 1995:178).

So how does Klapwijk himself see the relationship between Christian and non-Christian philosophy? According to him it is a fact (cf. Klapwijk, 1995:182) that all Christian philosophers think both *antithetically* (in so far as they consider themselves alien towards worldly wisdom and want to be led by the revelation of God) and *synthetically* (in so far as they still remain involved in the issues of their own times). In this respect Klapwijk refers to two sides of the well-known verse 2 Corinthians 10:5: *Antithetically* "... we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" and *synthetically* "... we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

In the light of this Klapwijk (instead of either accommodation or antithesis) proposes a transformational model. He admits himself that applying it is not a simple matter. However, to him it does not mean *external accommodation* to a non-Christian way of thinking, but the *critical processing* within a Christian worldview (cf. Klapwijk, 1995:184, 185). Critical processing to him means melting down and purifying non-Christian ways of thinking so that they can be integrated within a Christian ontology in the service of God. This is what *normative* transformation means to Klapwijk.

However, he admits the possibility of *antinormative* or *inverted* transformation which does not lead to the Christianisation of non-Christian thinking, but, on the contrary to dechristianisation or secularisation of the Christian faith and philosophy. What renders it even more complex is that correct and inverted transformation often go hand in hand in the work of the same scholar, because being open *to* the world is simultaneously being open *for* worldly ways of thinking (cf. Klapwijk, 1995:187, 188).

Finally Klapwijk is of the opinion (cf. p. 189, 190) that his transformational philosophy will be more dynamic and contextual than that of his predecessors, Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd and others.

#### *Comment on Klapwijk's view*

Klapwijk's (new) viewpoint on an antithetical attitude has already been scrutinised by several of his kindred spirits. Bos (1987:135) for instance, is of the opinion that Klapwijk's transformational philosophy entails only cosmetic changes, in which the contrast between antithesis and synthesis has only been substituted by two new concepts, namely normative and anti-normative transformation.

Further Bos (1987:137-138; 1996:56-76) criticises the *spolatio*-motive in Klapwijk's work. This supports his idea that – like the Israelites who took gold from the Egyptians later to melt

it down and build a tabernacle for the Lord – Christians can take over non-Christian ways of thinking. According to Bos this is a typical example of allegorical exegesis of the Bible – which amounted to nothing less than a Hellenisation of Christianity. (Cf. Choi, 2000:136-144 for a detailed exposition of Klapwijk’s viewpoint as well as criticism levelled at it.)

I confine myself to the following four remarks:

In the first instance one must admit that some of Vollenhoven’s predecessors, like Kuyper, was inclined to think *antithetically*: Christian and non-Christian thinking are radically opposed. However, Vollenhoven thinks *anti-synthetically*.

In the second instance Klapwijk also warns against anti-normative (inverted) transformation. Does this not on closer analysis mean the same that Vollenhoven meant with synthesis philosophy?

In the third instance Vollenhoven (cf. 2.4 below) makes a significant distinction between *spontaneous* (almost unconscious) synthesis philosophy and a *deliberate* synthesis between Christian faith and secular wisdom. Should not Klapwijk have taken this into account as well?

In the fourth instance it is not true that Vollenhoven did not want to learn anything from non-Christian or synthetic philosophers. His own thetic-critical method (cf. 2.11 below) contradicts such a suggestion as well as his lifelong struggle with the history of the whole of Western philosophy with the intention of learning from it.

Therefore in my opinion Klapwijk did lay significant new emphases but his critique of Vollenhoven’s view of synthesis does not convince me. (We will go into Vollenhoven’s viewpoint in more detail below.)

#### *1.1.4 Helleman’s sympathy with synthesis philosophy*

Helleman (1990 & 1994a), just like Klapwijk, is critical of Vollenhoven's use of the term "synthesis". She also claims (cf. Helleman: 1994b:462, 463) that the concept "synthesis" in the Reformational philosophy of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd has more or less the same meaning as the "Hellenisation" of Von Harnack.

About synthesis she writes the following

... it expresses a process which is in principle illegitimate, perhaps even impermissible or impossible for true faith ... In a synthesis the two component elements are essentially alien to one another. When combined the mix is unfortunate and detrimental ... (Helleman, 1994b:463).

From the following quotation, however, both her rejection of the idea of synthesis as well as her own view becomes clear:

... if we are to regard interaction of Christianity and the Classics as synthesis, we will need to discern carefully the specific religious or cultural aspects which are juxtaposed, accommodated, and even compromised. To the extent that we recognized the primary religious character of Christianity and the nature of the classics to be primarily cultural, we may need to modify our use of the term "synthesis" since the relative integrity of the two poles in the relationship is inevitably lost or threatened in a synthesis (Helleman, 1990:19).

Here Helleman makes a clear distinction between culture (which includes philosophy) and religion. According to her it is wrong to effect a synthesis between pagan and Christian *religion*, but it is not to be regarded as synthesis when Christian scholars take over (cultural) *thinking* from pagan thinkers (cf. in particular Helleman, 1990:28, 29). Formulated in a different way: One should not compare Christian faith with heathen culture, only with heathen belief.

Although her viewpoint is not very clear (cf. Bos, 1996:158, 179), it would furthermore seem as if classic culture and philosophy should be appreciated positively by Christians because, according to her, there is no specific Christian culture. From her argument it therefore seems as if culture and philosophical thinking as well, are supposed to be religiously neutral – a viewpoint which would be unacceptable to Vollenhoven and to me.

Another reason why Helleman is less opposed to synthesis philosophy may be because her research is mainly limited to early synthesis in the work of Patristic writers. As Vollenhoven has indicated the synthesis philosophy of this period happened spontaneously and not deliberately, as happened for instance during the Middle Ages and in the work of Aquinas.

#### *1.1.5 The debate by about the nineties*

By about the nineties of the previous century two important volumes were published. One of them deals with the classical heritage, while the other opens up the debate much wider.

#### *Classical Philosophy*

In a volume edited by Helleman (1990) indications are given on where the whole debate stands on how a Christian philosopher should position himself/herself towards the classical Graeco-Roman heritage. In the last chapter by Wolters (1990) for instance, in the line of what Bavinck wrote earlier, Niebuhr's well-known *Christ and culture* (1951) is used as a model to indicate the various possible attitudes taken by Christians. Wolters (1990:194-195) summarises the various attitudes as follows: (1) *grace opposed to nature*, (2) *grace perfecting nature*, (3) *grace alongside nature*, (4) *grace equals nature*, and (5) *grace restoring nature*. Wolters chooses the latter option, because "... it fully affirms the validity and legitimacy, in its own terms, of classical culture, and at the same time gives a religious critique of its perversion" (Wolters, 1990:201).

The categorisation of Christian worldviews done by Bavinck, Niebuhr and their followers is, however, currently no longer accepted without critique and would most probably also have been unacceptable to Vollenhoven (cf. Van der Walt, 2012).

#### *The more broadly-based debate*

In the volume edited by Klapwijk, Griffioen & Groenewoud (1991) the whole scope of the debate is widened from the Christian's attitude towards ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy to the whole of Western philosophy. It is shown, for instance, how different philosophers (like Hegel, Tillich, Pannenberg and Gutierrez) tried to link Christianity with contemporary philosophy. With the closing essay by Klapwijk (1991) it is probably suggested that Klapwijk's own transformational model already mentioned in (1.1.3 above) would be the (most) acceptable one.

#### *1.1.6 The struggle of Sweetman and others*

Finally, the fact that Reformational philosophers are currently still struggling with the question of how they should evaluate ancient Greek Hellenist philosophy, becomes evident from the volume edited by Sweetman (2007). Besides discussing again different historical characters (like Philo) the volume also contains an essay by Tol (p. 127-160) on how Vollenhoven as a Christian philosopher saw classical antiquity. It is further important to study carefully Sweetman's own introduction (p. 1-12) and epilogue (p. 267-289).

#### *1.1.7 The viewpoint of some contemporary theologians*

Up to now an outline has been given of the variety of views of (mostly Reformational) philosophers only. But in conclusion something should be said on theological viewpoints about of the Hellenisation of Christianity (Von Harnack) or synthesis philosophy (according to Vollenhoven).

In general it can be stated that theology – even Reformed theologians – through the ages were not very conscious of the hazards attached to synthesis philosophy. Currently it is no different. This becomes clear for instance from the uncritical way in which Vos (1985 and 1990) condones the deliberate synthesis philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.

I will take only the essay by Van Asselt (1996) here as a representative example. His point of reference is taken as the sixteenth century Reformation on the one hand and Medieval theology on the other. The model of interpretation advocated by Van Asselt and many others is that of continuity. According to them there is not much difference between the Middle Ages ( $\pm$  500-1500), the Reformation (1500-1550 AD) and Reformed Orthodoxy ( $\pm$  1550-1700) following the Reformation. Further the detrimental role played in the Christian tradition by (e.g. Greek) philosophy is rejected as something merely *formal* (concerning the method of theologising). It is supposed not to have affected the theological *contents*. Such a viewpoint of course does not at all tally with reality. Methods are not neutral (cf. Venter, 1981:501 et seq.)

It is due to this model of continuity and their naïve disregard for real philosophical influences on theology that Van Asselt *cum suis* can also follow the reverse way into history and look for new direction for the 21<sup>st</sup> century among philosophers like Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus and others who lived centuries ago.

#### *1.1.8 A preliminary own view*

Earlier I have already formulated my own – preliminary – viewpoint in this respect (cf. Van der Walt, 2001a:34) as follows. First I showed that the Scriptures themselves bear clear witness that God's revelation does not completely ignore the culture in which it takes form, but to some extent links up with it. From this one could possibly deduct that God does not

expect one to serve Him *outside* but *in* one's cultural clothes. This I called the principle of *relative continuity*. (Please note: *relative*). To this I added the following:

Apart from this *relative continuity* between Gospel and culture we do, however, also see a *radical discontinuity*. Without a degree of continuity the Gospel could never be relevant. Without discontinuity, it would not be able to challenge and change the culture in which it was embodied. It would become syncretised. The Biblical message is clear: The Gospel associated itself with different cultures – not to be domesticated, to become the captive of these cultures, but to liberate and transform them (Van der Walt, 2001a:34).

So in my opinion the warning red lights begin flashing at the point where *relative* continuity is no longer relative, so that the *radical* discontinuity no longer prevails. But if it is believed that the Christian faith and a specific culture mutually exclude each other in an antithetical way then the Christian faith would hang in the air.

In my own view – which shows correspondence with the Reformational approach in general as set out above – both uncritical continuity (synthesis or accommodation) between a culture and the Christian faith and the opposite idea that the two could exist in total isolation from each other are rejected.

I admit that such a theory offers (like Klapwijk's transformational model) no simple solutions when one is confronted by concrete issues. In addition it is merely a preliminary view, for the critical question can of course be posed whether such a view is not merely a modification of the method of paradox. For how can continuity and discontinuity go together? Perhaps this was the reason why Thomas early in life accepted the much easier solution of a nature-grace synthesis.

## ***1.2 Lay-out***

From the foregoing long motivation it will be clear that (as I did in Chapter 1 already) characterising Thomas (in the same way as Vollenhoven) as a synthesis philosopher would not be approved today, but would be regarded as too harsh and judgmental. Hence in this concluding chapter on Aquinas I return to this issue – this time in much greater detail.

The following points will be dealt with in succession: (1) what exactly synthesis involves; (2) what its basis is; (3) how it differs from syncretism; (4) two kinds of synthesis philosophy; (5) the various motives behind synthesis philosophy; (6) that synthesis is not merely a matter of terminology, method or form; (7) the different methods according to which one can think synthetically; (8) the hazards attached to these; (9) that Vollenhoven's anti-synthetic philosophy implies a completely different view of Western history of philosophy, and (10) what his thetic-critical method involves.

Since synthesis and Scholasticism are often not clearly distinguished, the next (second) main theme deals with what is understood by "scholasticism".

Finally (a third main section) we return to the fascination Thomas Aquinas had with Aristotle's philosophy in particular. Questions like the following are answered: (1) Why was the philosophy of the man from Stageira so popular in Thomas's time? (2) Was it not very difficult to attempt reconciling a pagan philosopher's ideas with the Scriptures? (3) Did no one in the time of Thomas object against his synthesis?

## **2. Synthesis philosophy**

When religions and cultures come into contact with one another, hybridisation (acculturation) takes place. This also happened during the history of Christianity. The gradual Christianisation of the West resulted in the Westernisation of Christianity – first Hellenisation, then Germanisation (Van der Walt, 2001a:35).

Several studies have been conducted on these processes. For instance studies like that done by Fox (1986) and Wilken (1984) on the meeting of (pagan) Roman and Christian philosophy. Brown (1995) looks at the process from the perspective of Christianisation and Wilken (1984) looks the other way round at Christianity from the perspective of Roman culture. On the later Christianisation of German culture and the reverse process of Germanising Christianity, much has already been written (cf. e.g. Fletcher, 1997 and Russell, 1994).

Similar processes are still taking place today. On our own continent (especially since the beginning of the twentieth century) the Christianisation of Africa, but simultaneously the Africanisation of Christianity has been in full swing (cf. e.g. Van der Walt, 2006). When do such processes (like Africanisation) go too far and degenerate into synthesis or syncretism?

This chapter will be confined to the synthesis of Christian philosophy with non-biblical philosophical thinking from the Graeco-Roman world. Yet it also contains pointers for today. In the first instance it is important to get clarity on:

### ***2.1 What synthesis means***

Synthesis originates when one combines biblical ideas with ideas from a non-Christian philosophy (Spier, 1959:10) or, stated the other way round (which amounts to the same) when a pagan concept is reconciled with themes from the revelation in Scripture (Vollenhoven, 2005a:405). Although this synthesis philosophy reached a peak during Medieval philosophy, it is not confined to this period. It already occurred in the work of the Church Fathers and runs all through the ages up to the present in the work of Christian thinkers.

For the sake of clarity we have to say beforehand that calling someone's philosophy "synthesis" does not imply a judgment of his/her personal faith. Like Thomas one can be a devote believer and still think in a synthetic way.

## ***2.2 Based on the idea of neutral scholarship***

Most of the time synthesis philosophers do not realise that being occupied with philosophy/theology is not a religiously neutral matter. There are real religious differences between religious convictions (as e.g. between that of pagan Greeks and Christians) which also determine a human being's scientific activity.

Vollenhoven (2005a:406) therefore warns: "All human activity is controlled by religion, and so being occupied with philosophy is never neutral in the religious sense. Therefore each philosophy should be conscious of its religious and thus non-scientific point of departure".

## ***2.3 It differs from syncretism***

Vollenhoven (2005a:446) makes a clear distinction between synthesis and syncretism. As an explanatory example (cf. Venter, 1988:82) we can use the early Christian and Medieval philosophers on the one hand and Manicheism and Gnosticism on the other hand. The latter blended, contorted and limited the role of Christ as the Redeemer with pagan ideas of other "redeemers" alongside Him. (More on Gnosticism can be found in inter alia Bos, 1994:1-23.) During the time of the Church Fathers and the Middle Ages the philosophers, in spite of everything they added from Graeco-Roman philosophies, are still recognisable as Christian philosophers because they also accepted the biblical revelation on Christ.

As is clearly proved from the work of Gort, Vroom, Fernhout and Wessels (1989) the whole issue of syncretism is nowadays a topical problem again. Van der Walt (2001b:35) further shows that Western philosophers tend to point out syncretistic trends in which traditional African religion and culture are blended with biblical ideas. However, often they (the

Westerners) are not conscious of their own syncretism between the Bible and Western culture.

#### ***2.4 Two kinds of synthesis***

As mentioned already above, Vollenhoven (2005a:406) draws attention to the fact that one should distinguish between *unintentional* and *deliberate* synthesis philosophy. Among the Church Fathers the former was mostly the case, while thinkers during the Middle Ages followed the second course. It is the *deliberate* synthesis in particular which a Christian scholar should oppose. Because Christians, too, are children of their times, synthetic features will always occur to some extent. But if someone is *consciously resisting* it, and attempts to equip others to be more defensible against it, such a person should not be judged as a synthesis scholar. However, Aquinas was a deliberate synthesis thinker.

#### ***2.5 Different motives***

Vollenhoven (2011:198) mentions different possible motives behind synthesis philosophy, including contemporary ones. (1) Some Christian philosophers, as we have said, are not even conscious of the fact that they are thinking in a synthetic way. (2) Others think this way consciously because they want to be popular in the time in which they live. (3) Still others do not do it to be in vogue, but because it is too difficult and tiring to resist the spirit of one's own times. In the case of (2) and (3) egotistic motives can therefore come into play.

#### ***2.6 Synthesis is not merely a matter of terminology and methods are not neutral***

Many theologians are of the opinion that they do not think in a synthetic manner, because they are merely taking over some non-biblical *terms* from contemporary secular philosophy. Concepts or words are, however, not empty receptacles which can be filled with any kind of contents. Words carry meaning, have contents. Spier (1959:10-11) rightly says:

Synthesis philosophy begins where Christian scholars together with the terms also take over the non-Christian content of the terms from renegade or pagan thought and believe that it can be united with Christian thought to form a whole. In this way Thomistic philosophy in Roman Catholic circles has combined ideas of Aristotle with Christian themes.

Methods are not neutral either. They are determined by one's worldviewish and philosophical points of departure, one's view of God, of creation, of the human being, one's particular epistemology and so forth.

As tangible evidence of this I strongly recommend to the reader the excellent article by Hartvelt (1962). He is one of the few reformed theologians who realised what a decisive role originally philosophical methods have played in Reformational theology since the beginning of the Reformation. He also shows that these methods cannot be "justified" on biblical grounds, but have been derived from the logic and philosophy of Aristotle.

According to Hartvelt in method one is concerned with more than just listing information from the Scriptures. In method one's view of the relation between God and human beings also comes into play. *In* the choice of method one can cause dogma to *say* something – or to *withhold* it. Method means precision, planning, strategy, but also: pursuing a goal, letting the information say something, separately, according to its locus, but also in its totality.

### ***2.7 Different methods of synthesis***

Grabmann (reprinted 1956) is still a valuable source on methods used during the Middle Ages. Vollenhoven, too (2011:202-206) did us an eminently valuable service by showing *how* Christian thinkers in the past and present reached their (unconscious as well as deliberate) synthesis by means of mainly three different methods (already mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, section 4.3).

### 2.7.1 Method of exegesis and eisegesis

The method of eisegesis and exegesis is the oldest. In this way the cultural upper layer of early Christians who were philosophically schooled in ancient philosophy could first read unbiblical ideas into the Scriptures and afterwards – with apparent approval from God's Word – read them out of the Scriptures again. This kind of synthesis philosophy was not original, for Jewish philosophers like Philo had already effected a synthesis with their Hellenist philosophical environment (cf. Runia, 1983, Doran, 1995 and Borgan, 1996).

#### *Four kinds of hermeneutics*

During the Middle Ages a four-fold meaning of the Scriptures were usually still accepted (cf. De Lubac, 1959-1964): (1) the literal meaning said what happened or what the *factual* position was, (2) the allegorical meaning what one had to *believe*, (3) the moral meaning indicated what one had to *do*, and (4) the anagogical showed where one had to *go* or for what one had to *hope*. (In Latin: *Litera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*)

Nicolas van Lyra (obit 1349 AD) articulated it in the following well-known poem:

The letter shows us what God and our fathers did;  
The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;  
The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;  
The anagoge shows us where we end our strife.

#### *Allegorical exegesis*

The last three ways of explaining the Scriptures, but in particular the allegorical hermeneutics (cf. Van der Walt, 1973:196-200) made it possible during Jewish and Christian tradition to carry one's own, predisposed philosophical ideas into the Bible and guarantee the truth

thereof in a Biblicist manner. Individuals like the Jewish philosopher Philo from Alexandria (cf. Runia, 1983, 2007 and Helleman, 1994a:107 et seq., 125 et seq., 159 et seq., 189 et seq. and 323 et seq.) and Christian thinkers like Origenes (cf. Goud, 1991), Clemens (cf. Bos, 1991a and Helleman, 1994a:323 et seq.) and Augustine (cf. Bos, 1991b) are important in this respect. (Cf. also Smit, 1998:275 et seq. for a good survey of the hermeneutics of early Christianity.)

### *Biblicism*

Vollenhoven also calls the method of eisegesis and exegesis the Biblicist method. As with all good things, the Bible can also be misused. *How* one uses it depends on *what* the Bible is to you. To believers it should not be just a source besides other sources of knowledge. It is God's authoritative *light* for the human being's direction in a life of faith. However, one does not look directly *into* the light on your desk or the headlights of one's car. *By* the light of the Bible one sees to do one's work and to determine one's direction.

### *Threefold revelation*

One can expect *too little* from the Bible. But one also uses God's Word in the wrong way when one expects *too much* from it by for instance expecting information and answers in it to every possible issue. Then one lapses into Biblicism – one reads one's own predisposed viewpoints into it and again – now with biblical sanction – from it.

The principle of “only Scripture” (*sola Scriptura*) can thus also be misunderstood and misused. It is important to remember that God's revelation is not confined to the Bible. He reveals Himself first in creation, then in his revelation in the Scriptures and finally in Christ. God presents human beings with one revelation but then a three-fold one, which can be distinguished but not separated. If one of these (e.g. the Bible) is overemphasised we depreciate the other two. When one of these are underemphasised or depreciated (as e.g. the

creational revelation or the revelation incarnate in Christ) it easily leads to everything being expected from the Scriptures only – instead of looking at reality *in the light of* the Bible (the real meaning of *Sola Scriptura*).

Which philosophical ideas have been read into the Scriptures in this way? From the Church Fathers until the tenth or eleventh century Plato was the hero in Christian synthesis philosophy – Aristotle became known only later. How was this possible, for it is in Plato that one is confronted by one of the most radical and consistent forms of heathen Greek philosophy? (Cf. Bos, 1996).

A second method to arrive at a synthesis was

### *2.7.2 The paradoxical method*

Since intellectually disposed Christians did, however, begin to realise the danger of eisegesis and exegesis, some assumed a paradoxical method. They did observe the deep religious antithesis between pagan philosophy and biblical faith, but still wanted to maintain both in the form of a so-called double truth. In spite of this their theologies/philosophies were contaminated.

Venter (1988:82, 83) for instance says of Tertullian (a representative of the method of paradox) the following. He may have had an antithetical attitude, but in practice he did absorb non-Christian ideas in his philosophy. It seems that the antithetical attitude could never succeed because we can never exceed the language and thought structures of our times. The hybridisation of Christian and non-Christian ideas is not something that can be avoided by drawing a line between groups (e.g. ‘believers’ opposed to ‘philosophers’) because this hybridisation takes place in the thoughts of an individual – often without his willing to do so.

The third *method* was the following:

### *2.7.3 The method of nature and grace*

The last method (which had already originated in the sixth century, but only flourished properly during Medieval philosophy) was that of nature and supra-nature or grace. According to this the non-biblical philosophies were regarded as an “entrance hall” (*praeambula*) which are not *rejected* by the biblical message, but would only be *perfected* by it.

### *Implications*

The nature-grace theme therefore also implies that a Christian may practice science (except for the supernatural theology) independently from God’s revelation in the Scriptures. In the profane (natural) sphere pagan theories were introduced into Christianity and adapted where direct conflict occurred. But in this way the impact of a Christian view on science, education, politics, labour, commerce, etcetera was obscured and ignored. Venter’s comment on this is:

The greatest error of Medieval philosophy [including Thomas – BJvdW] was the division of the world into a sacred and a profane sphere – by doing this they caused Christianity to adapt to the secular world (Venter, 1985:123).

Furthermore it should be kept in mind that not only philosophy (and the philosophical or natural theology) was secularised. Vollenhoven (2005a:205) points out that even the supernatural theology (*sacra doctrina*) of Thomas was not biblically sound, free from the influence of pagan philosophical elements. By means of the method of eisegesis-exegesis (which was used in conjunction with the nature-grace method) unbiblical philosophical ideas were in a subtle way also carried over into so-called holy theology. However, there are more hazards attached to synthesis philosophy.

### ***2.8 Hazards of synthesis philosophy***

Vollenhoven (2005a:406) is of the opinion that any form of synthesis – no matter which method is used to effect the synthesis – in the end brings its revenge, it causes tension and

damage. If one goes about synthesising deliberately, too much that is authentic to the Christian faith is lost in the process of accommodation.

### *An example*

One could take as an example Aquinas's synthesis between the biblical revelation about God and Aristotle's idea of god (cf. previous chapter). How is it possible to reconcile the heathen idea of a god that is immovable, who only thinks about himself all the time, who is absolute (therefore in no relationship) and who moreover predetermines everything, with the Bible – which teaches exactly the opposite?

Venter (1985:38) therefore describes Aristotle's idea of the godhead as “bloodless marble”. Vollenhoven (2011:204) simply calls it “something grisly”. Spier (1959:11) is therefore rightly of the opinion that synthetic philosophy obscures the truth of God's Word, undermines the power of the Christian faith and in the field of science delays the progress of God's kingdom.

### *No slave of Aristotle's and yet...*

It is true that Thomas attempted to fit Aristotle into the tradition of the church and theology and did not want the opposite. He was therefore no slavish follower of Aristotle (he did not think like Aristotle, but in an Aristotelising way) for it would undoubtedly have brought him into conflict with his own faith and the tradition and authorities of the church (compare Chapter 1). But in spite of his good and honest intention his interpreted Aristotelian philosophy did not keep on playing the part of merely a servant, it became a Trojan horse.

### *Unresolvable tension*

The great problem with a synthesis theology or philosophy is that it can never be free from unresolvable, inherent tension. For iron and clay can never be truly united.

This tension can for instance clearly be seen in the work of Evans (1980). The *artes liberales* was seen as a foundation for theological training but because these sciences were based on ancient Greek philosophy, they stood in a relation of tension to theology as a science which had to be based on the Scriptures.

### *Anachronistic thinking*

According to Vollenhoven (2011:208) one errs very grievously if – as in the synthesis philosophy of Thomas – one turns Plato or Aristotle into a semi-Christian. In the first instance it is historically incorrect. The presynthetic philosophers did not know the Gospel at all, they were completely pagan. This does not mean that one should exalt oneself above them instead of having compassion with them. But having compassion does not mean declaring them as partly Christian. Therefore one looks in vain for Christian themes in the work of Greek and Roman philosophers – it is a fool's errand.

### *Taken over by Aristotle*

Thinking synthetically is, in the second instance, also hazardous to a Christian. Making Plato/Aristotle partly a Christian means one has to add something (the sphere of grace) to get a complete Christian. Furthermore, you think you are taking over Plato/Aristotle for yourself and for Christianity but in the meantime Platonism/Aristotelianism is taking possession of you and your Christian way of thinking. The *accommodation* required by synthesis philosophy in the end easily leads to the *capitulation* of Christian faith. This not only applied to the accommodation to Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies but is also valid for contemporary efforts of reconciliation between the Christian faith and secular philosophy.

## ***2.9 A different view of the history of Western thought***

Instead of the continuity model of Van Asselt (1996) and others (cf. 1.1.7 above) Vollenhoven has a completely different view of history. Taking Christian synthesis philosophy as his point of departure he divides the history of Western philosophy into three great periods (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005b:29): (1) the presynthesis thinking of the Greeks and Romans (from approximately six centuries BC to about 50 AD); (2) the synthesis philosophy of the Church Fathers and the Middle Ages (from approximately 50 to about 1500 AD); (3) the post-synthesis thinking (from approximately 1500 up to today. The latter period has a distinct anti-synthetic character and can be distinguished in two different schools. The one starts with the Reformation of the sixteenth century which wanted to break away from the synthesis between heathen philosophy and the Bible in order once more to do full justice to the Scriptures. The other school started with the Renaissance with the opposite motivation: It broke away from synthesis because it disliked the biblical element in it and wanted to revive ancient pagan culture and philosophies. These two tendencies of which the latter became the dominant one, run right through to the present day.

## ***2.10 A permanent temptation***

Although it is no longer the dominating spirit, synthesis philosophy has never really disappeared among Christians – it remains a permanent temptation.

An example of this is the inception of Reformed Orthodoxy in as early as the second generation of Reformational philosophers like Beza (Calvin's successor in Geneva). Because insights acquired by the sixteenth century Reformation had to be consolidated, extensive theological treatises originated which were intended to defend, explain and systematise the new dogmas.

However, since no Christian philosophy was available, Aristotle was called in to help – just as earlier in the work of Thomas and the Roman Catholic Contra-reformational movement after him. Someone like Musaeus (who wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) is therefore quite happy to see himself as a scholastic philosopher in a tradition going back to Thomas. Protestant Orthodoxy became Protestant (also Reformed) Scholasticism (cf. Evans, McGrath & Galloway, 1986:151 et seq.).

If one rejects synthesis philosophy, then of course the question is what the right way of thinking is? Is it really possible, since every philosopher is a child of his/her own era? What does it mean to reject synthesis (the way the 16th century Reformers intended to do) because the secular element in it was unacceptable?

### ***2.11 Thetic-critical philosophy***

According to Vollenhoven (2005c:6-8) a Christian should not think anti-thetically, but thetic-critically. This means that one cannot (thetically) philosophise without one's own preliminary viewpoint. But simultaneously one can also (critically) learn from others. "Critical" includes both a positive and a negative side. The negative means amongst other things, to think *antisynthetically*, that is to reject synthesis philosophy as a Christian.

Venter (1985:11) rightly says:

A Christian philosopher does good when trying to learn from others. But merely polishing others' ideas to adapt them to one's own faith in the end means that one's faith is combined with an idea structure which is foreign to it.

The correct way is that we should take care that our Christian faith gives structure to our ideas, and that which we take over from others we should dismantle and restructure according to the structures of our faith (Venter, 1985:11).

Apart from the fact that (according to Vollenhoven) synthesis philosophy reached a peak in the work of Aquinas, the latter is also often called “the father of scholastic thinking”. What is the difference and the relationship between the two? This brings us to a second important subject:

### **3. Scholastic philosophy**

It is probably the best to regard Scholasticism as a *kind or type of synthesis philosophy*. For synthesis is also possible with other types and tendencies within, for instance, modern secular philosophies, like evolutionism or existentialism.

McGrath (1988:50) writes that “Scholasticism is probably one of the most despised intellectual movements in human history”. For this reason certain sources on Reformational philosophy ignore it without even explaining what it entails, not realising how significant it really is for understanding the Reformational tradition as well.

Even if the concept “Scholasticism” is of ill repute today, it still is important, if possible, to get greater clarity on it – also for this final chapter on the philosophy of Thomas.

#### ***3.1 Stemming from two needs***

McGrath (1988:51) explains the inception of Medieval Scholasticism by referring to two needs which originated at the time. (1) The need for *systematising Christian theology* and develop it; (2) The need to show that *theology* (and with it the Christian faith) *is a rational, scientific matter*. To meet these two needs, however, philosophy was necessary, being regarded as something rational. “This then is the essence of scholasticism: the demonstration of the inherent rationality of Christian theology by an appeal to philosophy ...” (McGrath, 1988:51). It led to scholastic theologies, according to him, becoming “cathedrals of the

intellect”, encompassing the whole of reality. We already found this distinctly in the intellectualism of Thomas.

Gaybba (1998:29) concurs with this and shows how a mere two generations after the apostolic era the use of philosophy made its appearance in theological thinking. And, since there was no truly Christian philosophy, especially Plato (in a Neo-Platonic version) became the philosophical pundit for Christian theologians until far into the Middle Ages before he was replaced by Aristotelian philosophy.

### ***3.2 Bound by traditional sources***

According to Vollenhoven (2005a:371) the concept “Scholasticism” denotes the philosophical method of scholars with whom studying the heritage of their predecessors plays a more important part than their own independent investigation. This is the reason why Scholasticism exhibits a substantially traditionalist character (cf. also Gaybba, 1998:35, 36). The writings of the early Christian scholars were initially during the Middle Ages only collected (in *compilationes*), later on harmonised with one another (in *concordantiones*), which finally served as a base for their own opinions (in *sententiae*) and were used as teaching aids.

Hart, et al. (1974:102) briefly describe the situation during those days after the fall of the Roman Empire, the inundation of Europe by the German “barbarians” and the decline of the ancient culture and Christianity as follows:

The preservation of culture and education came to rest in the hands of the clergy, mainly in the monasteries. Their primary interest was the passing on of the tradition of the Christian faith via the authority of the Church Fathers. This made for a traditionalistic, schoolishly-slavish clinging to traditional authority. And since this preservation consisted mainly in the propagation of remaining documents (by

copying, making compilations, collections, concordances, etc.) as well as some hesitant interpretation, studies in grammar dominated the scene ...

According to this description Scholasticism does not necessarily imply the nature-grace theme or Aristotelising philosophy.

### ***3.3 The role of logic***

Venter (1985:3,4) rightly rejects the common concept (among Reformational theologians) that “Scholasticism” is supposed to mean the same as “unreformed” (Roman Catholic) thought. (Cf. the flourishing of scholastic thinking later on among Reformed Orthodoxy from approximately 1550-1700). According to Venter also the nature-grace theme only really became more prevalent during the thirteenth century. According to him “Scholasticism” means (1) incorporating a mostly ecclesiastical tradition of learning with the aid of strictly logical means within the context of philosophical schools, and (2) adding in the same way new information to the systems. Logic did indeed take an important role in scholastic thinking. (Cf. the impressive two volumes by De Rijk, 1962 & 1967.)

### ***3.4 Specific methods***

Grabmann (1956) and De Rijk (1977:25) also discuss this facet of Scholasticism when they write that it denotes a (theological and philosophical) activity according to a specific method which (in both study and teaching) is characterised by a system of concepts, distinctions, the analysis of propositions and specific ways of arguing of which the dialectic method is the dominant one. (From p. 107 to 137 De Rijk discusses this dialectic method in detail.)

### ***3.5 A wider definition***

All these definitions of what “Scholasticism” means, point to different facets of this type of thinking: (1) it originates from a specific need, (2) is markedly bound by tradition – even today, (3) a certain type of logic takes an important role in it as well as (4) a specific

methodological approach. What is conspicuous in three of these definitions of Scholasticism, however, is that they more or less concentrate on the *formal* aspect. Perhaps the *contents* is avoided because scholastic thinking can include a diversity of philosophical and theological directions and concepts.

McGrath (1988:51), however, does not avoid the contents of Scholasticism rightly so in my opinion. He demonstrates how the Neo-Platonic, Augustinian philosophy (as the basis for a rational theology) by about 1270 – in spite of vehement opposition from conservative side – was ousted by Aristotle (called “*the philosopher*”). From then on Aristotle’s philosophy was employed to meet the two needs of Christian theology mentioned above (cf. 3.1).

Polman (1961:88-89) gives a description of “Scholasticism” in which most of the previously mentioned elements are included. The term is derived from the Latin *scholasticus*, for someone who worked (as a teacher or a student) at a cathedral or convent school of that time and later at a university. Their philosophical-theological science practised was called “Scholasticism”. Important traits were the following: (1) A firm traditionalist approach since it only reproduced and systematised the heritage of the Church Fathers and the Greeks. (2) A certain relationship developed between philosophy and theology in which philosophy was supposed to act as “handmaiden”. (3) Aristotle’s influence grew steadily. (4) A definite kind of method was developed for reading, exegesis, commenting, speculating, debating and arguing – as emerges distinctly from the two *Summae* by Thomas Aquinas.

### ***3.6 Conclusion***

My personal opinion is therefore that one can hardly speak about Scholasticism during the hey-day of the Middle Ages (from about 1250) without mentioning its Aristotelising character. The same applies to Lutheran and Reformed Scholasticism from approximately

1550, as well as contemporary theologians and philosophers who attempt to revive this kind of orthodoxy today.

I would like to add as a second feature the dualism of nature-grace (supranature). In the case of Thomas his Aristotelisation of Christianity was achieved by means of his method of nature-supernature. I will first remark briefly about Aquinas' nature-grace dualism and then elaborate on the Aristotelian influence in his thinking.

### *3.6.1 Nature and grace*

The challenge which confronted the West at the time was not merely of a theological or philosophical kind but to effect unity between the Roman, German and Christian worldviews and cultures:

The underlying motive of unification which managed to mould these diverse elements into one 'community' we call the motive of 'Nature and Grace'. Simply stated, this motive understood the cosmos to consist of Nature, or man's external way of living from day to day (in sin), and Grace, the added dimension of 'new' life promised by Christianity. Whatever ideals would emerge from this synthesis of life-styles would at heart reflect this deeper duality of Nature and Grace.

In order to survive the fall of the Roman Empire, the Church and State somehow had to reach an alliance. Indeed, we can most fully express this reality in terms of the synthesis ideal of a *Christian Commonwealth (Corpus Christianum)*. Here Grace and Nature were to co-exist. The pope and the head of the state were 'equals'. The Roman Empire (now German) and the body of Christ were to be one.

It may be said of this ideal that it characteristically divided both man and cosmos into a duality consisting of a spiritual sphere and a natural one, maintaining that spirituality was attained through communion with God and naturality attained

through rationality. The various expressions of this basic motive gave rise to both the plurality of Medieval cultural forms and the differences within scholastic thinking (Hart et al., 1974:2, 3).

### *3.6.2 The great influence of Aristotle*

The method of nature-grace enabled Thomas (as has been abundantly proved by the previous chapters on his SCG) to attempt to effect a reconciliation between Aristotle and the Scriptures. In these chapters, however, many questions were left unanswered, to which we now have to return. These are questions like the following: Why was Aristotle's philosophy in particular so popular at the time? Was it not very difficult – as well as irresponsible – to reconcile his ideas with the Word of God? Did nobody object against it?

Seeing that the reception and processing of philosophy according to the man from Stagira is an intricate tale, those who are interested are referred to the (unfortunately still unpublished but) excellent survey by Hart et al. (1974:63-95). From this work amongst other things the following becomes clear: (1) How at the universities of Paris and Oxford the Neo-Platonic philosophy was gradually replaced by an Aristotelising one, as well as what it contained. (2) The fierce controversy that accompanied it, especially at the University of Paris – and also the role Thomas played in it (cf. Hart et al., 1974:84-86). (3) The denunciation by Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authorities of the incorporation of Aristotelian philosophy in their theology. (4) Later reactions (by i.a. Occam) to these ecclesiastical denunciations.

Here are a few flashes from the intricate and tense course of events.

## **4. Thomas's synthetic accommodation of Aristotle's philosophy.**

Aristotle's philosophy for the greater part of the hey-days of the Middle Ages played either a positive or a negative role.

### *4.1 A Broad outline*

I do not have the room to go into the philosophy of Aristotle himself here. I have to confine myself to start with the fact that this giant in the history of Western philosophy – not without reason – has always enjoyed attention within Reformational philosophy. Examples are Runner (1951), Vollenhoven (2011:57-70, 118-126, 129-131) and various works by the Aristotle expert, Bos (e.g. 2003). I confine myself to an overview of Platonising and Aristotelising philosophy during the Middle Ages.

The history of *Medieval thinking* in main lines covered the following phases: (1) an Augustinian-Boethian-Platonic; (2) an Augustinian-Neo-Platonic-Aristotelian; (3) a phase during which controversy began on the processing of Aristotle in Christianity and (4) a phase of critique of Aristotle.

During the first and partly the second phase of early Scholasticism there was still very limited knowledge of Aristotle's logic. During the later second and especially during the third phase the full Aristotelian logic as well as his other works were discovered and translated into Latin which was then utilised to introduce new information into the Christian tradition. However, during the final phase the Aristotelian synthesis was queried.

#### ***4.2 The reason for Aristotle's popularity***

According to Vos (1990:70) the popularity of Aristotle's philosophy can be ascribed to the fact that to philosophers of the thirteenth century it provided a new scientific view of reality. According to this view the terrestrial world was no longer (the way it was in Augustinian Neo-Platonism) a mere "sign" of a higher world, but was knowable as such by the natural intellect of human beings. Therefore it was impossible to ignore Aristotle, since it would mean trying to stem progress which would in any case not last long. Such a strategy would be similar to us today attempting to avoid the scientific-technical problems of our own times.

#### ***4.3 No easy task***

One should, however, not assume that it was easy for Christian philosophers to accept Aristotle. The man from Stagira held, amongst others, the following views which were in direct conflict with the ecclesiastical and theological tradition of the time: (1) he believed that the world had not been created but existed from all eternity; (2) that the deity is an unchangeable, indifferent being who only thinks about himself and is the first cause and end of everything; (3) that the soul of a human being is passive and has to be activated by a higher, supra-personal spiritual power; (4) that human individual souls perish at the time of death since they are then once more taken up into the universal spirit; (5) that knowledge can only be obtained via sensory experience. How, for instance, could the Aristotelian view of (3), (4) and (5) be reconciled with the official teaching of the church?

#### ***4.4 Reactions to Aristotle's philosophy***

Thomas not only had to reconcile Aristotle with the church but also the doctrine of the church with Aristotle. I will once more explain the background briefly.

Aristotle was only discovered gradually in the Western world after many centuries (cf. Venter, 1988:156). By the eleventh century his logic was rediscovered. Via Arabic commentaries (who still read Aristotle from a Neo-Platonic perspective) during the late eleventh century more of Aristotle's other works became known in the West. Only by the first half of the thirteenth century the realisation dawned that this was not the authentic Aristotle and by means of translations from the original Greek into Latin the real Aristotle first became known. This was also the age in which Thomas Aquinas lived.

This history, especially the events at the University of Paris, is recounted in detail by amongst others Van Steenberghen (1955). He first describes how Aristotle gradually became known and was accepted and then the different reactions to it, namely an eclectic Aristotelianism, the more conservative Augustinian Aristotelianism (of amongst others Bonaventura) and the

radical Aristotelianism (of e.g. Siger of Brabant). As mentioned before, Hart et al. (1974:63 et seq.) also present a short survey of this complex process which also includes the events at the University of Oxford.

Christian thinkers therefore reacted differently to this novelty. Some of them (e.g. Bonaventura) still shied away from Aristotle and preferred staying on the traditional Neo-Platonic course (already paved by Augustine). Another group (e.g. the Averroists) leaned over to the other extreme by canonising Aristotle (alongside the Scriptures), adhering to a double truth. A third, moderate group in the middle (e.g. Albertus Magnus and Aquinas) treated Aristotle with more caution and also retained some elements from the Augustinian tradition. As we have shown (in the first chapter) even the moderation of Thomas was, however, considered unorthodox by some of his contemporaries.

#### ***4.5 The outcome of the whole course of events***

The reaction by the church initially was to ban the works of Aristotle without exception. When later on it was realised that such an attempt was in vain, the condemnation was confined to the “unorthodox” ideas in his writings (cf. Hart et al., 1974:87). The condemnations were in particular levelled at the Averroist-Aristotelian line of Siger of Brabant who attempted to reconcile Aristotle with the Scriptures by means of the method of paradox, the doctrine of double truth (cf. 2.7.2 above). Thomas’s method of nature-grace seemed to have been more acceptable, though not to everybody.

The condemnation (in 1277) by Bishop Tempier of Paris included no less than 219 errors, some of which were ideas of Thomas. Eleven days after that Robert Kilwardby, the archbishop of Canterbury, applied this condemnation to the University of Oxford as well. His successor John Peckham, repeated his predecessor’s condemnation in 1284 and 1286, so that Thomist philosophy was forbidden at Oxford.

But the church could not stem the Aristotelian-Scholastic tide. In 1278 The Dominican Order declared the philosophy of Thomas official doctrine of the order. In 1323 Thomas became the first person in history to be canonised by the Pope. And in 1325 the condemnation of certain views of Thomas (in the condemnation of 1277) was retracted. Synthesis philosophy had triumphed!

#### ***4.6 Aristotle, Aristotelianism and Aristotle interpretation***

Finally we have to point out that synthesis philosophy can have as its outcome a very complex system so that it is essential to use distinct terminology (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a:45). Aristotle himself underwent (according to Vollenhoven) a development through various phases. Trends linking up directly with some of his conceptions are designated “Aristotelianism”. Other types of philosophy which are not so directly connected with Aristotle’s philosophy, are called “Aristotle interpretations”, as for instance Thomas’s subsistence theory. Aristotelianism and Aristotle interpretations are therefore no longer the pure, original Aristotle. It has been combined for instance with Platonising elements (as in the SCG of Thomas – cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a:329).

### **5. Conclusion**

In vyf chapters I – a mere philosophical dwarf – dared to criticise a giant in the history of Western thought. My final conclusion is that, in spite of the fact that Aquinas wrote his *Summa Contra Gentiles* more than seven hundred years ago, one can still be challenged and enriched by his struggles as a Christian thinker. One can learn from his philosophy both in a negative and positive sense.

Negatively one should be warned against any kind of synthetic Christianity, aiming at a compromise between God’s infallible revelation and a contemporary, popular philosophy of whatever kind.

Positively I want to refer to the balanced evaluation of two Reformational thinkers, viz. Spier and Hart.

Spier (1959:93) justly writes that Thomas “baptised” Aristotle to become a Christian, but explains it as follows. He did not accept Aristotle’s philosophy unquestioningly. On the one hand he tried to cleanse generally accepted ideas which were presented as “Aristotelian” from their later interpretations. On the other hand he let go of original Aristotelian ideas which were irreconcilable with the Scriptures. He therefore was an original philosopher who embroidered his own conception on an Aristotelian pattern.

One can also identify with Hart et al. (1974:85) who write the following on Aquinas:

... Aquinas did not accept Aristotle wholesale; he only accepted that which he, too, considered to be true. He did not accept Aristotle, but the truth of Aristotle. Aquinas never quotes Aristotle with the implication that this statement is valid simply because Aristotle made it ... Out of his love for truth, Aquinas could not accept an equation between Aristotle with truth ... So Aquinas saw himself as a servant of truth ...

## Chapter 7

### SEVEN CENTURIES OF NEO-THOMIST THINKING AFTER AQUINAS

*In the preceding chapters the author investigated the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274), the doctor angelicus of the Catholic Church. In investigating what happened to his heritage during the following seven centuries, this and the following chapter will conclude the book. As has been the case with many philosophical traditions, Aquinas was, since his death, interpreted by Neo-Thomist scholars in a great variety of ways.*

*The introduction provides some information about Reformational thinkers' interest in Catholic Thomistic philosophy and vice versa. Then the question is asked how one should deal with an inherited tradition. Thirdly follows a brief review of the revival of Thomist thinking, especially since the papal encyclical Aeterni Patris, at the end of the nineteenth century. The fourth section discusses the key issue, viz. which Thomas and whose Thomism? The next part investigates two methodologies of portraying the history of Neo-Thomism: according to different ontological types or conceptions in the interpretation of Aquinas, as well as a more chronological-historical method. Since neither of them is regarded by the author as fully satisfactory, the chapter is concluded with the prospect of an improved philosophical historiographical method to describe and analyse Neo-Thomist thinking in philosophy and theology (see next chapter).*

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#### **1. Introduction: How this chapter links up with previous chapters, the motivation for it, its limitations and lay-out**

By way of Introduction we indicate (1) how this chapter is related to the previous ones; (2) the motivation for adding it; (3) its focus, as well as (4) the course the investigation will take.

##### **1.1 Connection**

In previous chapters the author dealt with the philosophy of the important Medieval philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. This chapter and the one following it will conclude the book by asking what happened to his philosophical heritage during the more than seven centuries after his death up to today.

For the past seven hundred years his heritage has been preserved by Thomistic followers writing commentaries on his work and developing his ideas. In this way a long tradition came into being comprising a great variety of interpretations of the writings of the *doctor angelicus*. The formation of such a (Neo)-Thomist school is not unusual. There are many examples in history of (re)interpretations of eminent philosophers, as for instance in Neo-Platonism, Neo-Kantianism, Neo-Calvinism (of e.g. A. Kuyper) and many others. In the very first chapter it was already pointed out how various – even opposing – interpretations emerged at the International Conference (in Rome and Naples, 1974) commemorating the death of Aquinas seven centuries earlier.

These different readings of Thomas were recently (Nov. 2012) once again emphasised in the lecture given by Walmsley (2012) during an International Conference in Johannesburg at the Catholic College of St. Augustine. The title of his lecture was already revealing: “Whose Thomism? Which Aquinas?”

## **1.2 Motivation**

One could pose the question whether this is not a case of occupying oneself with an archaeological-philosophical effort to revive old disputes. However, even while he was still alive, it was rightly said of Thomas that this “thick-headed bull” would keep on “bellowing” through the ages!

A second question is whether it is necessary for Reformational philosophers to take cognisance of Thomas and Neo-Thomism. (During my years as a student one of our

professors warned us as students to beware of the “danger of Roman Catholicism”!) In answer I therefore offer some motivation for this chapter.

### *1.2.1 Fellow-Christians*

First we should keep in mind that Catholic philosophers are also Christians – our brothers and sisters in Christ. As will become evident, some of them advocated, apart from a Christian theology, also a Christian philosophy – as did Reformational philosophers. In addition Neo-Thomism is one of the largest philosophical schools in the world (cf. Sahakian, 1969:316) and also produced some of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. Van der Beek (2006) for instance discusses the following Roman Catholic theologians: K. Raher, H. Urs von Balthasar, H. Kung, E. Schillebeekx and P. Schoonenberg.

### *1.2.2 Influence on Orthodox Reformed theology*

Secondly it should be kept in mind (as already pointed out in previous chapters) that after the sixteenth century Reformation from the middle of the seventeenth century and long afterwards Thomist philosophy had a vast influence on Reformed Orthodox theology. This emerges clearly for instance in the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (1625) which was written under the authority of the Synod of Dordt (cf. Van der Walt, 2011a and 2011b). That this scholastic attraction is lasting to this very day, is confirmed by the fact that the first part of this work (containing three volumes, a total of 1500 pages) was once more (in Latin with an English translation) issued in 2013 by the well-known publisher Brill in Leiden.

### *1.2.3 Interrelations*

In the third instance, in the teaching of Reformational philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam attention has always been given to Medieval philosophies (cf. Woldring, 2013). A good example of a thorough study of 933 pages is the one by Zuidema (1936) on the philosophy of the late Medieval philosopher, Willem van Ockham (1285-1349). Later

examples are Smit (1950), who deals with new Roman Catholic views of history, and the publications by Aertsen (1982, 1983, 1984, 1990 and 1991) in which he focused on Thomas Aquinas.

Ever since the origin of Reformational philosophy in the thirties of the previous century regular discussions have also been taking place between Reformational philosophers (like Dooyeweerd) and Roman Catholic thinkers. (Cf. e.g. Albers, 1955; Robbers, 1948:124-126 and 1951:119-120; Marlet, 1954; the contribution by Louet Feiser in Van Dijk & Stellingwerff, 1961:18-35.) During the International Conference at the 75<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the founding of the Society for Reformational Philosophy (Amsterdam, August 2011) once more papers were read by several Catholic-oriented speakers.

Within the circles of Reformed theology in the Netherlands there also has been a lively interest in the past in developments within Roman Catholic theology (cf. e.g. Berkouwer, 1948, 1964 and 1968; Meuleman, 1967; Wentzel, 1970 and Vandervelde, 1975.)

#### *1.2.4 Confronted by the same problems*

In the fourth place one should remember that Christians of different convictions and denominations are often confronted by the same problems. One such an issue is what a Christian philosopher's attitude should be toward non-Christian secular philosophy and culture. Of course this does not imply that the solutions to such burning questions would be similar for Roman Catholic and Reformational philosophers.

Both from the side of the Roman Catholics and other churches also ecumenical debates have long since been taking place on possible ecclesiastical unity. (Possibly a climax will be reached in 2017, 500 years after Luther started ringing the Reformational bell.) This kind of discussion was regularly encouraged by Pope Benedictus XVI (2005-2013) and from the side of the Evangelicals it can be read in for instance Noll & Nystrom (2005).

### *1.2.5 Recent attempts at a synthesis*

Finally we point out that a movement which became known as Radical Orthodoxy currently attracts a number of followers in South Africa too. This group of philosophers like to hark back to Thomas for inspiration – even though they admit that this is a “new” Thomas, radically re-interpreted. Smith and others even attempt to combine this trend with certain insights of Reformational philosophy and, the other way round to “reform” Reformational philosophy in the light of Thomism (cf. Smith, 2004:120 et seq., 155 et seq., 165 et seq. as well as Smith & Olthuis, 2006).

### *1.3 Constraints*

Obviously it is impossible to do justice to such a long and complex tradition of more than seven centuries in a single chapter – it is merely possible to draw some main outlines.

Existing surveys of the history of Neo-Thomism is not very satisfactory, since they usually merely mention the most important individuals chronologically (cf. e.g. Sassen & Delfgaauw, 1957; Hamman, 1960; Gilby, 1967) or focus on different conceptual accents by different Neo-Thomist philosophers (cf. e.g. Ashley, 2006 and Haldane, 2005).

The mass of *theological* Thomist literature will only touched on obliquely. This chapter is confined as far as possible to the Neo-Thomistic *philosophies* forming the foundation of the different theologies. The key issue (cf. the following chapter) is whether there are a number of basic, connected ideas which could be regarded as typical of this philosophical tradition.

### *1.4 Lay-out*

The following will be discussed: (1) The way the followers of a certain tradition usually handle it. (2) A short survey of the revival of Thomism particularly since the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. (3) Two key issues: Which Thomas?

and Whose Thomism? will be discussed: (4) Two methods by which Neo-Thomists recount the history of their tradition, will be looked into. One which mainly focuses on the types of conceptions and a second using a chronological-historical methodology. (5) Because neither of these two methods seems to be fully satisfactory, the survey is concluded with the prospect of a final chapter in which the developments and shifts within Neo-Thomist philosophy (and by implication theology) is set out according to an improved method of philosophical historiography.

## **2. How a tradition is handled**

Two vital introductory questions are: Exactly what does a tradition comprise? And: How is it usually handled? We here confine ourselves to philosophical traditions of a world-viewish nature.

### ***2.1 What a tradition is***

A tradition is the heritage left by predecessors to their successors. Our relationship with the past implies, according to Van der Hoeven, a responsibility towards those who left us a heritage (cf. Van der Hoeven, 1980:21).

Such a view of tradition is related to one's view of history. Van der Hoeven (1974:13) formulates it as follows:

History is that which concerns all of us, which takes us along in a forward movement. In it everything passes by, but in such a way that the passing by is still taken up in the forward movement. Therefore the past has never passed away, but is something all of us carry around with us. Even when we have taken leave of it, it keeps on speaking to us. [Transl. from the Dutch.]

He illustrates it as follows:

The relation of a human being with his parents can by way of analogy (nothing more) perhaps bring greater clarity. A human being only becomes really mature and independent, that is sees his own possibilities for the future more distinctly, when he learns to discover how much he has received from his parents, in particular regarding the points on which he differs most with them, their approach, habits, opinions, etc. [Transl. from the Dutch.]

Van der Hoeven therefore emphasises the responsibility of those who receive a certain inherited tradition towards those who handed it down to them as an incomplete heritage. A tradition is therefore not something without obligations. But before saying something more in this regard, we first distinguish the various elements of a tradition.

## ***2.2 Elements of a tradition***

Wolterstorff (1987) distinguishes the following four facets in any tradition.

A worldviewish tradition helps one to understand everything that exists (I call it the structural side), but also how it *should* be (the normative element). In the case of philosophy a (prescientific) worldview is developed into (scientific) reflection.

Such a philosophical tradition, secondly, does not remain a mere theory, but is expressed in practice in many ways.

Each tradition also has its own “story”, usually penned down in important writings, by means of which it is handed down from one generation to the next.

In the last instance no tradition is infallible – it will always be an imperfect, human product.

With this in mind, the next issue arises, namely:

## ***2.3 How a tradition should be handled***

The risk attached to any tradition is that it can become a stagnant, dead legacy from the past. Then tradition becomes the living faith of the deceased and traditionalism the dead faith of the living!

Because the Christian tradition from the past (among which the Thomist and Reformed) had a rather intellectualist approach, it is currently not very popular. The emphasis is more on practical experience (cf. Van der Stoep, Kuiper & Ramaker, 2007).

Vander Stelt (2005) shows how a classical kind of view of being human – from as long ago as Plato and Aristotle – runs right through the Christian tradition. According to this anthropology a human being (apart from his body) consists of three parts of the soul, namely reason (head), will (hand) and desire (heart). During the course of the history of Christianity emphasis was laid one-sidedly on one of these three.

Earlier in Reformed Orthodoxy (in the line of amongst others Thomas's intellectualism) great stress was put on rationality (the head). The right knowledge, teaching or doctrine (orthodoxy) was regarded as very important. Later on the emphasis shifted to the will, the right conduct or deed (called orthopraxy). As was the case in earlier periods also, currently the experience of the heart is given precedence. It is therefore a question how intellectually coloured traditions can be transmitted within such a new spiritual climate.

Wolterstorff (1987:11-12) recommends the following: (1) *Being open* towards the tradition – even if one feels like changing it or even rejecting it. (2) A *critical attitude*, asking questions like the following: Did the tradition have the right view of reality and is it still pointing a clear normative direction? Does it also find expression in concrete conduct? Is its story handed down in such a way that it is relevant to our own times and thus will also appeal to a new generation, inspire and motivate them? (3) Its *creative development*: Any tradition demands to be corrected, broadened and extended by its followers.

As will emerge from the next section, this shows similarity as to how the heritage of Thomas was handled in the Neo-Thomist tradition.

### **3. A brief outline of the Neo-Thomist tradition**

Usually the concept “Neo-Thomism” has only been applied to the revival of this tradition since the end of the nineteenth century. In this outline, however, I use it for the complete history since the death of Thomas.

#### ***3.1 The philosophy of Thomas canonised***

Although in the previous chapter we did point out the initial opposition against the philosophy and theology of Thomas, it did not last long. In 1318 the philosophy of the *doctor communis* was declared official doctrine (*philosophia in ecclesia recepta*) of the Dominican Order (founded by Dominicus de Soto).

#### ***3.2 Influence on other orders***

However, his influence was not confined to this one order in the Roman Catholic church, but soon spread to scholars of the Franciscan Order (founded in 1209 already) and to an even greater extent to the Order of the Jesuits (founded much later, in 1534).

These two orders, however, supported different kinds of anthropologies. Instead of the typical Thomist subsistence theory, it was either a *vinculum*-theory, or a semi-mystical view of being human. In opposition to the Thomist Dominicans’ intellectualism they also held voluntaristic views (more emphasis on the will than on the intellect). Therefore conflict could not be avoided and the Franciscans and Jesuits are often designated as “unorthodox” Neo-Thomists. Examples of eminent earlier and later Thomist Jesuits are for instance Suarez (1548-1617), Rahner (1904-1984) and Marlet (1921-1997).

#### ***3.3 Decrees by various popes***

Various papal decrees further contributed to preventing Thomas's philosophy from petering out during the course of history. The following significant events may be mentioned. In 1323 Pope John XXII declared Thomas a saint. Thomas's main theological work, the *Summa Theologiae*, later gained a place of honour alongside the Bible on the altar in the hall where the First Council of Trent met. Leo XII (1878-1903) in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of 1879 called Thomas the *princeps and magister* who stands out far above the other scholastic intellectuals and pleaded for a revival of his philosophy. An encyclical is a circular letter from a pope himself to his bishops, priests and the members of the Roman Catholic church. (For a brief summary of this particular encyclical, cf. Meuleman, 1952 and Gilson, 1972:37.)

In *Pascendi Dominici Gregoris* of 1907 against modernism Pope Pius X (1903-1914) concurred with Pope Leo XII by prescribing scholastic philosophy (meaning mainly Thomas) as the foundation for the theological sciences. Benedictus XV (1914-1922) in 1917 regarded Thomas's rational thinking as an example to lecturers and institutions. Pius XI (1922-1939) in his *Studiorum Ducem* of 1923 called Thomas the common or universal teacher of the Roman Catholic church. In 1950 followed the encyclical *Humani Generis* of Pius XII (1939-1958). In this document he did not oppose the Augustinian or Franciscan traditions in Neo-Thomism, but the *nouvelle theologie* (new theology) under the influence of existentialism in particular (cf. Meuleman, 1960). Once more the philosophy of Thomas was recommended since it would safeguard the foundations of the Christian faith.

In 1965 (directly after the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965) Pope Paul VI in a decree of 28 October on the training of priests again emphasised the meaning of Aquinas's ideas for scientific development. Finally in the encyclical *Fides et ratio* of Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) one once again finds (in the line of *Humani Generis*) an accommodation of the Augustinian and Franciscan traditions, but with special emphasis on the Thomist as the

antipode for various irrationalist and relativist tendencies. (Pope Benedictus XVI (2005-2013) followed the Augustinian tradition and the latest pope, Francis, is of the Jesuit Order.)

### ***3.4 Nature and grace***

From these different ecclesiastical enunciations it becomes evident that Catholic thinking from the higher, supernatural, sphere of grace or faith (to which church and theology is regarded to belong) kept careful watch over the so-called lower, natural sphere of reason, science and philosophy. This kind of rational philosophy in which leaders of the church also had to be instructed, was not to conflict with the Christian faith or undermine it, but had to support it.

To Reformational philosophers, however, it remains a question whether Thomas's synthesis with the pagan thinking of for instance Plato and Aristotle as well as the later syntheses of the Neo-Thomists with modern secular philosophies did not constitute an obstacle rather than offering support.

### ***3.5 The Dutch-Belgian contribution***

Finally we have to mention that, due to the dominating role currently played by English, the Dutch and Belgian contributions to the revival of Thomism have often been underrated by historiographers. This applies in particular to the Roman Catholic Universities of Nijmegen and Leuven to which Stryker Boudier (1985-1992) devotes his eight volume work *Wijsgerig leven in Nederland, België en Luxemburg, 1880-1980* (Philosophical life in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg, 1880-1980). (Part 1 deals with the contributions by the Dominicans and Part 2 with that of the Jesuits.)

He clearly indicates how later Thomist philosophers, under the influence of newer philosophical trends and schools, deviated from Thomas and other "fathers". (In Part 8 of 1992:73 et seq. he also discusses the question of what Roman Catholics imply by a Christian

philosophy) As will become evident later (cf. the following chapter), the Netherlands and Belgium produced a substantial number of important Neo-Thomist philosophers.

#### **4. Neo-Thomist interpretations of developments during seven centuries**

The history of Neo-Thomism is recounted by various Thomists themselves. In addition to the sources later to be enumerated, we could mention Cessario (2003), Lonergan (2000) and Rowland (2012). Even writings dealing mainly with Thomas often draw the lines further through history, as e.g. Nichols (2002) and Elders (2013). The well-known contemporary Roman Catholic philosopher, MacIntyre (2009), also weaves the history of Thomism after Thomas into his work.

The intention with this chapter, however, is not to set out a history of Neo-Thomism, but rather to draw attention to the problems concerning their different historiographies. We mention only a few examples.

##### ***4.1 Haldane***

Haldane (2005:1017) emphasises the synthetic character of the Thomist tradition. Further he distinguishes between the concept “Thomism” in a narrower and a broader sense. The narrower sense to him comprises the interpretations of and commentaries on Thomas by sixteenth and seventeenth century philosophers like Cajetan (1469-1534) and others. He would probably also count De Vitoria (1468-1546) and possibly Zabarella (1532-1589) among these.

But already in these early times there were, according to Haldane, philosophers who saw a connection between the philosophy of Thomas and that of, for instance, other Medieval philosophers. Suarez (1548-1617), for instance, also used insights gained by Duns Scotus.

According to Haldane even before, but especially after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) such a broader view gained popularity. Thomist philosophers began freely

accommodating contemporary tendencies as for example existentialism and phenomenology. However, this renders it more difficult to write a history of Neo-Thomism: “Not only have some self-proclaimed Thomists held positions with which Aquinas would probably have taken issue. Some have advanced claims that he would not have been able to understand” (Haldane, 2005:1017).

Sassen & Delfgaauw (1957:266) were confronted by the same issue already during the fifties of the previous century. Not only was it a fact that not all Thomists are Catholics, but the influence of various tendencies on Thomism often was so considerable “... that it is sometimes difficult to make out whether a certain philosopher should be regarded as a Thomist or not.”

#### ***4.2 Delfgaauw***

Delfgaauw (1952:79 et seq.) attempts to make a distinction between conservative, moderate and progressive Neo-Thomists and enumerates representatives of all three schools.

The conservatives were of the opinion that Thomas’s philosophy and theology merely needed to be explained anew for current times. The moderates did not want to change the philosophy of Thomas, but were convinced that their own times presented numerous new issues which had not yet been topical in the time of the *doctor angelicus*. By far most of the Neo-Thomists, however, belonged to the third group who were of the opinion that the philosophy of Thomas could be followed in broad lines, but could by no means be considered as complete. Neo-Thomism could, according to them, only be a living philosophy if practised in perpetual contact with modern and contemporary philosophy.

Robbers (1951:82,83) also follows this categorisation into three types of Neo–Thomism and himself chooses for the third (progressive) approach.

Thus a great diversity of forms or shades of Neo-Thomism exists. As mentioned above, this was recently again accentuated by a lecture by Walmsley (2012) entitled “Whose Thomism? Which Aquinas?”

## **5. Two difficult questions**

We begin with Walmsley’s second question: Which Thomas? However, it cannot be isolated from his first question: Whose (Neo-)Thomism?

### **5.1 Which Thomas?**

To be a true *Thomist* a philosopher has to take into account Thomas’s thinking in some way or other. But to qualify as a true *Neo-Thomist* one should also differ with it. Therefore there should be both continuity and discontinuity. In the above-mentioned encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (of 04/08/1879) the issue, concisely put, is formulated as follows: *vetera novis augere et perficere* (the old should be enriched and perfected by the new).

But this proves to be no mean assignment. To meet the two above-mentioned ecclesiastical directions, first demands answering two vital questions. First: What were the essential traits of Thomas’s own philosophy with which a Neo-Thomist should associate himself? Secondly: How much independence may a Neo-Thomist indulge in while still remaining a Thomist? (This, incidentally, applies to all three types of Neo-Thomism listed above, because even the first two distinguished by Delfgaauw, were not able to represent Thomas in a neutral and objective way.)

### **5.2 Illustrating the issue**

Robbers (1951) is here used merely as an illustration of how difficult it can be to answer the first question (Which Thomas?).

Initially he attempts to answer the question by trying to pin down which of the two had the greater influence on Thomas – Aristotelianism or (Neo-)Platonism. Following certain

Thomas interpretations, he chooses for the latter influence which he discerns particularly in the central meaning of the doctrine of analogy in the work of Thomas (p. 58).

Later on, however, he has to admit that distinct Aristotelian influence in the work of Thomas cannot be denied either, and he writes: “Even if one could see the Platonism of Thomas as specified by Aristotelianism, likewise one can call his Aristotelianism specified by Platonism” (p. 69). Therefore he finally prefers to identify an “Aristotelian Platonism” in the work of Thomas (cf. p. 74).

However, it is not satisfactory to characterise the philosophy of Thomas merely by means of reference to significant influences on his thinking. For Thomas was an original thinker whose philosophy was not simply a combination of two other philosophers or schools of philosophy.

Robbers (1951:80, 81) is therefore eventually compelled to enumerate some leading, characteristic features in the work of Aquinas. According to him these are Thomas’s teaching on the *analogia entis*, *materia et forma*, *actus et potentia* and *essentia et existentia*. He adds that this kind of philosophy was practised in a “Christian climate”, in other words it cannot be called Christian as such.

Is it not conspicuous that Robbers in his description of the essential traits of Thomas’s thinking (and also in his description of Neo-Thomism) makes no mention of what, in my opinion, is the most important feature, namely the distinction between a so-called natural and a supernatural sphere – with all the implications this has? Does he take this dualistic two realm doctrine so much for granted that it need not be mentioned? Or is it perhaps the deeply hidden driving force from which he as a Thomist departs?

### **5.3 Whose Thomism?**

In the second instance, what does being a Neo-Thomist entail, according to Robbers (1951)? He admits (cf. p. 64) that this question is even more difficult to answer in clear terms. He

merely states in general (p. 51) that Neo-Thomism should consist of two elements: One by which it is connected with Thomas, and a second whereby it can be considered a modern school of thought. Instead of distinct norms or guidelines for its modernity, Robbers simply falls back on what he previously described as characteristic of Thomas.

Thus he actually answers only one aspect, namely that of continuity and not the discontinuity with Thomas – which would truly make modern Thomism a *new* kind of Thomism.

Since Robbers advocates the third type of (progressive) Neo-Thomism, the answer probably is that, just as Thomas earlier attempted to combine Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies in a synthesis with his Christian faith, Neo-Thomism may use the same method of synthesis in the case of modern philosophical trends. Therefore Robbers points out (p. 84 et seq.) that it would be in accordance with ecclesiastical enunciations, as for instance the *vetera novis augere* of *Aeterni Patris*.

It would seem (cf. Robbers, p. 52) as if he also departs from the (to my mind false) division between form and content. According to that, the “neutral” form and method of contemporary philosophies (accepted by the Neo-Thomists) would not influence the content of their Thomist (Christian) convictions. The same error is committed that Thomas made seven centuries ago.

#### ***5.4 The importance of a development in the philosophy of Thomas***

According to Vollenhoven (2000:237-238) it is vital for understanding Thomas to realise that within his philosophy important shifts took place due to a development through several phases.

As was pointed out in Chapter 1, Thomas wrote his main philosophical work, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* between 1258/9-1263/4 while he was still reading Aristotle through Platonising lenses. His theological *opus magnum*, the *Summa Theologiae*, however,

originated during a following phase (1265-1274) when the influence of Aristotle on Thomas's philosophy had increased and it became clear that he was following a non-Platonising interpretation of Aristotle.

Therefore followers of Thomas will have to indicate clearly with *which* concepts or writings of Thomas they are in agreement. Generally such a distinction is not made by Neo-Thomists in Thomas's own development. Thus some Neo-Thomists stressed the Platonic elements (e.g. the idea of participation), while others emphasised the Aristotelian features (e.g. the doctrine of causality, potency and act, matter and form).

This brings us to the next point, namely that the history of Neo-Thomism is mainly mapped out according to two methods.

## **6. Two historiographical methods**

The first method implies a more or less broad ontological-conceptual typology.

### ***6.1 A typological classification***

Ashley (2006:44-45) uses this type of survey to attempt a systematic distinction between different kinds of Neo-Thomism. In his classification one finds amongst others Platonising, Aristotelian, Augustinian, Existentialist, Phenomenological and Analytical Neo-Thomists.

However, such a classification remains too vague, for what exactly is meant by "Platonising" etc. (Neo-)Thomism? Would it not be possible to be more specific?

The same applies to Mitchell (2007: map no. 155, 156 and 172). His first map (no. 155) gives a survey of Medieval philosophy, subdivided into Islamic, Jewish and Christian philosophies. Among the latter a distinction is made between the Augustinians, Franciscans and Dominicans, with Thomas as an important representative in the last-mentioned order.

The second map (no. 156) gives an outline of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is shown how Thomism had great influence on the Dominican Order (in particular at the University of Salamanca in Spain) as well as on the Jesuits (particularly at the University of Coimbra in Portugal). In the first case individuals like Cajetanus and De Vitoria were significant and in the latter Suarez. According to this map, however, the Jesuits at the time were still thinking especially in the line of Bonaventura.

The third map (no. 172) gives a picture of 20<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Thomism in the narrower meaning of the concept or the Thomist revival which followed in response to *Aeterni Patris*. Apart from being incomplete the map is not very enlightening. For example, at Cardinal Désiré Mercier (1851-1926), who played an important role in the revival of Thomism, numerous lines on the map lead to various philosophers, some of whom are merely mentioned (among them early individuals, e.g. Etienne Gilson and other more recent philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre), while other more recent philosophers are categorised according to concepts like “analytical” “metaphysical” and “transcendental”.

## **6.2 A chronological account**

Gilby (1967:119-121) distinguishes between three meanings of the concept “Thomism” (in use since the fourteenth century) which correspond with three important periods in the history of this movement. (1) Until the beginning of 1500 there was stiff competition between the various other Medieval schools and Thomism; (2) From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Thomism enjoyed a golden age in Spain; (3) From the second half of the nineteenth century (especially as a consequence of *Aeterni Patris*) a revival of Thomism began – regarded as the *philosophia perennis* of Roman Catholic thinking. Since then Thomists have been moving outwards in dialogue with numerous other philosophical traditions and disciplines and also applied Thomist principles to contemporary social and political issues.

Consequently Gilby classifies the history chronologically in (1) the thirteenth to sixteenth century, (2) the sixteenth to nineteenth and (3) nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In each period he also mentions the most prominent philosophers and theologians.

### **7. Conclusion: the necessity for a more distinctly philosophical historiography**

On the one hand it has to be admitted that mapping the seven centuries-long Neo-Thomist tradition is not a simple matter. On the other hand the ways in which it has been done up to now are confusing and therefore unsatisfactory. A final chapter will therefore investigate whether a more suitable method, which would offer both a better survey of and a deeper insight into Neo-Thomist philosophy, is available.

## Chapter 8

### A PROBLEM-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF NEO-THOMIST SCHOLARSHIP

*The preceding chapter provided a broad overview of seven centuries of Neo-Thomist thinking in philosophy and theology, as well as a discussion of the methodological attempts of various Neo-Thomists at describing this long history of the interpretations of Thomas Aquinas. The final conclusion of the previous chapter was that these historiographers were confronted with such a long and complex history that they could not provide a fully satisfactory historiographical method. This chapter argues that a consistent problem-historical method may be more appropriate to do the job, providing both penetrating analysis and insight.*

*The chapter develops as follows. First a brief description is given of the two main aspects of a philosophical conception, viz. its ontological type and normative direction. The second part provides an analysis of “classic” Thomist ontology (purely cosmological thinking, an ontological hierarchy with a dualism, vertical partial universalism and a clear distinction between nature and supernature or grace) as well as its anthropology (a subsistence theory). From the third section onwards the focus is on the Thomist nature-grace distinction, describing the modern shifting perspectives on this central dogma, while the next section explains the underlying philosophical reasons for this remarkable departure from Aquinas’s original viewpoint. Special attention is given to more recent irrationalist perspectives. The last (fifth) part is devoted to the discussion of a possible, more biblically oriented perspective on the ancient tension between the secular/profane and sacred/holy. In an increasingly secular world Protestant Reformational thinkers are also challenged by the vital question how the relationship between nature and grace, culture and Christ, creation and redemption should be viewed. If a Neo-Thomist view cannot be of help in this regard, in which direction should a Reformational philosophy be developed in the twenty-first century A.D.?*

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## **1. Introduction**

Some preliminary remarks are required on the way this chapter links up with the previous one, as well as its lay-out.

### **1.1 *Link***

The conclusion of the previous, seventh chapter was that Neo-Thomists themselves could not offer a satisfactory philosophical account of the developments during the past seven centuries following their “father”, Thomas Aquinas, and that a better methodology should be found. Therefore this chapter wants to investigate whether the consistent problem-historical method would be more appropriate for this purpose. Simultaneously it also attempts to demonstrate that such a method can give a better explanation than the standing theological studies of the remarkable shifts that took place within Neo-Thomist thinking regarding a central dogma (the doctrine of nature-grace) in Roman Catholic philosophy (cf. e.g. Meuleman, 1951).

### **1.2 *Lay-out***

The argument is presented in the following phases. First a brief definition is given of the two primary moments of any philosophical and theological conception, viz. its ontological type and normative direction. Subsequently (in the second part) an analysis is offered of “classical” Thomist ontology, viz. a purely cosmological philosophy, an ontological hierarchy including a dualistic division, vertical partial universalism and a distinction between nature and grace (the supernatural), as well as a typical Thomist anthropology (a subsistence theory). From the third section onwards the focus is on the two realm doctrine of nature-grace, as well as on the clear shifts that have taken place during the past centuries concerning this central Roman Catholic dogma. A fourth section attempts to explain this

remarkable departure from the original view of Thomas from the perspective of certain underlying changes in philosophical views. Special attention is given to more recent irrationalist tendencies. The last (fifth) section is devoted to the possibility of a more biblically oriented view of the age-old (in my opinion fictitious) dualism between the profane/secular/worldly and the sacred/holy. Even to Protestant philosophers this is an issue from which they have struggled to liberate themselves. How should they understand the relationship between nature and grace, culture and Christ, creation and redemption within the context of an increasingly secular 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## **2. Considering the consistently problem-historical method as a possibility**

In the previous chapters it has already been mentioned (cf. also Vollenhoven, 2005; Runner, 1982 and Kok, 1998:1-178) that a worldview and philosophy attempt to answer two basic questions. In the first instance how existing reality *looks like* according to one's view, and in the second instance, how it *should be*. The first is an *ontic* or *structural* question on what *exists* (reality) and the second a *normative* or *directional question* on how one *should* think and act.

Vollenhoven in his historiography of Western philosophy departs from the answers given to these two fundamental questions by scholars during the course of history. An answer to the structural problem offers a certain *type* of philosophical ontology (or view of reality) and anthropology (or view of the human being). Answers to what should be normative for thinking and doing emerge in different philosophical *schools* or *currents* which point the direction for a specific time. Together the type and current constitute the conception of a philosopher. (For introductory, elementary explanations of Vollenhoven's method, cf. Van der Walt, 2010a, 2013a, 2013b available in English in Van der Walt, 2014a:47ff and 2014b:1-37.)

## ***2.1 The character of types***

The interesting point is that the *types* of philosophies are not restricted to a certain age. After many of these originated as far back as ancient Greek philosophy, during the course of history they emerged again in the works of various philosophers. An identical type of philosophy in the work of two different philosophers could therefore be an indication of the influence of one scholar (e.g. the master) on the other (e.g. the student or disciple) or of a philosophical school which could be in existence for a shorter or longer period. Accordingly one would therefore expect more or less the same type of philosophy in the Neo-Thomist school. The common type of philosophy would explain its consistent element. (Vollenhoven, 2000:184-259 mentions all the different philosophical types, of which Vollenhoven, 2005:157-159 offers a brief survey.)

## ***2.2 The nature of schools or trends***

Unlike the type of philosophy which can live on for ages through generations and so guarantee continuity in a tradition, a specific school, trend or current lasts for only a limited period of time to be replaced afterwards by a new normative direction. Therefore schools are responsible for the variable or dynamic element in history. (For an outline of the various schools in Western intellectual history, cf. Vollenhoven, 2005:153-155.)

Why do philosophical directions change all the time? According to Vollenhoven the reason for this is the subjectivist idea of normativity which already had its origin in Greek philosophy. What does he mean by subjectivism?

It implies that no clear distinction is made between law/norm and that (the subject) to which the law/norm applies. That which should be subject to norms/laws is wrongly elevated to become a norm itself. Formulated in a different way: what *is*, is also regarded as what *should be*.

Why do the various philosophical schools lead to constant change? Simply because there are so many things in creation which can be absolutised or elevated to a normative status. In rationalist philosophy ( $\pm$  1600-1900) the human mind was, for instance, absolutised as reason (*ratio*), as the most important standard for both theory and practice. Irrationalism, however, downgrades the reason without rejecting it entirely. In this mainstream (from approximately 1900) there are, however, internal differences. In vitalism power or vitality is elevated to an absolute norm; in pragmatism usefulness is viewed as the highest standard; in existentialism human existential freedom has to point the direction (cf. e.g. Robbers, 1951).

### ***2.3 The influence of schools on types***

As mentioned above, the combination of a certain type and specific normative current or school form the conception or system of a specific philosopher. But what is the relationship between the two main elements of a philosophical system? The dynamic element (normative school) can influence the type of philosophy. A particular type of philosophy within rationalism is for example to a degree transformed when it also appears in subsequent irrationalist schools.

This chapter attempts to analyse Neo-Thomism according to this approach to Western history of philosophy, both as far as its continuous ontological-anthropological features are concerned (the type of philosophy) and regarding the changing different schools it passed through over seven centuries.

### **3. The type of philosophy fundamental to Thomism**

First attention will be given to a number of Thomas' disciples from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and subsequently from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to determine whether their type of philosophy remained the same.

### ***3.1 Earlier representatives***

The founder of the Dominican Order, Dominicus de Soto (1491-1560), the classic commentator on Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*, and T. De Vio Cajetanus (1469-1534), F. de Vitoria (1486-1546), attached to the famous university of Salamanca, Fr. de Suarez (1548-1617) and G. Zabarella (1532-1589) all still belong to the period or trend of the new age following the Middle Ages (cf. Vollenhoven, 2000:257). Their types of philosophies on the whole also correspond to that of Thomas Aquinas during his second philosophical phase in which he wrote his two *Summae* (cf. Vollenhoven, 2000:238).

### ***3.2 More recent representatives***

In the work of representatives of the nineteenth and twentieth century Thomas's type of philosophy is more or less maintained. However, this takes place within new schools. Here are a few examples of how these philosophical currents changed. D. Mercier (1851-1926) was a neo-idealistic rationalist. The following philosophers did, however, support some or other form of irrationalism: A.D. Sertillanges (1863-1948), H. Bergson (1860-1941) and M. Blondel (1861-1949) adhered to "Lebensphilosophie"; A. Gardeil (1859-1931) was a pragmatist and K. Rahner (1904-1984), J. Maritain (1882-1973) and M.F.J. Marlet (1921-1997) existentialists (cf. Vollenhoven, 2000).

Apart from these Roman Catholic philosophers Vollenhoven (2000) also provides valuable information (according to type and current) on the following more recent individuals' philosophical conceptions: H. Urs von Balthazar (1905-1988), J. Danielou (1905-1974), L. La Velle (1883-1951), H. de Lubac (1896-1991), G. Marel (1889-1973), J. Maritain (1882-

1973), P. Merlan (1897-1968), F. Sassen (1894-1971) and T. de Chardin (1881-1955). Since Vollenhoven (2000) was originally published already in 1962 contemporary well-known Roman Catholic philosophers, like A. MacIntyre (1929-), C. Taylor (1931-) and others were not included. (Cf. Bartholomew & Goheen, 2013:201 ff.)

When a new school becomes a popular fashion, the older schools in philosophy are usually doubted. However, in a Christian academic milieu (mostly of a conservative nature) one often finds the opposite tendency: Contemporary philosophy is criticised from the perspective of a preceding, out-dated philosophy.

A Roman Catholic philosopher like Delfgaauw (1952:110 et seq.) for instance criticises the above-mentioned three irrationalist schools departing from his rationalistic conviction. According to him “Lebensphilosophie” causes a human being to be led by his instincts and not by his reason. The existentialists adhere to an idea of a blind irrational choice for freedom. The pragmatists subordinate the human intellect and scholarship to useful conduct: Science which is not of practical use is a luxury, and senseless. According to Delfgaauw, finally pragmatism places the intellect in the service of the material prosperity of human beings.

Later on we will show how this change in a normative direction led to the transformation of the typically Thomist doctrine of nature-grace.

### ***3.3 A brief description of the type of philosophy of Neo-Thomism***

The concise typification by Vollenhoven (2000:238, 257) of the majority of these Thomist philosophers runs as follows: purely cosmological philosophy, dualism, vertical partial universalism and subsistence theory. What is implied by this Vollenhovian terminology? The

first four concepts in broad terms describe the Thomist ontology or view of reality, and the last its typical anthropology.

In the third chapter (which dealt with the ontology of Thomas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*) an extensive explanation of the above concepts was already given. This is just a brief refreshing of the readers' memory.

*3.3.1 Purely cosmological philosophy means that the origin of creation is not* regarded as significant in this kind of thinking. Studying the existing *structural side* of cosmic things is the focus, while their *origin* and *development* is regarded as of less importance. This type of philosophy therefore implies a markedly static view in contrast to cosmogono-cosmological thinking which, as the word denotes, does seek to pay attention to the genetic or dynamic. Older cosmological philosophers differ from other, later Neo-Thomists (e.g. Blondel and Von Balthasar) with whom we will deal later.

*3.3.2 Dualism* indicates that the existing reality consists of an original dichotomy, usually called the transcendent God and the non-transcendent universe. Within one hierarchy of being a higher and a lower part is distinguished.

Such a view of reality, however, usually leads to all sorts of problems. For instance, what is the difference between God and creation and what is their relationship if they are merely higher and lower "parts" of the same hierarchy of being? This (false) issue leads to the "solution" that God is supposed both to transcend and to be immanent in creation. Then the next question arises: Exactly in what way is God present in creation? Or: How can He be in creation without creation becoming semi-divine (called pantheism) or God being cosmologised? Or the opposite: Does his being transcendent not imply that creation exists disconnected from God (called deism)? The only "solution" seems to be an always precarious balance between God's transcendence and his immanence.

The *radical* distinction between God and his creation as found in the Bible is therefore not fully respected in Neo-Thomism. God and creation are not, biblically seen, in a *religious* relationship, but in an *ontic* one of *analogy* (i.e. similarity in difference). In this way creation participates in the divine. The highest quest of a human being becomes his supernatural deification.

### 3.3.3 Nature and grace

In Chapter 1 (subsections 4 and 5) it has already been shown that the distinction nature-grace is a *method* to effect a synthesis or compromise between biblical revelation and a prevalent extra-biblical philosophy. However, since a method is not something neutral or “formal” it has the result that reality itself is construed according to a double focused view: It consists of a natural, terrestrial and a supernatural, heavenly, divine sphere.

Since the transcendent is often associated with the supernatural, divine grace, and the non-transcendent with the natural cosmic things or spheres, all Thomist philosophers raise the question of what exactly the relationship and the difference between the two is supposed to be. (In Chapter 2 this issue was already discussed in detail.)

According to them the *difference* between nature and grace is that the sphere of grace is something beyond reason, which can only be understood in faith, while nature is supposed to be accessible to human reason. Faith need not play any role in this domain.

The *relationship* between the two is that nature has an inherent quest (*desiderium naturale*) for the supernatural, which has to be completed or perfected by divine grace.

In Chapter 2 (subsection 6.1.3) it was stated that the Thomist philosophers after Thomas at an early stage already posed questions regarding this relationship (cf. e.g. O’Mahony, 1929). As for instance: How can there in nature be a quest for the supernatural, since such a natural

longing would no longer be purely natural? A natural consciousness of imperfection supposes at least something of a supernatural kind in nature.

Seen from the side of grace, the opposite question arises: If nature is *perfected* by the supernatural (not *cancelled* – as Thomas repeatedly emphasised) then there would have to be something natural in the supernatural as well. This issue will be further investigated below (subsection 4).

### *3.3.4 Vertical partial universalism*

Briefly put, partial universalism is an interim position between individualism, which regards individual things more important than the universal (this specific human being is more important than being human) and universalism, which teaches the exact opposite (being human is more important than this individual). Both these viewpoints are, however, erroneous, since the universal and the individual are both *facets* of reality in its entirety.

Vertical partial universalists see a higher-lower relationship between the universal and the individual. In the case of classic Thomism the form was regarded as the higher, universal and the matter as the lower, individual.

### *3.3.5 Subsistence theory*

Chapter 4 already dealt in detail with this kind of anthropology. In short it boils down to the following. God creates every new human soul at some time or other (during conception or afterwards) into the human body, which is derived from the parents (a theory called creatianism). Since the soul comes from God as a separate substance (hence the name “subsistence theory” for this view of being human) it is something supratemporal, supernatural and therefore, unlike the human body, immortal. After death it also survives as separate substance until the time of resurrection when it will be re-united with the resurrected body. (For a more biblically oriented view of a human being, cf. Van der Walt, 2010).

We have already mentioned above that a type of philosophy as just described does not stay absolutely consistent in succeeding normative currents. Subsequently we will consider how the change to a new school also influenced Neo-Thomist philosophers' view of a central dogma of Thomism, viz. the relationship between nature and grace.

#### **4. Shifts in Neo-Thomist views of the nature-grace theme**

We will now demonstrate how a shift in view took place regarding the relationship between nature and grace, especially in more recent Thomist philosophy. Subsequently we will point out what the fundamental causes were. Sometimes merely due to a new school of thinking, but often at the same time also because of a new type of philosophy.

That Thomist philosophers since about 1920 advocated a different view from that of Thomas on the relationship of nature and grace has been confirmed by several studies. From a Reformational angle for instance by Smit (1950), Meuleman (1960 and 1967) and later by Wentsel (1970). A comparison between the older views and the more recent ones clearly reveals the difference.

According to Aquinas nature has a passive potential for the supernatural. Grace realises this potential and thereby fulfils the most profound possibilities and aspirations of nature. However, only by the intervention of God can the slumbering, unconscious quest of the natural human being be fully developed. Thus Thomas accepted both a harmony and a strict distinction between the two spheres (cf. Polman, 1961:367). It is this clear distinction made by Thomas between nature and grace which would be doubted by the later, twentieth century Neo-Thomists.

##### ***4.1 Earlier views***

Sixteenth century debates already reveal problems with Thomas. Cajetan who has already been mentioned (*obit* 1534) attempted to solve the issue of the relationship between nature

and grace by denying the (natural) longing or making it supernatural. Sylvester Ferrariensis (*obiit* 1528) on the other hand, queried the supernatural character of the object of the natural longing. Both philosophers therefore agree in so far as they reject a *positive directedness* of nature towards grace. Nature and grace exist *parallel alongside each other*. Nature is merely a *passive substratum* of the supernatural. The Thomist concept *desiderium naturale* therefore says nothing more than that nature *has an aptness* for taking up grace when God offers it (cf. Smit, 1950:39).

#### **4.2 Newer tendencies**

According to Smit (1950:19) there were earlier signs (end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) of objections against the above-mentioned two commentators on Thomas's view, although the actual controversy about it only flared up after World War II. He describes the new opinions as follows. All of them reject the idea that the natural sphere is an *altogether passive substratum* which can only be complemented by grace. According to them there is a *positive relationship* between these two spheres. Formulated slightly differently (cf. Wentsel, 1970:473) more recent Roman Catholic theology is grappling with the issue whether the natural concept of a *desiderium* did not already imply grace. Therefore the more recent Thomists are attempting in different ways to overcome the earlier substantial dualism in the two realm doctrine. Vandervelde (1975) shows that due to this a notable shift has also taken place in the work of Roman Catholic philosophers regarding the doctrine of original sin.

More recently, however, Zagzebski (1993:3-4) wrote that a major difference between Roman Catholic and Reformational philosophers is still that the first continue to believe in an unaided human reason, while according to the latter group of Christian thinkers the effects of the fall into sin on the human reason were more radical.

#### **4.3 Two different views**

Smit (1950:40 et seq.) also distinguishes two different directions among these 20<sup>th</sup>-century Neo-Thomists, viz. a more static and a more dynamic direction.

The first (static) direction considers the natural desire to see God as an innate *ontic* urge of the human being for the fulfilment of his being or existence. However, such a supernatural ultimate goal can of course not be attained in a natural way. God is not compelled to answer to this longing either – that would jeopardise his divine freedom.

Smit (1950:42) has the following critique of this ontic (instead of religious) view of the relationship between God (supernature) and man (nature):

It is once more evident here that the ontological and religious views of the basic relationship between God and human being mutually exclude each other. The first always entails a restriction on the second and the latter does not allow a restriction, precisely because of its integral character. [Translated from the Dutch.]

According to the biblical *religious* view *all of* life is of a religious nature – there is no natural, religiously neutral territory.

The second, more recent view is the more dynamic, of which M. Blondel (1861-1948) was the main representative. Seeing that he was an irrationalist, adherent of “*Lebensphilosophie*” or vitalism it can be understood why he placed so much emphasis on dynamic development and action instead of conceptual abstraction (typical of preceding rationalism). However, the theme of the natural human shortcoming, insufficiency, insatiable longing for supernatural grace remains central in his philosophy.

#### ***4.4 Unsolved issues***

The key issue amongst Neo-Thomists is therefore not whether the distinction nature-grace is biblically acceptable, but about where exactly the borderline between nature and grace should

be drawn. Both the more structural and the more dynamic views of Neo-Thomism are on thin ice in this regard.

On the one hand there is the risk that nature may from its *own power* reach its supernatural goal (cf. Smit, 1950:41). Therefore it is repeatedly emphasised that nature is *inefficax*, that is that reaching its supernatural end or *goal* goes entirely above the capacity of nature.

On the other hand caution should be taken that the fact that God has created an innate longing for the supernatural in human beings does not result in an absolute *demand* by nature (human beings) regarding divine grace (cf. Smit, 1950:47). An affirmative answer to this would infringe on the undeservedness of grace and on God's free right of decision. Some Thomist philosophers solve this problem by speaking not about an *absolute* but a *moral* demand from the side of nature.

It consequently becomes evident that the tension in the relationship between nature and grace is irresolvable. Smit (1950:47), for instance, shows how the standpoint of H. de Lubac (1896-1991) finally reaches the point where nature is supranaturalised to such an extent and vanishes from the horizon and that the issue of the relationship between nature and grace is practically eliminated.

#### **4.5 A confirmation**

Wentzel (1970:487-8) reaches the same conclusion. On the one hand there is *continuity* in the Thomist tradition, because nature and grace are still distinguished as two separate spheres. On the other hand there is, however, also *discontinuity* or a clear shift, since nature and supranature are being very closely connected. The distance between the Christian or the church and the world is almost obliterated. "After nature and grace were for a long time driven too far apart, a tendency can now be observed to identify the one with the other and allow them to merge" (Wentzel, 1970:488). [Translated from the Dutch.]

It is understandable that the Roman Catholic authorities in the papal encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) spoke out against this new kind of Thomism and attempted to put in place various measures against it (cf. Meuleman, 1952).

An important question that has not been answered, is what kind of philosophy is underlying these sometimes radically changed views of the age-old nature-grace theme – the next point of our investigation.

## **5. The philosophies “behind” the changed view of the relation between nature and grace**

Since Smit (1950), Vandervelde (1975) and Wentsel (1970) do not offer a *philosophical* explanation why the newer Thomists advocate a closer relationship between nature and supranature, we now undertake to do this.

### ***5.1 New irrationalist schools***

The first reason is undoubtedly new philosophical trends, schools or normative views. It has been shown above with examples of some Neo-Thomist philosophers how their thinking reflects various rationalist and irrationalist currents. One example of the latter will here serve as an illustration.

### ***5.2 K. Rahner as an example of a new philosophical current***

Rahner (1904-1984) teaches (cf. Wentsel, 1970:167,168 as well as Vandervelde, 1975:109-126) that there is no contrast between nature and grace. Nature exists on behalf of grace and grace purifies and fulfils nature – they are intrinsically involved. However, this happens in spite of the fact that Rahner’s *type* of philosophy still corresponds with that of Thomas (cf. 3 above and Vollenhoven, 2000:257).

The chief reason for Rahner's new view on nature and grace, therefore, has to be the new philosophical school within which he philosophised, namely existentialism, which laid great emphasis on human freedom and the dynamic-historic as opposed to the fixed and static nature of reality. In this respect he concurs with, for instance, the view held by J. Maritain (1882-1973).

In spite of this close involvement of the two spheres, Vandervelde (cf. one of the theses in his doctoral thesis) points out that the dualism and tension between a natural and a supernatural sphere constantly afflicts Rahner's theology.

### ***5.3 M. Blondel as an example of another type of philosophy***

In some cases, however, it is not only new trends/schools/currents but, coupled with them, also new types of philosophies which cause a changed view of nature and grace. As an example we mention M. Blondel (1861-1949). (H. Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) holds a similar conception.) We will devote more time to this influential Roman Catholic philosopher of the previous century.

Blondel was not an existentialistic irrationalist but a vitalistic irrationalist philosopher. The outstanding trademark of his "Lebensphilosophie" is that the origin of the norms for human life lies in a vital life of power itself – a distinctly subjectivist idea of law which elevates things/matters to normative status.

Apart from the fact that his philosophy is practised according to another normative direction or school, the type of philosophy he practises is also unlike that of Thomas and Rahner. Vollenhoven (2000:245) characterises it as follows: cosmogono-cosmological, monistic, doctrine of priorities, and noetic. All the elements of this type of philosophy contribute to a closer, dynamic relationship instead of a separated, inflexible relationship between nature and grace.

As mentioned above, a cosmogonic philosophy (in contrast to the purely cosmological philosophers' structural thinking) emphasises genetic thinking, which recognises change in a dynamic creation.

Monistic philosophers depart from an original unity (in contrast to the usual dualism of Thomism). Although plurality ensues from the unity, the unity always stays the final ideal – something that Blondel emphasises in his teaching on nature-grace.

Zuidema (1972) not only gives a good account of Blondel's ideas in this regard, but also offers discerning immanent critique. He concisely summarises Blondel's whole philosophy in the following sentence: "Blondel takes his starting point in a supranatural idea of the natural in order to postulate by means of this idea a natural doctrine of the supranatural" (Zuidema, 1972:259).

#### ***5.4 An apologetic motive***

Blondel's apologetic motive was communication with and persuasion of non-Christian philosophers by pretending that he was taking the same stand as these "non-believers" (cf. Meuleman, 1958). In order to effect this, Blondel departs from the supposition that the natural human being possesses a *manque*, a metaphysical disquiet, an ontological shortcoming or insatiable natural longing for supernatural grace.

Thus the basic pattern of Blondel's philosophy is (cf. Zuidema, 1972:244): (1) the human being, due to the fact of his being created, is inadequate, imperfect; (2) the human being as a creature senses in himself a need of fulfilment or redemption; (3) God elevates the human being to the supernatural and thus obliterates the deficiency.

#### ***5.5 Inconsistency***

Therefore Blondel departs from a natural or immanent idea of the supranatural. Zuidema (1972:232), however, poses the following critical question:

Blondel will repeatedly point out that man's natural life is *se manque*, does not reach its goal and falls short of its destiny, if it does not culminate in a supranatural elevation and deification ... however, he has never seriously asked himself why natural-philosophical reason is an exception to this. What possible reason can there be that philosophy does not *se manque* when it does not culminate in a supranatural theology through a supranatural elevation? Along with scientific reason ... philosophy turns out to be the only thing in and on man which is to be an exception to the general rule of the insufficiency of the natural.

Zuidema's conclusion is: "Thus we encounter the extraordinary thesis in Blondel that philosophy is sufficient to demonstrate the insufficiency of everything natural with the exception of its own insufficiency on this point" (Zuidema, 1972:232).

### ***5.6 A failed apologetics***

The irrationalist Blondel – like Christian rationalist apologists through the ages – attempted to render the Christian faith acceptable to non-Christians by showing that such a faith is not irrational, but rational exactly by admitting its own ontic shortcoming. However, Zuidema (1972:252, 253) is not convinced that such an attempt can succeed. For modern human beings are convinced of their autonomy, the fact that they decide for themselves what is right – and will therefore not accept their natural deficiency. The secular philosopher prefers to live without God and will decline Blondel's supposed longing for a supernatural elevation.

Therefore the final conclusion of Zuidema (1972:259) runs as follows: "Blondel's 'philosophical apologetics' is in my opinion doomed to failure. It harbours the seeds of its own selfdestruction."

Is it nevertheless permissible to call such apologetics a kind of Christian philosophy – as is often claimed nowadays?

### ***5.7 Champions of a Christian philosophy?***

Sassen & Delfgaauw (1957:291-294) distinguish four different positions on the possibility of a Christian philosophy among Neo-Thomist philosophers. Some deny (due to a clear separation of nature and grace) the possibility of a Christian philosophy in the natural sphere. Only theology in the sphere of grace is considered as Christian.

Others, like for instance E. Gilson (1972), have a vague intermediate viewpoint. It seems that he is primarily concerned about the right method *or* manner to be applied by Christian thinkers – as if a method were something neutral. Gilson (1972:37) for instance says about a Christian philosophy: “It is a *way* of philosophizing, namely the attitude of those who in their study of philosophy unite obedience to the Christian faith. This philosophical method, or attitude ... is *Christian philosophy* itself”. (A footnote shows that he is quoting from the *Aeterni Patris*.)

Seen from a Reformational philosophical perspective a mere Christian *attitude* is, however, not sufficient – the *result* or *content* of the philosophy should be Christian as well. Formulated in a different way: One should not merely as a *Christian* practise (some or other) philosophy, but a specifically Christian *philosophy*.

### ***5.8 An exceptional viewpoint?***

Since most Neo-Thomist philosophers agree that philosophy strictly and formally spoken, can never earn the epithet “Christian”, Blondel is an exception. According to him the natural reason by means of a purely philosophical way, reaches the admission of its own insufficiency and the necessity of searching the Scriptures for answers to the problems it cannot solve by itself. If Thomist philosophy does not want to be Christian, it should, according to Blondel, be regarded as incomplete (cf. Sassen & Delfgaauw, 1957:292 and

Robbers 1948:111.) Accordingly, philosophy in a purely philosophical way reaches the admission of its own insufficiency or lack and stands open to or longs for divine revelation.

### ***5.9 Doomed to failure***

Robbers (1948:111, cf. also 1949), a fellow Catholic, however points out – which is our own problem too – that this natural longing of philosophy for the supernatural revelation can in no way ensue from nature – it has to be something supernatural.

The Blondelian idea of a Christian philosophy, however, also differs from that of the Reformational tradition. Zuidema (1972:231) points out that Blondel still maintains the idea of an autonomous, rational philosophy in the natural sphere and thereby rejects a truly integral Christian approach. Irrationalist Neo-Thomism has not yet been liberated from the belief in the autonomy of reason in the natural sphere. Their irrationalism seems to be confined to the domain of the supernatural.

In his earliest publications the today well-known Catholic philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre still seemed to be open to an integral Christian philosophy when he wrote: “Religion as an activity divorced from other activities is without point. If religion is only a part of life, then religion has become optional. Only religion which is a way of living in every sphere either deserves to or can hope to survive” (MacIntyre, 1953:9).

However, the age-old dualism between a so-called neutral natural sphere (the domain of reason and philosophy) and a Christian supernatural sphere (the domain of faith and theology) remains a stumbling block in the way of an integral Christian philosophy to every Catholic philosopher. They still cannot accept that one’s Christian faith can and should also have a role to play in the inner reformation of scholarship (Cf. Noll & Turner, 2008).

This concludes this investigation of Neo-Thomism. Finally the question has to be raised whether Reformational philosophy did indeed succeed in replacing the nature-grace theme of Thomism and Neo-Thomism with a more biblically oriented view.

## **6. A Reformational response**

Reformational philosophers were (at least in the past) convinced that the Neo-Thomist distinction between the spheres of nature and grace (or supranature) was and still is one of the most cardinal differences between Rome and the Reformation. (Cf. e.g. from a theological angle Berkouwer, 1948:134 et seq.; Meuleman, 1967 and from a Christian philosophical perspective Vollenhoven, 1933, Dooyeweerd, 1959:111 et seq.; Mekkes in various places in 1961 and 1965.)

### ***6.1 A false problem***

Although today there are again Reformed philosophers who advocate the two realm doctrine (cf. e.g. the discussion between Lief, 2012 and Van Drunen, 2012) to most Reformational philosophers the distinction between nature and grace implies a false problem which in the light of biblical revelation is unacceptable. It is based on the Christianisation of an age-old pagan dualism between so-called profane and sacred spheres. Chapter 1 (subsection 4.4) already indicated that the nature-grace theme was an important method to effect a synthesis between extra-biblical and biblical ideas. Subsection 5.1 to 5.8 of the same chapter showed its detrimental implications for the entire Christian life and also provided a biblical alternative.

### ***6.2 The correct biblical contrast***

The Word of God does not know this distinction between natural and supernatural spheres. The biblical contrast is not that between nature and grace, but between sin and grace. Thus wrote Bavinck (1894:18) more than a hundred years ago and other Reformational theologians

and philosophers followed him. (Cf. e.g. Dooyeweerd, 1959; Olthuis, 1970; Spykman, 1992; Van der Walt, 2001 and Walsh & Middleton, 1984.)

Vollenhoven (1933:45), for instance, says that grace in the very first instance means divine favour extended to man. In the relationship of God with sinful people it means His favour that has been forfeited. The opposite of grace is not nature or sin either, but the wrath of God.

Therefore the Reformational tradition taught that it belongs to the essence of a human being to be in a covenantal relationship with God whereby his *whole life* is religiously determined – not only a so-called supernatural sphere of the life of the soul or spirit.

### ***6.3 Modifications offer no solution***

In the second instance it is important to point out that a mere reformulation or modification of the nature-grace dualism offers no solution. From the above account of the Neo-Thomist struggle with this central issue it became distinctly evident that all of them – in spite of the tension it brought into their philosophy and in spite of numerous differences with Thomas and fellow-Thomists – attempted to remain true to this ancient doctrine.

According to a Reformational perspective neither a diluted, nor a rehashed, nor a reversed relation between the components of such a two realm doctrine can offer any solution. The only genuine solution from a biblical perspective is to take leave of the entire scheme of nature-grace as such.

However, it remains a question whether this actually happened within Reformational theology and philosophy.

### ***6.4 Examples of unfinished reformation***

As a test for answering this question we mention only one example. One of the giants within Reformational tradition, Abraham Kuyper, is for instance nowadays receiving considerable

attention especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. For instance, Kuipers (2011) published a comprehensive, annotated bibliography of Kuyper's writings.

Mouw (2012) published a volume in line with Kuyperian thinking in which he demonstrates what it means to think in a genuinely Reformational way. And also how, from such a perspective, one should react to the contemporary cultural environment – not only individually but also institutionally. Bishop & Kok (2013) have, besides a great number of chapters on different aspects of Kuyper's philosophy also a long list (on pp. 453-471) of chapters and books in English which were published from 1890 to 2012 on Kuyper's life, work and philosophy (cf. also Van der Walt, 2010b). A new Kuyper biography which is regarded as "definitive" has just seen the light from the hand of Bratt (2013).

Was this great thinker within the Reformational tradition able to evade fully the narcotic power of the nature-grace dualism? The discerning Reformational philosopher, Zuidema, does not think so. According to Zuidema (2013) Kuyper's teaching of general and special grace was merely a modification of the theme of nature-grace. Mekkes too (in 1961 and 1965) criticises this doctrine in the works of both Kuyper and Bavinck. (Cf. further Veenhof, 1994 and Heideman, 1959 for Bavinck's view.) Neither is Klapwijk (2013) without critique of it.

There is good reason for the statement that Protestants and even Reformed theologians and church members in general, up to the present day, have not succeeded in cleansing themselves completely from the blemish of some or other natural-supernatural dualism.

### ***6.5 The alternative?***

The question is, however, what a truly biblically-reformational view would entail which could take the place of the Neo-Thomist idea of nature-grace. What should a Christian's relation be towards the increasingly secular thinking and culture in which he/she lives

nowadays? What is the relation between creation and salvation? It is clear that at the end of this investigation there still are a number of unanswered questions which call for urgent further reflection.

Some examples from Protestant circles who are grappling with this issue are, for instance, Carter (2007), Carson (2008) and Klapwijk, Griffioen and Groenewoud (1991). It is also not only a Western problem. Christians in Africa are also struggling with it (cf. e.g. Bediako, 1992 and Van der Walt, 2011). Christians nowadays are confronted by numerous worldviews, theologies and philosophies which are alien to the Bible, like individualism, consumerism, nationalism, relativism, scientific naturalism and postmodern tribalism and are compelled to take a stand regarding these. (Cf. Wilkens & Sanford, 2009).

When the chapter has to be concluded, at least one important lesson was learned. The distinction in God's creation between a so-called natural, neutral realm and a so-called sacred, supernatural, spiritual or religious sphere between which we as Christians have to divide our lives must emphatically be rejected as against God's Word and will. It must be replaced by integral way of living everywhere *coram Deo*, in the face of God Triune. Life is religion!

The ideas of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the most prominent Christian philosopher-theologian of the Middle Ages, were not confined to the so-called dark ages in Western history. In many different interpretations the worldview of this intellectual giant reverberated during more than seven centuries up to today. Not only was he declared the *doctor angelicus* of the Roman Catholic Church. His influence is also clearly discernable in Protestant church life, confessions and dogmatic works.

While this study consulted many works about Aquinas, it is based on a careful reading of the original Latin text of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, his main philosophical work.

From an integral Christian philosophical historiography the book analyses both Aquinas' philosophy, the foundation of his theology, as well as that of his many Neo-Thomist followers through the ages. It unveils the deepest religious, ontological, anthropological and epistemological presuppositions of their thinking.

The author furthermore indicates different stages in the development of Aquinas: from an initial Platonising orientation to a fully Aristotelising position.

Aquinas' synthesis between the revelation of God's Word and pagan Greek philosophy, already unacceptable by many of his contemporaries, proves to be untenable. The writer indicates how it resulted in many speculations, tensions and unsolvable problems in Aquinas. Thus he may serve as a warning today to Christian thinkers not to try to accommodate secular, biblically foreign ideas.

An additional feature of this work is that it openly acknowledges the lasting influence of Aquinas also in the author's own Reformed theological- ecclesiastical tradition.

This book is not only recommended for historians, philosophers and theologians. It will also benefit other thinking Christians to understand their roots as well as what it means to be a Christian today.

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