

Article

What Is the Philosophy of Religion?: A Thomistic Account

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Abstract: The article seeks to address and answer two questions: “What is Religion?” and “What is the Philosophy of Religion”? It gives a definition of the first and defends it. It places its arguments on the second in relation to a number of current textbooks on the subject, indicating that its views accord with commonly-recognized concerns, but that these deserve to be ordered a certain way. Specifically, it argues that the whole subject should rightly be divided into two parts (each with proper subsections): “Natural Theology” (or God as the Fullness and First Cause of Being) and the “Philosophy of Religion” (or God as Final End and Blessedness). This latter part deals with questions such as the relation of morality and religion, the definition of religion, and religious diversity, and ends with the study of the credibility of religion. For, it argues, the end of metaphysics as classically presented itself requires going beyond it to ask whether there is any credible Way to the natural human goal of being entirely happy or perfected. By rights, then, philosophy ends in seeking whether there is a credible true faith (or several), although committing to any one takes one beyond philosophy’s proper limits.

Keywords: Absolute; credibility; God; metaphysics; natural theology; philosophy of religion; religion and morality; sacred way

1. Introduction

Just what is the philosophy of religion? This is not that easy a question to answer.

Let us begin by perusing typical textbooks today on the subject,¹ ones that intend to offer an introduction of the subject to undergraduates through representative articles on it. These books are divided into subsections,² dealing with its main issues, which we find are largely agreed-upon.³

Usually, they begin with a definitional matter: “what is religion?”⁴ From this beginning, one would infer that the philosophy of religion is of the same genre as the philosophy of science or the philosophy of art. These suppose familiarity with their given subject. Should we then admit that the philosophy of religion begins with some kind of phenomenology of religion or study of comparative religion before asking philosophical questions of it? If so, what kind of study and familiarity must one have? Will, for example, an “arm-chair” approach do? (say the one that Max Weber practiced in his books on the religions of India and China);⁵ or is a more empirical, hands-on, or experiential engagement required?⁶ Is, in any case, the philosophy of religion dependent upon some study that might broadly fall under the term “cultural anthropology”? What familiarity with religion is sufficient in order to engage with it responsibly as a philosopher?

We might also wonder where “the philosophy of” any particular subject is to be placed. Are these not, indeed, proper to metaphysics in its sapiential role, seeking to give an ordered account of human knowing, a defense of the arts and sciences in the face of possible skepticism?⁷ Or is this taking an unduly “classical” approach to the matter? Yet, in any case, will not our answers about these different types of human knowing be dependent upon our understanding at least of what knowledge is? Is not some sort of metaphysical or epistemological inquiry presupposed?

Moving on in our textbooks, we soon find ourselves on more familiar philosophical ground (albeit notably different from the first issue raised!); we find sections on arguments



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for the existence of God (or possibly other ways of reaching God, through immediate experience, or belief not needing the support of any argument), the attributes of God, and language about God: clearly questions of metaphysics, natural theology, or the philosophy of God. These are matters raised by classical philosophers as the term of philosophical inquiry and found in sequence, for example, in the first treatise on God of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*.⁸ Further sections plainly deal with questions on this subject: questions regarding God's providence and its relation to freedom and to evil or of God's power in relation to the natural order (i.e., the possibility of miracles or the relation of religious claims to those of science, e.g., contemporary empirical science).

Although these questions clearly are familiar and part of what I will here just call "natural theology", they bring a similar question with them as before: since natural theology is the last part of metaphysics, and that the last part of philosophy as a whole, does the philosophy of religion, then, not first require an honest admission of "where one is coming from"? Does it not, inevitably, presuppose a whole set of prior philosophical positions, before it even begins?

A cognate issue our textbooks regularly raise asks what the relation is between "religion and morality". The relation investigated is that between moral life as under the authority and guidance of religion and as independent of it. This obviously supposes accounts of what a particular religion and an "independent" morality enjoin. We might well wonder here "just what religion?" (since they mandate different actions) and "what philosophical account of common human morals?" Presumably, this matter is dealt with in the articles. Nevertheless, their issues are clearly found more in practical philosophy⁹ than as the term of theoretical philosophy.

When the issue of "religion and morality" is being addressed, we might also wonder whether (and possibly discover that) the chief object of concern here is not an ethical, but a political, one: that is, to what degree can there be some defensible overlap between what a religion and a pluralist democracy can and do proscribe? Clearly, there is some overlap (the obligation, say, of not murdering) and some independence (the obligation, say, of Sunday observance); but how is the "middle area" (of more thorny issues such as abortion or euthanasia, to name but two of the most prominent current interests) to be conceived?¹⁰ It is thus not too surprising that we usually also find questions in our textbooks on the nature of "religious diversity" and on "reason and faith". Behind and in these sections lie the issues of the relation between our common human nature and the specificity of any religion, and its authority and claims, whether in terms of the truths it embraces or the practical life it enjoins. This clearly is no longer to do with natural theology.

But here another fundamental problem arises: can these questions be dealt with responsibly by anyone outside "the circle of faith"? What kind of appreciation of a religion can be expected of anyone who does not speak from within the embrace of a determinate religion? Here again, we seem to suppose that we "know what we are talking about": that we have some sense of what it means to live under the authority of a religious tradition. How is this to be acquired? Will the "sympathetic understanding" of practical wisdom¹¹ be enough? How can philosophers protect themselves from being "cried to scorn" by any person of a given tradition who decries the "hubris" of philosophers trying to address what they do not really understand?

So much for some of the more obvious kinds of questions that are raised up for us simply by perusing the textbooks on offer on the subject of "The Philosophy of Religion".

What follows is one effort to think these through: to argue for what religion and a philosophy of it are, and to offer some clarifying connections on the order of their questions.¹²

2. Preliminary Considerations

As will, I trust, surprise no reader of the previous paragraphs, my own view is that we must first acknowledge "where we are at" or "where we are coming from" in approaching this subject. What then follows will likely be of greater interest to those who share my point

of view, wholly or at least substantially (although it might be of interest to others who do not, insofar as it gives some “view onto” what one such person might hold).

My point of view, then, is of one who shares the fundamental philosophical point of view of Aquinas (thus, a broadly “Aristotelian Neoplatonism”) as well as his Catholic faith.¹³ My interest, however, is not chiefly to “witness to others”, just what such a person might think of the questions I have raised, but to think through my questions for those who come out of a similar point of view. For, as most will likely realize, Aquinas and his tradition do not have a “part of philosophy” dedicated to “the philosophy of religion”, nor was this a part of its tradition as it tried to present it in our day, or just prior to it, to undergraduate students. Thus, how this should be thought of from that tradition is likely to be as controversial, or more controversial, to it than to those who do not share it. I thus recognize that I may be speaking here for no one but myself!

To begin at the end of my questions, I hold a fairly common view that truth about God is to be found from two sources: the “Book” of Nature and the “Book” of a Holy Tradition. Since it is the same being who is known from both “books”, the truths of each cannot in principle contradict the other. Furthermore, there is indeed some overlap between the two. Thus, as is often said, that God exists, is all good and all powerful, and beyond human comprehension are truths that can be derived from any person’s understanding of the natural world and the human experience of it; but that God is a Trinity of three persons, two of whom were sent into this world, one being incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and the other being sent into the hearts (i.e., souls) of holy people, are truths that transcend what can be known from the natural world or from reason and that repose on divine faith: specifically, on the faith that behind or in Jesus of Nazareth lies the Word of God who is acting in and through him (i.e., whose actions are “theandric”), manifesting to us who God is.

I do not think, however, that one has to be within the circle of that faith to understand what is being said about God in the above. On the contrary, some who come to adhere to its faith do so having well understood the truth that it is proclaiming, and all those who do so should at least have *some* understanding of the truth they will be embracing, or else their conversion to that faith is questionable (and thus its communicants are required to affirm the truths in its church’s creed or confession of faith). The same holds for what this tradition proclaims about what actions we should engage in: these can be understood by anyone, not just those within its tradition. Furthermore, it seems to me that this is likewise the point of view of other religious traditions; that is, they think that those who do not share the beliefs or practices of their holy tradition nevertheless can understand them or understand them well enough to choose to embrace their tradition.

Thus, to directly answer one of the questions asked previously, there is no reason why a person of good will and sympathetic understanding need fear that he will be “cried to scorn” by a thoughtful and reasonable person of a religious tradition for trying to understand its beliefs and practices. Thus, a “philosophy of religion” is a defensible rational undertaking.¹⁴

This does not deny the possible truth that “you will not understand unless you believe”, in the sense that a religious faith embraced may give access to some further understanding. Indeed, it might hold that what is most important about God does not come from the “Book of Nature”. Yet, there is no good reason to claim that what comes from it is false or distorting, so long as the claim is not made that God is what can be gathered from it *alone* (and, unlike Deism, theistic philosophy is in principle open to God freely revealing Himself). Indeed, it is clear from religious practice that religions hold that something can be said to those not in their “circle of faith” on behalf of adhering to their holy tradition. At the very least, then, something in ordinary human experience motivates inquiry and questions to which it then speaks. And even religious language is human language, and it is only meaningful in relation to the ordinary experience of our human nature. It may be that the true God “comes in search of man”;¹⁵ yet it is also true that man goes in search of the true God: the entire history of human religion and philosophy indicates as much.

My use of “sympathetic understanding” also alerts us to my answer to one of the first questions raised. Just as being within the circle of faith might increase one’s understanding of its truths, so a deeper and hands-on experience of human religious traditions can deepen one’s appreciation for them. To take but one example here, surely Huston Smith’s personal and hands-on engagement with many different religious traditions was a great aid to his perspicuous understanding of them.¹⁶ By contrast, anyone of narrow and doctrinaire spirit—whether of one religious point of view or none—is likely not to speak well of the subject he or she is investigating. We would do well to adhere to Aristotle’s admonition to “nowhere be more modest than in discussions about the gods . . . lest from temerity or impudence we should make ignorant assertions”.¹⁷ Certainly, *some* experience of religion is necessary to engage in the philosophy of religion.¹⁸ Yet, this can be acquired variously and more or less deeply. It thus remains possible to engage in the philosophy of religion, even if imperfectly, without a deep hands-on experience of the subject (and thus what Max Weber wrote, say, is not without its interest).

3. The Philosophy of Religion

It being a possible intellectual undertaking, then, how ought a philosopher to go about its study? I turn here to the order of its philosophical inquiry. The reflections I offer seek to work out of the philosophical point of view of Aquinas.

First, then, while it is understandable that the nature or definition (or indefinability) of religion might well be placed in some textbooks as the first of their questions, this is not the first question that deserves to be faced in the subject of the philosophy of religion. The first questions to be asked in it come from the end of classical philosophical inquiry and are situated in the last part of metaphysics.¹⁹ By rights, its first questions concern the existence and the nature of God, and God’s providence (in relation to free choice and evil) and power (in relation to natural events). For a Thomist, then, in the first part of the philosophy of religion, one is on quite familiar ground: it is simply the contemporary equivalent of what is elsewhere known as “natural theology”.

For those who do not share this philosophical perspective, one reason for regarding the question of the existence of God as primary is that, without there in fact being any plausible referent for religious discourse, it becomes of considerably less philosophical interest. One might perhaps here mention Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*: it is a thin book.²⁰ Indeed, for a positivist, there hardly was such a thing as the philosophy of religion.²¹ There may well be many illusory or false convictions human beings have entertained; however, these seem to be more the purview of a cultural anthropologist than of great interest to a philosopher. If there is nothing to be said for there, in fact, being an Ultimate, an Absolute, or a Transcendent Reality behind the universe, the philosophy of religion will seem only distantly connected to the usual undertakings of philosophy.

Of course, historically there is likely no other subject that has as intimate a connection with philosophy as religion. But this is just because the latter treats the Absolute and Transcendent, the Source of all things, and supplies a criterion or criteria (i.e., a Truth) for how we should act and how we should judge our actions (to be Good): matters that are likewise at the center of the preoccupation of many a philosopher. Again, then, were there nothing to be said in favor of there being such an Absolute and such a standard of action, religion would be of less vital interest to it.

In beginning with natural theology, it is reasonable to discuss other possible evidence than the rational argument for the existence of God, such as that given on the basis of religious experience²² or mysticism, or indeed to discuss whether any argument is necessary (belief in God being claimed to be “basic”, say). These matters, typically found in our contemporary textbooks, seem to be just further “disputed questions” raised in relation to the classical matter of natural theology.

If our philosophical inquiry indeed begins from natural theology, that means a great deal of previous philosophical work is needed to handle its questions rightly. One engaged in its task should make those presuppositions transparent, as necessary.²³ This seems to be

true of anyone's work in the subject, regardless of what his or her philosophical viewpoint may be.

If any Thomist is likely to assent to what I have said so far, many will likely find far more controversial what I am going to go on to claim, which is that there deserves to be a distinct subject by the name of "the philosophy of religion", one that goes beyond natural theology and is rightly the *true final term* of all philosophical inquiry. This subject, as we will see, includes a number of our previous sections not yet mentioned. The main thesis of this paper, then, is that "the philosophy of religion" is really in two parts: what falls under classical natural theology and this further and second part.

In the first sentence of his *Metaphysics*,²⁴ Aristotle claims that all men by nature desire to know: a claim he supports by a number of arguments. Since what differentiates the human animal from all others is its rational power, this desire to know is most distinctive and central to our nature. Because humans are not pure intellects but embodied ones, what they first know are the objects of the natural world known through their senses. But their desire to know them is not satisfied unless they know them as they are: both in themselves and in relation to their necessary causes. Now, as will have been clear from the arguments in natural theology, that means their natural desire to know can only be fulfilled by knowing their first and ultimate cause, by which they "live, move, and have their being". It is clear that their natural desire can only be met by the vision of God.²⁵

Aristotle more or less argues this in the last book of his ethics.²⁶ He rightly recognizes, however, that such a possible sight is entirely beyond human capacity. God alone possesses the natural ability to see Himself, and He does so perfectly; thus, God is absolutely happy, blessed, or bliss (since God is absolute goodness and is enjoyed in divine self-knowledge). This is in fact the conclusion of natural theology (the last question of the *Summa's* first treatise "On the One God"). An intellectual creature can only be rendered fully happy by participating in that blessedness.²⁷

Since doing so is entirely beyond our natural powers, Aristotle contents himself with the conclusion that our human happiness is reached by the understanding of God to be had in this life, which is highly imperfect and in which God is not seen as God is. He even seems to think that this may be the only happiness that is possible for us.²⁸ But, if so, in this he was mistaken. For, on his own principles, no natural desire can be in vain,²⁹ since it is the work of Absolute Wisdom, which makes nothing in vain. Thus, while it is certainly true that our natural desire to know is not fulfilled in this life, it nevertheless can and will be fulfilled, at least for some, after this life. (Furthermore, we might note that, in his will, Aristotle asked that statues be set up to Zeus Savior and Athena Saviourress . . . it would seem for the good of his own intellectual soul, in its possible life after death.)³⁰

This argument reposes on two truths. The first is that the human intellect, in its action and thus in its being, is immaterial and transcends the limitation and corruptibility of the body. There thus must be a life after death that awaits our defining inner principle (albeit not our full person, for we are not a pure intellect, but an embodied one).³¹ It is right and necessary that the philosophy of religion takes up this issue. (It is even within its purview to ask whether it is reasonable to suppose that, by the grace of God, a person might be restored to some incarnate and whole personal life.) The second truth is what is entailed by a natural, God-given, desire not being in vain. In my judgment, Aquinas holds (and clearly states, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*) that this entails not only that God *can* supply the gracious means by which an intellectual creature can know Him as He is, but that He in fact *will* supply those gracious means *unless* the intellectual creature, as first cause, *impedes* them from being effective by his sin.³² For God creates to some purpose and His *creative intention is visible in His work*: in the natural order to Him found in the intellectual creature's desire to know the truth (indeed: "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" . . . , i.e., God).

This second truth is certainly the subject of ancient philosophical discussions of God's providence (God's gifts by which we can be virtuous being clearly broached by Plato in the

Meno, for example),³³ and it could be discussed variously as a part of a natural theology. But its central place lies here, in the creature's order to God as the final resting place and end. In my judgment, it is Aquinas' *express* position that an order of pure nature alone, without the aid of God's grace, is an unjustifiable supposition.³⁴ It contradicts God's *wisdom* (one visible in the natural order of things He has made), since this would be to make an intellectual creature in vain, indeed to make one that would be everlastingly miserable: one that, absent His grace, would place his end in a creature, not his Creator, and would self-destruct.³⁵ *On the contrary*, God always *orders* creatures to their *end* and *perfection*. God thus orders intelligent creatures that they *can*, and *some do*, attain their final resting place. This is why Aquinas not only claims that God predestines some to blessedness,³⁶ but that this truth is within the power of human reason to discover (as he teaches in the *SCG*, III).

But here—in recognizing that we are made “*for God*” (as Augustine famously said in the first chapter of his *Confessions*) and that there thus must be *A Way* to attain God as our end and to rest in God—we reach the limits of philosophy. For the aid that will make this possible is beyond our nature and thus beyond what philosophy can rightly lay claim to seeing. It cannot see what is *THE Way* to our end.³⁷ Yet, this Way cannot oppose what philosophy knows from its own “*Book*” of nature. It thus has a tool to aid it as it goes in search of this Way. The Way may be beyond philosophy's power to demonstrate, but it is not beyond philosophy's power to criticize or possibly reject.³⁸ Whatever the Way is, it will not be an unreasonable one. At the *term* of proper philosophical activity, a philosopher must seek the Way to our human end and goal. We must seek a Way in which we can believe, a Way that is *credible* to reason (and this of course will demand philosophical reflection on the just standard of “*credibility*” to be applied here).

We come, then, to the final issues that are raised in our books: namely, the nature of religion and religious diversity. For it is the nature of religion just to propose what the True Way is to the end that philosophy can see is the perfection of our nature and of our natural desire to know. A philosopher of necessity seeks to address the question: “what is the true faith” or true religion?

Any dispassionate inquiry into this problem perforce must recognize that there are diverse serious contenders to be the right and true way to our end. Thus, one must face the “*diversity of religions*” that often is a section in our textbooks, and thus *some* knowledge of the “*phenomenology of religion*” is required for a philosophy of religion. In studying religion, one will discover a great deal in common between the great religious traditions of mankind: both in what they say about the Transcendent Reality behind the universe, and the right and virtuous way of acting that orders us to it. One will also discover some significant differences. However, a philosopher is not forced to suppose that one who does not choose the “*true way*” is *thereby* ordered away from one's end; it is clear that one can *implicitly* hold and live by truths that one has failed to make explicit (to oneself, as well as to others). To criticize a way for failing to be as credible as another or for not being the truest way is not to claim that a follower of that way is necessarily “*headed in the wrong direction*”.³⁹ Furthermore, and remembering Aristotle's admonition, a philosopher is likely to find that there are various credible ways,⁴⁰ ones more or less so (in his or her judgment). And, be it noted, to hold that a way is more credible is not necessarily to believe in it personally, just as to find a person more loveable is not to say “*I do*” in a marriage ceremony; the second entails a free commitment to an unsure good and the first entails the free commitment to a divine faith.

4. The Nature of Religion

In all of the above, we have been presuming what religion in fact is. At the end of our inquiry, we need to address this question explicitly. There are some who argue that religion is so mysterious or complex as to be indefinable.⁴¹ Against such a view, let me propose a definition of it that I believe is defensible.

We might begin by noting the definition of “the virtue of religion” as classically given. From the *Euthyphro* on,⁴² it was recognized to encompass the most important sphere of justice, giving what is due to the divine realm. It binds or ties one to the divine, principally through practical acts, such as worship, devotion, and prayer, or other acts, such as almsgiving, oaths, or tithing. Taking that as one’s cue, one can begin to define religion itself: it is a sacred way to the Absolute. More specifically, it is “a sacred way that claims to unite us to a mysterious ultimate reality⁴³ by personal and communal acts that entail both a vision and an ethic”. And this needs further elaboration, so we should add: “and that is expressed through works of beauty; that works through evil imperfectly now, but with the promise of doing so perfectly in a state of final joy; and that gives meaning to life as a whole”. Religion fundamentally seeks to come to terms with death and suffering and to see life as a whole, as including these negative elements, which nevertheless do not have “the last word”, but which are to be “worked through” in relation to a hope of something better and greater.

To comment on this proposed definition, the core of a religion is its communal *praxis*, which is just why some today say they are “spiritual”, but not “religious”, since they never or seldom engage in any traditional religious practice. (This is also why someone like Simplicianus told Marius Victorinus that he would not believe he really was a Christian unless he saw him in Church, practicing his faith and confessing it.)⁴⁴ Its central practical acts, then, are both personal (prayer, vow, devotion, adoration, contemplation, meditation) and communal (ritual, worship, sacrament). Embedded in such a practice, and thus supposed or entailed by it, is both a vision (faith, creed, writing, stories, doctrine, authority) and an ethic (law or way of life); these find expression in religious works of beauty (shrine, temple, mosque, church, icon, statue, song, dress, dance). The evil that it seeks to work through is our condition of ignorance, sin, guilt, suffering, and death, and the hope or final state that it promises can be variously described as blessedness, bliss, full enlightenment, Beatific Vision, or Nirvana. And it thus aims to give meaning to life as a whole, providing a framework in which all of our experience can be related and find some sense.

Let us comment further on some terms in this definition. “Sacred” is contrasted to profane or “secular”: it involves actions and rites that are “set apart” from the everyday and ordinary, and thus it entails sacred places and times.⁴⁵ This sacredness derives from its ultimate object or end, which is other and greater than the “natural” (i.e., “super”-natural). It is “mysterious” in being so much greater than our own being, understanding, and language. It is just because of its principal object’s “otherness” that such movements as Marxism or Nationalism, or personal or civic acts deriving from a “secular humanism”, and which also lack this referent, are not properly religious.⁴⁶

That religion is a sacred “Way” indicates both that religion is ordered towards something not yet achieved—a way to the end, not the end itself—and that it is something complex, involving different actions and beliefs. Usually, all aspects of its Way cohere; nevertheless, it is possible to incorporate aspects initially developed in an alternate Way or Tradition, as can be found in China, Korea, and Japan, for example, where elements of Confucianism and Buddhism (or Taoism or Shintoism) coexist together and can form part of a person or a community’s Way.

The “Mysterious Ultimate Reality” or “Absolute” is often called God (or by an equivalent but more particular name, e.g., the “Tetragrammaton”, “Allah”, or “Brahman”) and it also includes Satori and the “Nirvana” of Buddhism (which is why it can be seen to be a religion, at least in many of its forms, when it is not just a personal philosophy).⁴⁷ Often God is recognized as the ultimate source of life and existence, upon whose will we all depend, but this may be muted or less present or at least spoken of differently (say, as between certain varieties of Hinduism or Buddhism and the Semitic religions descended from Judaism).

That religion is centrally found in action, rather than doctrine, many who study religion would maintain: ritual actions are at its core.⁴⁸ People engage in this practice because they believe certain things. However, it is also and perhaps more importantly the case that “the rule of prayer lays down the rule of faith”: doctrine articulates *praxis*. Vision

and ritual are correlatives. Because ritual is communal, there is always a social dimension and authority in religion.

The religious ethic grows from the religious vision and practice and is developed over time, as the religion and community confront new situations and disputed questions. (Indeed, as with all human reality, religions develop various of their aspects over time.) If one is religious, one will seek to follow an explicit way of life or ethic (although each believer no doubt struggles to appropriate well, and differently, particular aspects of it or of its teaching). The situation does not work so readily in reverse. Someone who adopts or largely follows an ethic that derives from a religion may not come to follow its explicit faith or ritual practice.

The expression of the religion in beautiful material things⁴⁹ also develops over time, from something hardly so discernible to great monuments (from a “house church” to St. Peter’s, say).

Religion as it is found historically always is centrally concerned with the “negativity” of human existence and offers a way to come to terms with it. (A philosopher does not need to believe in the doctrine of “original sin”—that is, a doctrine that explains *why* we are faced with this condition—to recognize its obvious reality!). The *condition* remains—people remain ignorant and sinful, continue to suffer physically and spiritually, continue to die—and evil is experienced as real, and often “horrendous”, and even as a challenge to a religious faith. Nevertheless, religion is on the side of “positivity”; it offers reconciliation to present evils done or suffered and holds out the promise that finally they will be transcended or overcome. Bliss, Heaven, the Beatific Vision, the Communion of Saints, Enlightenment, and the Joy of Union with God are its typical end, promised for all or for all those who are faithful or become truly good. If the end is attained, then religion is transformed: praise, love, and communion remain, but the “sting” of evil is surpassed.

Religion is likewise always centered (in all states and conditions) upon the meaning of existence, for it provides the “touchstone” or the “Absolute” to which all can potentially be related, thereby placing events in some framework and making them “meaning-full.”

Because religion is centered on something other or greater, its “invitation” is always present, and can always be deepened; participating in it means placing one’s center in a new, different, and presumably better place: in the Way of the Ultimate, Absolute, or God. Thus, conversion—indeed many deepening conversions—is typical of its life. And some who are more holy—shaman, priest, prophet, saint, teacher, “wise person of faith”—serve as guides for others.

Although all of the above aspects are common to religions and can be found in most instances, they may be found in different ways and degrees.⁵⁰ Thus, for example, the Catholic and Orthodox forms of Christianity place more emphasis on the sacramental and ritual way than do many forms of Protestant Christianity (and one could make a similar contrast between other religions, say between most of Hinduism and Sikhism or some forms of Buddhism). In some religions (e.g., Confucianism), the transcendent dimension may be so muted that one almost thinks of it as an ethic alone;⁵¹ whereas, in others, some other dimension may seem under-developed (say, perhaps, the doctrinal or creedal dimension in some forms of so-called “primal” religion).⁵²

As should be clear enough, the above paragraphs derive in large part from reflecting on the issues raised by philosophers who have studied the phenomenon of religion. One will find such reflection present but undeveloped in Aquinas. It should be developed and is required by this “second part” of our study, what can be called “the philosophy of religion”, not “natural theology”.

5. Conclusions

In sum, then, and doing little more than taking as our lead the present state of the philosophy of religion, as this is given in various current undergraduate textbooks on the subject, it is rightly divided into two parts: one based upon God as the Fullness of Being and First Agent (thus embracing the issues Aquinas treats in the first two books of the

Summa Contra Gentiles), and the other based upon God as the Final End (thus embracing the issues Aquinas treats in the third book of that work, all of which, let it be well noted, he holds are within the purview of reason unaided by a specific religious truth). The first part is classically called “natural theology”, and the second part deserves to be called “the philosophy of religion” (if one is thinking along Thomistic lines), or both parts could just be called the latter (if one is thinking of the term as it is currently in use by various philosophical points of view).⁵³

The first part (God as Being and Agent), it should be noted, is purely philosophical. One can hold its conclusions while being a member of various religious communities or none (although its conclusions will be part of a theistic philosophy, as that of a Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle). The same can likewise be said of the *beginning* of the second part (God as End). There thus is nothing in the third book of the SGC specific to any holy tradition. This second part, however, is concerned with acts ordering to an end, and these acts are not merely ones that exist in the abstract. All action is concrete, and thus the actions required to orient us rightly will perforce go beyond what philosophy can see.⁵⁴ Since this second part ends by considerations involving the particular claims religions make, it deserves to be named from its final term, as “the Philosophy of Religion”.

If properly ordered, in my view, these parts will take up the following issues. The first part should begin by taking up the nature of its discourse and thus have a section devoted to “Natural Theology”.⁵⁵ At issue here will be rightly situating discourse about God in relation to other philosophical discourses. Since this is traditionally located as the final part of “metaphysics”—“meta” “coming after” and “going beyond” “physics”—this part should include the relation of this undertaking not only to that of sacred theology, but also to that of “physics”, meaning both the general principles of “natural philosophy” (e.g., as found in Aristotle’s *Physics*) and also the application of those principles to the empirical given and to conclusions of “scientific rationality”.

This part will then proceed through subjects taken up in natural theology or the philosophy of God: the reasons for claiming that God exists; the nature and attributes of God; what can be known and said of God; God’s operations of knowledge, life, and will; and God’s providence and power, ending with God’s blessedness. Likewise, it will take up the implications of God being the First Agent Cause, in possible sections on God’s creation, conservation,⁵⁶ and governance; the possibility of miracles; the relation between divine action and free will; and the problem of evil.

The contrast between our current state, enmeshed as it is in evil, and the blessed end that fulfills our natural desire to know God as God is, in God’s divine life, leads necessarily to the second part of its undertaking.⁵⁷ By rights, its first question should concern God as man’s happiness and end, and, since this can only be attained through God’s gifts, the relation between nature and grace⁵⁸ (often implicitly covered in questions dealing with reason and faith or in the relation of philosophy to religion). This material could also lead to reflection on the relation between spiritual gifts and infused theological virtues and the acquired moral virtues, or the relation between a religious ethic and a secular one that is “within the bounds of (political) reason alone”.⁵⁹

Given the difference between nature and grace, and the human need for God’s help in becoming who each person most wishes to be, a philosopher cannot help but be interested in the phenomenon of religion. We need to address both what is involved in the manifest diversity of human religions encountered, and, indeed, the nature of religion itself. This is all aimed at the final interest and question we have that deserves its own section: the credibility of religion.⁶⁰

Rightly pursued, then, natural theology leads to this final “appendix” of the metaphysical enterprise, in which a philosopher is not seeking to discover truths about God entailed by the human experience common to all, but rather is investigating claims that transcend common human experience and judging them according to its standard of rational credibility.⁶¹ Given the complexity of religion, as defined herein, there are any number

of considerations to reaching such judgments, since these can range from the inner beauty encountered in members of a given religion or the beauty of its worship, to judgments of the good (its moral law), or of the true (its central doctrines), and to the hope it promises. It is likely that judgments will perforce be circumspect here. To name but one difficulty, it is hard to have a just and deep appreciation of all the serious religious Ways that are likely to be encountered. And, since judgments may be entertained by one already committed to some sacred tradition, as well as by one without any, Plato's judgment in the *Republic*—that we cannot do better than follow the religious tradition handed down to us⁶²—unsurprisingly is likely to be the preliminary judgment of many a philosopher. Still, conversions are hardly unheard of. (Let us note that one is not here engaging in “apologetic theology”, but in a work that is properly philosophical.)⁶³

A philosopher thus must look at the phenomenon of religion, and natural theology rightly ends here, in the second part's term. For, as Aquinas makes clear in the very first article of his *Summa Theologiae*, philosophy is not enough. God is wise and will have provided His intellectual creatures some Way to their end and perfection, even though it transcends their natural powers. A philosopher must therefore *seek the Way* to the end “promised” in his natural orientation to God as the Truth one seeks and the Good in Whom one desires to rest. A philosopher needs to transcend his own nature, embracing a sacred path and a transcendent truth. To do so is to find oneself on a new adventure: the path of sacred theology, seeking to understand the faith embraced. All philosophers are called to such a path and its truth, but committing to it goes beyond philosophy.⁶⁴

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Notes

- ¹ The following are a typical sample only (and have gone through numerous and further editions): (1) *The Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd edition (Peterson et al. 2007); (2) *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 5th edition, (Pojman and Rea 2008); (3) *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary* (Zagzebski and Miller 2009); (4) *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject* (Davies 1998); (5) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Quinn and Charles 2009); and (6) *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective* (Kessler 1999).
- ² Here are the subsections of Peterson's collection: (1) The Nature of Religion; (2) Religious Experience; (3) Faith and Reason; (4) The Divine Attributes; (5) Arguments about God's Existence; (6) Knowing God Without Arguments; (7) The Problem of Evil; (8) Divine Action; (9) Religious Language; (10) Miracles; (11) Life After Death; (12) Religion and Science; (13) Religious Diversity; (14) Religion and Morality.
- ³ It is remarkable that, despite entirely different orderings, these six books all cover the same sections as just given, with only slightly less attention in a few on knowing God without argument, the problem of divine action and human freedom, or religious language (although these are tangentially covered even so). There are also several other sections, such as the relation between philosophy and religion.
- ⁴ In truth, they begin either with that (Peterson, Kessler) or with the issue of what the philosophy of religion itself is (Zagzebski, Davies, Quinn). As will be seen, I favor the latter as the first question to be raised. (In fairness to Kessler, he tries to address this question in the introduction to his collection.) To see my own definition of religion here, see pages 6–8. It will be clear to anyone familiar with this question that my attempt is very much “in dialogue with”, or has reflected upon, other attempts to deal with it; however, it is no purpose of this rather “programmatic” essay to enter into debate with these other views, in order to justify what I am there offering.
- ⁵ *The Religion of China* (Weber 1951) and *The Religion of India* (Weber 1958b). In his own sociology, Weber was above all and principally interested in religion, as in his famous *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1958a) and in his even more important work *The Sociology of Religion* (Weber 1963). All of these works of course were published in German in the earlier part of the twentieth century.
- ⁶ For example, a book such as Melford E. Shapiro's *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Shapiro 1967) suggests the possible oversimplification of an “arm-chair approach”, in this case in seeing Burma as Buddhist, thereby missing the complexity of Burmese religious practice “on the ground”.

- 7 This is my own view. Investigations of other forms of knowing than that of philosophical analysis (and art or law involve such, as well as the sciences) properly fall within the purview of metaphysics.
- 8 Aquinas' first treatise presents matters in this order: after first attending to the method of his treatment (q. 1), he examines the existence of God (q. 2); God's attributes (qq. 3–11); knowledge and language of God (qq. 12 and 13); God's operations of knowledge, life, and will (qq. 14–21); God's providence and predestination (qq. 22–24); power (q. 25); and blessedness (q. 26). In my judgment, this presentation remains the soundest, intentionally developing the material according to the logical order of its ideas.
- 9 Just as sacred theology—as opposed to natural theology—is both speculative and practical, so must be the study of religion, for faith and religion both are concerned with sacred *praxis*, as well as sacred *theoria*.
- 10 For my own thoughts on this, see my “Murray After 50 Years: Reflections on America and Its Proposition” (Torre 2010). In brief, I point out that, for Aquinas, there is a set of more difficult moral questions that are *in principle* deducible from the more basic premises of natural law, but that *in fact* require the guidance of religious authority (e.g., “Moses and Aaron”), since otherwise most people will not see them, given their difficulty. These prove to be just those issues that are now of controversy in pluralist democracies, which is hardly surprising, given that they are not under the guidance of any particular religious tradition. Those who think these truths are *natural* ones and do not repose *in principle* on any religious authority need to recognize that, even if that is true, they do repose upon it *in fact*, politically. The task of anyone persuaded of their truth, then, is to share the *wisdom* of his or her holy *tradition* with others, and the rational *arguments* on its behalf, in the hope that enough of a political consensus can be built for a pluralist community to choose to make these truths a matter of law.
- 11 See Aristotle's account of this in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 11. (It makes its appearance, as a key term in his ethical discourse, as early as the first sentence of Book III, and again at III, 1, 1110b 24).
- 12 Since the books of selections noted earlier do not attempt strongly to justify their order, my own comments on this would be better compared with works such as Charles Taliaferro's *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Taliaferro 1999) or Brian Davies's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd edition (Davies 2004). While having great sympathy for each of them, my own order differs somewhat from theirs, for reasons that will shortly be developed. My principal concern in this essay is to give an account of how and why the topics typically discussed deserve to be ordered, as part of a coherent whole. The degree to which this account will be regarded as perspicuous obviously is tied to the degree to which an author has sympathy with my own presuppositions. It is again not a part of this essay to enter into debate with all of those who have written so well on these many questions.
- 13 From innumerable possible authors who might be cited as taking a similar point of view, I will cite only one: Norris Clarke, SJ, and his *The One and The Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Clarke 2001). I mention my Catholic faith only in order to be entirely transparent. None of what I here argue depends upon it: the essay is one of philosophy, not one of sacred theology, neither “dogmatic” nor “apologetic”. (As the work of men such as Eric Mascall and Mortimer Adler attest, to be a Thomist philosopher is separable from being a Catholic.)
- 14 In case the reference just made to my own faith might mislead someone, let me reemphasize what has just been said: I have here argued that the philosophy of religion (in both of its two parts for which I will argue here) is a work of reason and philosophy, and it does not depend on or require any faith commitment to be engaged in well.
- 15 See Abraham Heschel's well-known work *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Heschel 1976).
- 16 See his *The Religions of Man* (Smith 1958). I do not take Huston Smith principally to be a philosopher, but, as noted, a “phenomenology” or “comparative study” of religion is indispensable to its own study, and his work in that realm was hailed as a classic. (For the same reason, others' work, such as—to name but one other “person of influence”—that of Christopher Dawson, is relevant to its undertaking.) Again, my point here is not to laud Smith because of his faith, but rather because of his empirical knowledge and his “sympathetic understanding” or empathy for what he studied: an intellectual virtue, to be sure, but one that is human and not specific to any faith community, and one that is surely essential in order to engage well with the intellectual work found in the philosophy of religion.
- 17 As quoted from Seneca: see *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, Volume Two* (Barnes 1984).
- 18 No judgment on minimum experience need be made, save to comment that it hardly seems likely anyone would undertake such studies without some personal familiarity with and interest in its subject matter! Anyone who seeks to specialize in the philosophy of religion naturally seeks to deepen his or her experience and understanding of the phenomenon. As with all philosophy, and especially metaphysics, this study has no “upper limit”, but will always be on-going and can never be completed. This is clearly true of studies of the “philosophy of” genre, requiring ever-more in-depth knowledge of their chosen subject matter.
- 19 In truth, and as I go on to argue, its very first question by rights should deal with what it is and the method proper to its study. This will mean in the first place distinguishing itself from sacred theology and thus addressing the issues previously referred to, namely its “legitimacy” from the point of view of sacred traditions. But it will also have to establish its “legitimacy” in relation to an opposite community: that of critical, “secular”, or “scientifically-minded” philosophers (and also historians of religion). At a minimum, this will require acknowledging its “philosophical antecedents” and giving some justification for these. Obviously, it is no part of this essay to attempt such a justification. Nevertheless, it seems to me that virtually all who engage the philosophy of religion rightly regard it as concerned primarily with the realm of truth, not the realm of the good: that is, they regard it as

a theoretical, not a practical, study. And thus they employ what Aristotle would call the “analytic” method, rather than the “synthetic” one proper to practical endeavors. And they employ—implicitly or explicitly—some standard of “reasonableness” in their judgments, and such a standard or criterion (as the skeptics forever point out) requires some metaphysical or epistemological commitments. (To take an obvious example, they always assume the logical principle of non-contradiction, one that metaphysics defends.) It seems, then, that insisting on the justification of one’s principles, as I have, is not to take a much controverted position.

For a “friendly”, but critical, assessment of Freud, see Ricoeur’s *Freud and Philosophy: An Interpretation* (Ricoeur 1970). In the “dialectical” approach to their subject taken by most of the textbooks cited, Ricoeur’s three 19th century “architects of suspicion”—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—are regularly included, as are earlier critics (such as Hume) or the 20th century positivists and naturalists referenced in the following footnote, often found under the section of “Religion and Science”.

A history of the emergence and development of the Philosophy of Religion, as an “academic” subject within Anglo-American philosophy (broadly “analytic”) has yet to be written. However, it clearly could not have developed as it did unless the predominance of a positivist “scientism”, rooted in a materialist, mechanist, and reductionist naturalism that reduced wholes to the sum of their parts—which is in truth just a modern and more sophisticated variety of Epicureanism—had been lessened (even though this view is still quite visible today in the “academy” of the West). In truth, the phenomenon of religion is simply too enormous a reality, both historically and in our time, to be “dismissed” from serious philosophical inquiry.

For my brief views on this, see “Modest Reflections On The Term ‘Religious Experience’” (Torre 2017). As will be clear from my remarks on the nature of religion, I hold any just account of it will deal not only (nor even centrally) with religious beliefs or doctrines, but with the ritual praxis and religious “experience”, broadly taken, that is central to most religious life.

For an Aristotelian Neoplatonist, these involve considerations of method (i.e., logic), natural philosophy (including contemporary empirical findings), anthropology (both the human being, and its possible continuance after death, and human knowing), ethics and politics (i.e., the good), ontology, and epistemology, all of which are presupposed to the final undertakings of metaphysics, which deal with the existence and nature of reality’s transcendent first cause, only grasped analogically: a process that may begin with some likeness (of effects to their cause), but that ends with negation (i.e., “remotion”) and enduring mystery.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I (A), 1, 980a 21.

This is Aquinas’ express position not only in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* but in the *Sentences* (bk 4, d. 49, q. 2, a. 1), his commentaries on Matthew and John, his *Compendium of Theology*, his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and his *Summa Theologiae* (I, 12, 1). As “startlingly different” as this is from Aristotle’s view (which he expressly “spurns”, as a *philosophical error*), it is *not* simply the result of Christian faith, but is held by many Neoplatonic *philosophers*, with Boethius being the most notable example.

See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X. (For God as perfectly happy, see *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072b 30).

This position is clearly enough given in Plato’s *Symposium*, in Diotima’s ascent to the vision of Absolute Beauty. Once her Absolute Good is identified with Plotinus’ One, the participation of intelligent creatures in the vision of God as their blessedness is commonly discussed in much of the Neoplatonic tradition.

And thus he dismisses any discussion of a Separate Good, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 6, by arguing that it is “not acquirable by a human being” (I, 6, 1097a 34). The only possible happiness obtainable by us is in the imperfect “way human beings are” (I, 11, 1101a 20). Even if the divine element in us should be favored, a life in accord with it is “more excellent than the one in accord with the human element” (X, 7, 1177b 25). He does recognize that our intellect does not derive from the body, i.e., it “comes from without” and is “divine” (see *Generation of Animals* II, 3, 736b 26). And he argues its activity is immaterial, unlike the activity and knowing of the senses (see *On the Soul*, III, 4): “it [thought] is pure from all admixture” (429a 20) and “separable from it [the body]” (429b 5). Nevertheless, if it has some further life after its separation from the body at death, he refuses to speculate about its possible operation or even about its existence. All Hellenistic philosophy after Aristotle will deepen his “stand-offish-ness” on this, and it will await Plotinus and the entire Neoplatonic school to return to the earlier-held views of Plato on this matter.

Thomas always turns Aristotle’s stated principle against him. See, for an example, his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Book I, Lecture XVI, #202): “Since a natural desire is not in vain, we can correctly judge that perfect beatitude is reserved for man after this life” (note well: “is” not “may be”!).

See Aristotle’s will, as given by Diogenes Laertius: see *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, Volume Two* (Barnes 1984).

For a simple summary of this argument, see Jacques Maritain’s “The Immortality of the Soul” in *The Range of Reason* (Maritain 1942).

Thus Thomas, in Book III of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, chapter 159, and also in *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 1. For more here, see my “The Importance of God’s Wisdom to Thomas’ Account of Nature and Grace” (Torre 2016).

See Plato, *Meno*, 99d.

This false supposition has not only misdirected Catholic sacred theology, but it has led Catholic thinkers in general—against the plain evidence of human history and thought—to argue that any reference to God as a merciful giver (and thus any reference to God’s “grace”) is *beyond philosophy*. That is not true. To take but two obvious references, that God in His providence is One who could and does give gifts to us is found throughout Ancient Philosophy, from Socrates, Plato, and even Aristotle, through someone such as Cicero, to the Neoplatonists. (For the most conspicuous place in Aristotle, see his “Book of Good Fortune”: the *Eudemian Ethics*, Book 8, chapter 2.) Boethius, in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, clearly teaches our end is the Beatific Vision,

to which God *directs* us. Equally, God gifting us is posited throughout the history of human religion, in all times and places. Aquinas's thought, while audacious, is hardly unusual: since God creates a nature that can only be fulfilled through His gifts, this means that God *intends* to offer these gracious means *in creating that nature made for its end*, that God *does* offer them, and that philosophers can *rightly argue* that God does so. If this point is missed, then Thomas's entire vision of our orientation to *see* God as our *natural* end will be mistakenly presented and distorted. Let us listen to the sober words of Servais Pinckaers, O.P.: "we are astonished to note how far this teaching, so essential for Aquinas [namely, his teaching on our *natural* desire to see God], has been neglected by many of his disciples and by later theology": from "Aquinas's Pursuit of Beatitude" in *The Pinckaers Reader* (Pinckaers 2005). For arguments against the possible state of pure nature, see my essay referenced in the following footnote.

For more on this point, see my essay cited in footnote 32, as well as my essay "The Natural Desire to See God" (Torre 2022). (I there simply follow Pinckaers' "lead".)

This is the culminating truth of Book III, which details the doctrine about God knowable by human reason alone. In his *Summa Theologiae* that directly follows, Aquinas proves predestination from two premises: that "it belongs to God's providence to order things towards their end" and that the human end "exceeds the proportion and power of created things and this end is eternal life". The first of these is clearly within the purview of natural philosophy, and he had just expressly held (in *ST*, q. 1, 12, a. 1) that the second of these is a truth *taught by human reason*. Plainly, the conclusion requires no special revelation to hold.

This is just Augustine's own view, as famously given in Book VII of the *Confessions* (18–21). Plotinus had shown him that his *end* and *blessedness* lay in the *Divine Word* known, and thus in the beauty of Eternal Truth, but he could not supply him with the *Way* to his end: the same *Divine Word made flesh*.

And Augustine again is iconic here for his Catholic tradition, using his new-found Neoplatonism to criticize and refute the false dualism of his previous Manichean religion.

And thus Aquinas allows that even pagans (not to mention earlier holy Jewish men and women who are in truth the Church "in the womb" and before its "birth" on Pentecost) could have had an *implicit faith* in Christ, "since they believed that God would deliver mankind in whatever way was pleasing to Him" (*ST*, II-II, 2, 7 ad 3), just as they could have had an implicit faith in the Trinity (I-II, II, 2, 8). Of course, earlier non-Jews such as Melchizedek, Job (if not a Jew), the Magi, or even Roman Sybils were often cited as being holy men and women. This does not entail an equality in the Ways to be found, since a true explicit guide is better than an implicit one (and one that may also contain some untruths); however, it does indicate that—despite there being various *signs* of our inner virtue and life—we are in no position to make a *sure and absolute* judgment about the heart of *any* person, whether in one's own holy way or not. The same stricture applies equally to those of no religious practice or of atheistic views. (Indeed, in relation to the first, one can encounter many who do not seem to recognize adequately that there are adult versions of religious understanding, and, in relation to the second, that the "god" they are busy disclaiming does not exhaust the possible referents of that term, and that many theist philosophers and religious practitioners equally or more strongly do not believe in the "god" they are busy denying. Since knowledge of God is at the limit of human understanding, it is hardly surprising that many people, and perhaps most people, do not understand well their true mind and heart when it comes to claims about God and/or to living in accordance with them.)

Aquinas, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and simply following the lead of earlier Christian writers, supplies categories to be used in assessing credibility: the spiritual nature of a religion's doctrine and the fitness of arguments for its truths, and the attestation to it by prophecies and miracles (the greatest being the inspiration of minds and the transformation of lives, of both the simple and the learned). (For brief remarks on his thoughts on credibility, see my "Aquinas and the Credibility of God" (Torre 2000). Contrary to what some have held, however, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* obviously evinces little to no interest in Islam *as a religion* (and, as a matter of fact, Aquinas was not familiar with it as such). His attention in this work is taken up almost entirely with Muslim *philosophers*: Alfarabi, Ibn Sina, Algazali, Ibn Rushd. No fair-minded contemporary Thomist would be willing to follow this work's easy and polemical dismissal of Islam as unreasonable: clearly, an atypical "blind spot" in Aquinas. Certainly, no *Catholic* could if he or she were going to pay proper attention to Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* (3) and the work of interreligious dialogue undertaken by pastoral leaders of the contemporary Catholic Church. And to Islam must be added other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism (again, see *Nostra Aetate* [2]).

For example, see Rem B. Edwards, "The Search for Family Resemblances of Religion" (Edwards 2000). Without denying a possible analogical use of "religion" (e.g., if applied to the angels, say), I would resist this "Wiggensteinian" move. Instead, I would argue that a definition of religion is possible (even if a successful philosophical "focus" is only approached asymptotically), and what "religion" signifies is essentially the same human reality, even when it is participated in diversely.

In the *Euthyphro*, Plato concludes that piety is "just service" to God, one in which God or the divine realm uses us as servants to accomplish a work. In the *Apology*, Socrates says "there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god" (30b), which is to "sting" his fellow citizens into caring most about wisdom and "the best possible care" of their souls (29e): so, we are just to God when we act justly towards ourselves and others (the "work" God seeks to accomplish through us). The Aristotelian *Virtues and Vices* says that "first among acts of justice come those towards the gods" (1250b 19). Both Cicero and Augustine locate the virtue of religion in the service and rites offered to the divine, and Aquinas defines it as the highest part of justice, which binds one to God through acts immediately directed to Him (such as devotion, prayer, adoration, sacrifice) or through commanded acts (such as oblations, tithes, vows, oaths, praise).

- 43 As I trust is clear from the way I seek to speak of the ultimate referent of religious discourse, I do intend to deny that atheism (let us say Marxist communism) or a “secular humanism” or a “materialistic naturalism” or an “indifferent agnosticism” or a “militant Nationalism” deserve to be regarded as a “religion” (despite the obvious resemblances between them and religion, and their attempting to “compete” with it, which will naturally enough lead many religious people to regard such undertakings as “false religion” and “idolatry”). This will not be regarded as controversial by adherents to such views, since they usually regard themselves as “a-religious” or “anti-religious” and either think little of, or have negative views on, religion. This definition, on the other hand, is meant to include all of the major world religions and many others, including so-called “primitive” religions. It does not deny that many will speak of their having had a “religious experience”, even though they do not engage in the religious practice of any community. Given what is usually meant by the term “religion”, however, it is more accurate to speak of such an experience as a “spiritual” one; and, in fact, many who are not practicing members of a religion self-describe as being “spiritual, not religious”. This is rightly to recognize that the term “religious” and “religion” ordinarily include a community of religious practice. And, while a theistic philosophy may argue for monotheism (as in Neoplatonism, but also in Plato and Aristotle and other philosophers), religion can only be described as “theistic” if this term is very broadly and uncertainly understood. That is the point of describing its ultimate referent as here, one that includes the God of classical theism but is broader.
- 44 See Augustine, his *Confessions* VIII, 2.
- 45 One thinks here naturally of Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* (Eliade 1957).
- 46 It is unsurprising that, once the Transcendent and Absolute Good is denied, some form of political good will then take its place, for, after God, the common good of society is the greatest; but whether one’s highest good is political, familial, or personal, no created good can fulfill our natural desire. The claim that we are a “vain desire” will ever attract a few intellectuals, or perhaps also some clever comics happy to “send up” everything . . . except when this attitude is turned back on their favored goods or ideology: Skepticism and Nihilism are unlivable and impossible, ever a disguise, even when unrecognized and/or unacknowledged.
- 47 I recognize that some Buddhist practice can involve neither the Sangha, any religious authority, or any reference to a greater reality and life (after death). When it involves none of these, then “Buddhism” is a “philosophy of life”, but not a religion. (One could say the same thing about Stoicism in ancient Western philosophy and modern practice.) However, that is neither the way Buddhism has been traditionally practiced nor has spread. Historically, it has involved all of these and thus is properly a religion. On this interpretation, its use of “Nirvana” would be an extreme example of “apophatic theology”. (Both its oft-employed concepts of reincarnation and the Bodhisattva indicate that death is not the *extinction* of our life.) When it comes to affirming a “transcendent” reality, Buddhism (as perhaps Stoicism) is a “borderline” case. Certainly, some forms of Buddhism clearly fall under “religion” as here defined. This does not exclude the possibility of there being “intellectual gurus” or teachers or masters (both in “the East” as in “the West”) who are not religious (since outside the tradition of a community’s practice) and who would resist even being called “spiritual”, since they subscribe to some kind of naturalism and intend to deny the “greater reality” to which religion points. Nevertheless, as argued above, being “radically apophatic” need not entail this, and, indeed, it seems clear from other usual elements of much Buddhist practice that it does not “fit” the ideas found in Western naturalism: to argue for reincarnation and the possible escape from the “cycle of suffering”, as much Buddhism does, is not “naturalism”.
- 48 For the need to nuance such a generalization, see Mary Douglas’s *Natural Symbols* (Douglas 1970). Any definition, as attempted here, will need to address the complexity of human religious practice, as discovered by anthropologists: there is no escaping the need for a philosophy of religion to be as attentive as possible to the phenomenon it is studying. Just as there cannot be a true philosophy of nature without reflecting upon changing empirical evidence and the theories crafted to explain it (i.e., a philosophy of science), so there cannot be a philosophy of religion that fails to do the same in relation to its subject. This is another indication that the second part of a philosophy of religion, at its term, is quite different from the conclusions previously advanced, which are of a metaphysical order.
- 49 While heading the Congregation of Faith and before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger said “I have often affirmed my conviction that the true apology of Christian faith, the most convincing demonstration of its truth . . . are the saints and the beauty that the faith has generated”: see his “Message to the Communion and Liberation (CL) Meeting at Rimini” (Ratzinger 2002). As is well-known, Hans Urs von Balthasar centered his very influential theology on the importance of divine beauty. (In truth, the “material works of beauty” proper to religion are simply one, typically human, way of *praising* God. However, due to the central importance of these beautiful offerings or works—likely our first encounter with a religion—they deserve this emphasis.)
- 50 Religion is not a mathematical entity and exceptions do not disprove general truths about it. The fact that someone may be born with only one kidney does not falsify the truth that it is natural for human beings to have two. Neither will ethnographical exceptions to the features of religion here presented mean that these are not typical and natural to religion. Not every society needs to be as religious as most. (In a similar way, Aquinas concedes that possibly some Germanic tribes did not recognize robbery was wrong, even though this truth is at the level of murder and adultery being wrong—that is to say, it is at the level of the Ten Commandments—and that level of precept is naturally known by most and in principle is knowable by all.)
- 51 No doubt, this in part explains why Confucianism could be united with elements from another religious tradition, such as Buddhism, in the religious syncretism not uncommon in Eastern Asia.

- 52 There is no excuse to dismiss such forms of religion altogether as “unbelievable, since primitive”, due to the lack of the technological or cultural development out of which they come. Only someone who falsely universalizes “human progress” would be tempted to do so and thus miss some possible depth and richness in these forms. Fortunately, such an easy dismissal would seem to be less common today than at one time.
- 53 As is clear from my note #60, I regard different usage here as being purely verbal and not a matter either of differing conceptualities or differing substance. One can agree to call all of what presently is found in current anthologies “The Philosophy of Religion”; nevertheless, this covers two parts that are quite different (as here argued), and the first of these parts (as again here indicated) was traditionally covered by texts in “natural theology” or the “philosophy of God”.
- 54 Thus, in *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, Aquinas posits the need for the theological virtues, but he does not discuss the *specific content* of such virtues (e.g., the need for faith and love, but not the specific acts of true faith or the works of love it commands). Likewise, he posits the need for an aid beyond our natural ability (i.e., for God’s grace) to love as we should, without *specifying* in what that consists (e.g., the gift of the Holy Spirit). In fact, this is also the way he organizes the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*: the first part (I-II) follows the same order as the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and concerns the *structure* of human action towards its end; the second part (II-II) concerns the *specific* actions required by the *true faith*, and this shift in point of view is signaled by its first treating of the theological virtues, before addressing the cardinal ones. Human reason can take us far enough to recognize our *need* to look for a divine *revelation*, one that it recognizes the God who made us *would supply*, and to make use of our God-given reason in *assessing* various claims to be that true revelation, but it cannot itself *specify* what those revealed truths will be.
- 55 If one prefers contemporary language of the discipline, then one could begin the book with a section on “The Philosophy of Religion”, as is sometimes done. What then followed would be divided into two basic sections—“Natural Theology: God as First Being and Agent” and “Philosophy of Religion: God as Final End”—and these different parts would then be divided into their proper sections.
- 56 Such considerations can be found, for example, in Hugh J. McCann’s “Creation and Conservation” (McCann 2009).
- 57 That seeing God is our natural end is entailed by many things said in the first part of its study: that God is the Absolute Good, that God wisely orders all things to their natural ends and perfections, that the end of the intellect is to know all that is True and the end of the will is to enjoy all that is Good, that God predestines some human beings for the end for which they were made, the evidence of mystical experience, and so on.
- 58 It is above all this section that deserves greater explicit attention than it has so far usually received.
- 59 One will note that, from the perspective here argued, a “secular ethic” *absent any reference to God* or God’s gifts to us is an *artificial construct*, and a *restriction* of a *natural ethic* to what will be acceptable within the *polity* of a pluralist democracy (for example). The claim that the “natural default” of a *human ethic* is *absent reference to God* is false and historically untenable. For example, that the United States of America supposes that its polity is “under God” seems to be evident from many of its founding documents and practices. Such practices plainly are neither those of Deism nor of a “civic religion”. One can insist on the separation of Church and State while recognizing that a theistic “philosophy” undergirds that state’s polity.
- 60 I take the last three sections of this part to be, in order: the nature of religion, religious diversity, and then the credibility of religion. There can be no doubt whatsoever that Aquinas regards this as a key issue for *human reason*. Here, then, is the outline of a possible collection entitled: *The Philosophy of Religion*. Introduction: The Philosophy of Religion: (1) Sacred and Natural Theology; (2) Natural Theology and Philosophy. Part One—God as First Being and Agent: (3) Evidence for the Existence of God by Rational Argument (or not); (4) The Attributes of God; (5) Knowledge about and Language of God; (6) The Operations of God—God’s Knowledge, Life, and Will; (7) God’s Providence and Predestination; (8) God’s Power; (9) God’s Blessedness; (10) God as Creator and Conserver; (11) God’s Governance [1]: God’s Power, Miracles, and Contemporary Science; (12) God’s Governance [2]: God’s Action and Creaturely Freedom; (13) God’s Governance [3]: The Problem of Evil. Part Two—God as Final End: (14) God as our Blessedness and Hope (or “Union with God”); (15) Nature and Grace; (16) The Moral Life: Supposing and Not Supposing a Religious Vision; (17) Possible Life After Death; (18) The Nature of Religion; (19) The Diversity of Religion; (20) The Credibility of Religion. This order includes all of the sections in Petersen’s book (the first being similar to its “Reason and Faith”). It differs chiefly by adding sections on God as our Blessedness, Nature and Grace, and the Credibility of Religion. These are all parts of one vision, hinged on God having created and ordered all intellectual beings to participate in divine blessedness, a crucial teaching of Aquinas’s “philosophy of religion” (i.e., as in *Summa Contra Gentiles* III).
- 61 Notice, then, that the second part of the Philosophy of Religion remains a theoretical discipline aimed at assessing the truth of religious affirmation. It is not seeking to serve as a “guide to the promised land”; rather, it seeks to judge whether any proposed religious “Way” does not contradict what we rightly affirm to be true of ourselves and of the world on the basis of our reason, and whether anything going beyond that standard does not unduly stretch credulity.
- 62 Thus, in the *Republic*, Socrates says that the founder of the good city, when it comes to religious matters, will not “employ any interpreter [regarding the right religious practice] except our ancestral one” (*Republic*, IV, 427c). This point of view is seen again throughout Plato’s last work, the *Laws*, especially IV and X.
- 63 In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas is engaging in a work of apologetic theology, one aimed at a particular audience: philosophers or intellectuals. For those of his tradition, he is showing them where their work overlaps their mutual sacred theology (Book I-III) and where the latter depends entirely on a divine revelation (Book IV). Of those that are not, he is showing

them where they in principle can agree (Books I–III) and then answering their difficulties, where they in principle do not (Book IV). In short, Aquinas is doing for his day what Augustine did for his own in *The City of God*. From the differing point of view of a “philosophy of religion”, Aquinas has indicated quite clearly that its material rightly covers what is said in Books I–III.

⁶⁴ For this same view at greater length, see my *What Is: Introductory Reflections on Thomistic Metaphysics* (Torre 2020).

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