

THOMAS AQUINAS—INTEREST GROUP

Topic:	Conversion and Coercion in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas
Convener:	Holly Taylor Coolman, Providence College Michon Matthesien, Providence College
Moderator:	Cyrus Olsen, Scranton University
Speakers:	Frederick Bauerschmidt, Loyola University Maryland Daria Spezzano, Providence College
Respondent:	Paul Griffiths, Duke University

This session explored the dynamics of conversion—especially in contrast with coercion—in Aquinas’s thought. The first focus was God’s action in concert with the human will: the relationship, in other words, between divine grace and the freedom of the act of justifying faith. In this regard, both papers considered Aquinas’s reflections on Lamentations 5:21: “Convert us, O Lord, to you, and we shall be converted.” The second focus was the related question of when and how human efforts to foster conversion pass over from persuasion to coercion. Investigation into Aquinas’ theology of the voluntariness of faith in this connection, unsurprisingly, also brought into play questions about Aquinas’s own context—political Christendom—and perhaps the question of what in Aquinas’s understanding of faith survives the demise of this cultural form of the Christian religion.

In his paper, entitled “Conversion, Coercion and Persuasion in Thomas Aquinas,” Frederick Bauerschmidt considered Aquinas’s understanding of the process of conversion, focusing particularly on how his views on the use of coercion might and might not be related to his views on grace, as well as the role of persuasion in the mind’s assent to truth. Specifically, he asked whether Thomas’s accounts of grace as *auxilium* and of truth as that to which the mind cannot help but assent underwrite the use of coercion in order to obtain conversion. In a turn to human efforts to foster conversion, Bauerschmidt went on to address the possible use of fear as an instrument to encourage conversion and asked whether or not it constitutes coercion. What is the crucial difference, Bauerschmidt asked, between threatening a potential convert with physical harm, and threatening him or her with the fires of hell?

In her paper, entitled “The Best Kind of Servitude: Thomas Aquinas on the Grace of Conversion,” Daria Spezzano explored Aquinas’s treatment of conversion in the context of the human person’s journey by grace to eternal union with God. In his mature work, she noted, Thomas insists on the absolute primacy of grace in the rational creature’s movement to beatitude. Yet this movement must also involve the full activity of the free will—or it would not be truly human. God causes the free will to act freely in his plan of divine providence. In conversion, the will seduced away from God by sin is moved toward God by operative *auxilium* in a passive manner, with no preparation or merit of the sinner. God’s turning of the unwilling will is not coercion, but the liberating beginning of a lifelong process of conversion, in which the free will, aided by cooperating *auxilium*, plays an increasingly significant role in meriting and enjoying the perfection of beatitude. Thomas’ teaching in the *Summa* that conversion is a journey of increasing freedom for God’s adopted children is illuminated by an investigation of his commentaries on key scriptural texts

in Lamentations, Romans and the Gospel of John; these reveal an underlying dynamic in which the “servitude of humility and love” of God’s adopted children is true liberation, as the saints are “drawn by their own pleasure” away from sin and towards friendship with Christ. Spezzano’s paper concluded with an evocative reference to John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14.

For his part, respondent Paul Griffiths began by noting the salutary nature of the absolutely central task of drawing distinctions in theological work, as well as the way in which studying Aquinas trains theologians to do so well. He then broadened the conversation by pointing to a fundamental difference between Aquinas and Augustine on the question of turning toward the good. (As is well known, Aquinas affirms that the will always turns toward what it understands as good, whereas Augustine famously insists that the will can sometimes choose evil as evil.) This led into a lively discussion period, considering not only the “internal” dynamics of Aquinas’s thought, but also how some of his emphases might relate to the larger tradition.

HOLLY TAYLOR COOLMAN
Providence College
Providence, Rhode Island