

# Aquinas and Alison on Reconciliation with God

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## Abstract

*This paper compares the concept of reconciliation in the works of Thomas Aquinas and James Alison through a soteriological lens. For both authors, the problem of sin confronts humanity with grave implications for our salvation that cannot be fixed on our own; therefore, Christ must enact a new way for humanity to live in right relationship with God. The paper examines Thomas and Alison's anthropologies through the lens of three questions regarding salvation: What does sin do to the human?; What does Christ have to do because of sin?; and finally, What does Christ enable humans to do in order that we may participate in reconciling ourselves to God?*

## Text

### Introduction

Since the beginning of Christianity, theologians have had to confront the problem of the plight of humanity and how we are to escape our plight through salvation. This paper will examine the anthropologies of Thomas Aquinas and James Alison as they pertain to reconciliation. In order to examine reconciliation through a soteriological lens, I will proceed by asking three questions of both Thomas's and Alison's theological anthropologies: What does sin *do* to the human?; What does Christ have to do because of sin?; and finally, What does Christ enable humans to do in order that we may participate in reconciling ourselves to God? My aim here is simply to explore what interface might exist in the concept of reconciliation between these two thinkers.

### Thomas Aquinas: Restoring God's Friendship

#### *God's Friendship*

For Thomas, it is most helpful to view reconciliation in terms of restoration of God's friendship. However, we should begin by briefly reviewing Thomas's anthropology, as it will be necessary for our understanding of human friendship with

God. Thomas constructs an anthropology that is hylomorphic, meaning that the human is made up of form and matter: the form is our rational soul, and the matter is our body. He further argues that the rational soul is the higher part of the human over and above the body: “Now the human soul is the highest and noblest of forms. Wherefore it excels corporeal matter in its power by the fact that it has an operation and a power in which corporeal matter has no share whatever. This power is called the intellect.”<sup>1</sup> Within this hierarchy of soul over body, the soul directs and animates the body. The body remains hierarchically ordered to the soul only to the extent that the soul remains ordered to God. If our intellectual powers are not focused on God, our bodily appetites confuse us and blur our ability to choose the good.

Daniel Schwartz argues that for Aquinas, the goal of the human is to remain bonded in friendship with God through conformity of our will to God’s.<sup>2</sup> Thomas—drawing from an Aristotelian definition of friendship—is suggesting that the human use her intellectual powers to seek and know God’s will. Though he admits that humans can never *fully* know God’s will, he does posit the following: “The will of God cannot be fully known to us. Hence, neither can we fully conform our will to His [sic]. But we can conform to it in proportion to the knowledge which we have [...]”<sup>3</sup> In other words, since God has created the human with certain functions of the rational soul that can and should naturally lead her back to God, friendship with God is achievable in some sense. Therefore, despite a vast “cognitive separateness” between ourselves and God, Thomas would say that friendship with God is both “possible and desirable.”<sup>4</sup>

Taken within the framework of God’s friendship, we ask our first question. Operating within a Thomistic worldview, what happens to us when we sin? The short answer is that sin disrupts and disorders our friendship with God, but we must look more carefully at the *Summa* to understand why. Thomas argues that there are three natural goods of human nature. The first is our constitutive principles (such as reason); the second is a natural “inclination to virtue”; and the third is the “gift of original justice.”<sup>5</sup> When sin is introduced, two of the three natural goods are affected: sin diminishes the second natural good (our inclination to virtue) and it completely destroys the third natural good (the state of original justice).<sup>6</sup> However, sin *neither* diminishes nor destroys our constitutive principles, meaning that our capacity to think, reason, choose, or act are completely maintained. After all, we need these capacities to be *able* to sin in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 76, a. 1 (hereafter cited as *ST*).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Ver. Q. 23 a. 7c.* [207-11] as cited in Schwartz, *Friendship*, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Schwartz, *Friendship*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> *ST*, I-II, q. 85, a. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *ST*, I-II, q. 85, a. 1.

However, we see that sin very much affects the ordering of human habit. In both natural goods that are affected by sin, we observe a change in disposition of our will. As virtue is nothing other than a good habit, for sin to diminish our inclination towards virtue means that it diminishes our disposition to act in a way that is fulfilling to us, meaning that we become more inclined to act in ways that are not fulfilling to us. Thomas's notion of original sin likewise introduces a privation of the good into original justice, thereby completely destroying original justice and forever changing the disposition of the human toward the good. Therefore, our will becomes confused as we become more inclined to act in ways that are not in conformity with God's will. In terms of friendship, Schwartz will argue that every wrong we commit against God damages our friendship with God: "God is both the first victim of every wrong and the friend of the offender, inasmuch as she is a potential recipient of His [sic] grace and love."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, sin simply makes acting virtuously more difficult because it confuses our will, making it more difficult to seek, know, and act in conformity with God's will.

#### *Reconciliation in Penance*

The second question we must ask of Thomas is what Christ has to do because of our sin. Aquinas will argue that the redemptive act of Christ's suffering and death is the very "cause of our reconciliation to God."<sup>8</sup> There are two reasons for this explanation: Christ's passion takes away our sins that have offended God and damaged our friendship with God; and Christ's passion is an ample sacrifice that appeases God's anger at our sin.<sup>9</sup> It would seem, for Thomas, that there are certain things the human is incapable of doing because our sin has so offended and angered God. Christ's passion, then, acts as the possibility of our reconciliation or restoration of friendship with God. Only Christ's superabundant satisfaction can make possible our satisfaction through penance, which brings us to our third question.

How do we participate in reconciliation with God? Thomas will emphasize a sacramental participation in the restoration of God's friendship through penance. Penance describes a "series of steps one should go through to amend for one's act of offence against either God and/or a fellow human being."<sup>10</sup> Penance is not only a sacrament, but it is also a moral virtue which re-establishes just relationship between offender and offended. In this case, God is the offended, and we owe God satisfaction for our sins. Satisfaction is defined as "a sequence of acts and attitudes

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<sup>7</sup> Schwartz, *Friendship*, 142.

<sup>8</sup> *ST*, III, q. 49, a. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *ST*, III, q. 49, a. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz, *Friendship*, 143.

necessary for the offender to atone for his wrongs in the eyes of the victim.”<sup>11</sup> As we can see, satisfaction must transform the very way that we act within the world. Our satisfaction, according to Schwartz, is both backward-looking and forward-looking. It is backward looking in that we seek to restore the situation (as much as we can) that offended God in the first place, and it is forward-looking in that we seek to establish reconciliation with God and “reform” our own behavior as the offenders.<sup>12</sup> Our satisfactory acts, then, must transform our very intellectual powers so that they again will be re-aligned with God’s in hope that we do not continue to offend God by sinning in the future.

### James Alison: A Girardian Conversion

#### *Sin as Complicity*

James Alison, a contemporary systematic theologian, primarily uses the hermeneutic of René Girard’s work to approach the doctrine of original sin in his work *The Joy of Being Wrong*. In order to fully understand how Alison conceives of reconciliation, we must take a brief look at his Girardian anthropology and the elements within it that will help us to understand our first question: operating within an Alisonian framework, what happens to us when we sin?

Girard’s theory centers on the scapegoat mechanism: the foundation of which lies in the notion of *mimesis*; the idea that the “I” is constituted by the desires of the other. Thus, according to Girardian thought, I am formed by the other in my imitation of the desires of the other. However, in my imitation of the desires of the other, Girard argues that I will never *not* fall into rivalry with the other.<sup>13</sup> The danger of mimetic rivalry comes in my claim that my desires are absolutely original. I fail to admit the fact that I have modeled the desires of my neighbor, and autonomy of desire is only ever an illusion. Mimetic rivalry manifests itself in a multitude of relational patterns. As it reaches the group level, it transforms into a “mimetic crisis.” The phenomenon of a mimetic crisis refers to a group dynamic in which rivalries are happening on large scales, and so much tension, hate, and envy builds within the group, that something must be done to relieve the chaos of the war of *all against all*.<sup>14</sup> The only way a group can relieve itself of chaos is through the election and exclusion of a scapegoat. This person will be someone who is an outcast, someone who perhaps looks or acts differently than the rest of the group. The war of *all against all* transforms into *all against one*, meaning that any rivalries that once existed among the group are now morphed into a single energy that must exclude

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<sup>11</sup> Schwartz, *Friendship*, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz, *Friendship*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Girard, 24.

this one scapegoat. After the exclusion, the scapegoat is held up as that which brought peace to the community. In a “cathartic” moment after the expulsion of the victim, the community feels that order has been restored, and they no longer feel the all-consuming hostility they once did.<sup>15</sup> The life of the continuous cycle relies on the “participants’ unawareness of what is driving them”; otherwise, the cycle might be broken and exposed for what it is.<sup>16</sup>

Now, what does this cycle have to do with sin? For Alison, *mimesis* affects our “patterns of relationality” with the other.<sup>17</sup> To sin, for Alison, is a falling into the rivalistic desires that find their foundation in *mimesis*. Of course, imitating the desires of the other is not an inherently bad thing for Alison or Girard: in fact, we have to do so in order to learn fundamental human things such as eating and speaking. However, human desire unavoidably will turn into rivalry and violent exclusion of a victim. Therefore, sin is our *complicity* in the process of victimization of the other.<sup>18</sup> This represents a major point of contrast between Thomas and Alison: for Thomas, one must actively contradict the properties of her rational soul in order to sin; and for Alison, it is as if we are all-too-easily swept away by sin because of the very pervasiveness of mimetic rivalry. However, I do believe that both Thomas’s hylomorphic anthropology and Alison’s mimetic anthropology are directly related to these “patterns of relationality” to which Alison calls our attention. By this, I mean that Thomas is very much concerned with how sin affects our everyday habits, which ultimately affect how we relate to God in friendship, while Alison is concerned with our relationship to victims and how we constantly fall into the role of the victimizer.

### *Jesus as “Forgiving Victim” and Our Conversion*

The second question we ask of Alison is: what did Jesus have to do because of this complicity in violent exclusion? For Alison, in Jesus’s passion and death, he becomes victim to the cruelty of the cycle of violence, just as all of us do at some point in our lives. However, the Resurrection for Alison is the linchpin of a theory of reconciliation. The Resurrection is Jesus’s way of showing us that the death of violent exclusion does not have the last word on human lives. Even further, the Resurrection is a “completely gratuitous” act.<sup>19</sup> We could imagine that the story of Jesus’ passion and death could have simply ended with the death, as any other myth would. But the gratuitousness of the Resurrection lies in the fact that Jesus does not

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<sup>15</sup> Girard, 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Girard, 154.

<sup>17</sup> James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 57.

<sup>18</sup> Alison, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Alison, 74.

take part in the violence of the human story; rather, the Resurrection marks the “possibility of a totally new human story.”<sup>20</sup> The presence of the Resurrected Jesus was “forgiveness as a person.”<sup>21</sup> It is God who stands before us a humans, forgiving us for killing him where he could have easily contributed to our violence; this God is radically other from our violence, but shows us that violent exclusion is not the only way for us to be human. In the Resurrection, Jesus forgives our participation in cycles of violence *and* calls us to a conversion.

This brings us to our third and final question for Alison: How does the human partake in reconciliation? She does so by seeing the world with a new kind of intelligence that is constituted by the Resurrection: the “intelligence of the victim.” Jesus, as the ultimate forgiving victim, has offered us two shifts in perception: first, we discover humans as “formed in violence,”; and second, we discover God as “entirely without violence.”<sup>22</sup> The intelligence of the victim must lead us to these discoveries in order for us to participate God’s way of being without violence. I use Alison’s words here:

“It is clear, then, that the intelligence of the victim is not a simple illumination, but a creative and constitutive revelation, creative and constitutive of a new way of being human: as *reconciled* with each other around the body of the self-giving victim. Furthermore, this creative and constitutive revelation is not seen as something entirely new, but as bringing to light what God had always intended society to be.”<sup>23</sup>

Reconciliation, then, comes about only through our participation in this “new way of being human,” a new way apart from death, apart from rivalistic desires, and apart from group-think victimization. Our conversion comes about in *recognizing* our complicity as victimizers by seeing cycles of violence through the eyes of the victim. For Alison, our patterns of relationality which are so often constituted by rivalry and violence can be transformed by imitation of the only person in history that we can imitate without worry of falling into rivalry: Jesus.

### Conclusion

The value of this project lies in the interface between Thomas and Alison and how humans function as actors in our salvation. In both cases, Jesus enables a new kind of relationality so that we may work to reconcile ourselves with God and

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<sup>20</sup> Alison, 74.

<sup>21</sup> Alison, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Alison, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Alison, 87. Italics mine.

others. In Thomas's case, Jesus's redemptive death makes possible our reconciliation with God through penance. Only Jesus's sacrifice on the cross can appease God's anger, which makes possible our reconciliation with God. For Alison, Jesus's *Resurrection* makes possible our ability to see the world through the "intelligence of the victim." It is only through Jesus's example as the ultimate forgiving victim that we become reconciled to each other in a way that does not include violent means. A valuable point of connection is that both thinkers ask us to make a relational conversion, whether it be vertical or horizontal, as we act as participants in salvation. For both thinkers, we are asked to *restore* relationship in the manner that God intended.

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