

Auctoritas in the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas

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Thomas Aquinas, Doctor of the Church and one of the greatest theologians of all time, is frequently cited, often badly or inappropriately, as a major authority in Christian theology, in particular within the Roman Catholic church.¹ Indeed that his work and thoughts have often been cited to formulate a final answer to an argument, to bring discussion to a close – “Thomas Aquinas said therefore . . .” is rather disturbing both in terms of the use of *auctoritas*, and in the vision of theology, of God and of Church it depicts. Another way, and I suggest a more truthful way is to see Thomas as the one with the better questions, and not the final answers. Thomas, or so legend tells us, as a young boy in Montecassino kept asking ‘what is God?’ – a question he was still asking right up to his death, and his greatest inheritance to us. Our task is not alone to ask, ‘what is God?’ but to consider how we might ask the question well in order that we continue our journey toward the answer. The main authority, or source for the answer will lie in scripture, what we will call together with Thomas ‘*sacra scriptura*.’ There are three main parts to this paper: Firstly, it is important to establish the biblical nature of the theology of which we, and Thomas, speak; then we shall explore the argumentative nature of the discipline and also Thomas’ understanding of *auctoritas*, the use of authorities in the craft of theology; thirdly, with Thomas, we shall explore how the language of *sacra scriptura* ‘works.’

A Biblical Theology

Thomas is a pedagogue in his writing, teaching and preaching, his preaching is an incarnate engaged preaching.² His words, whether

¹ Mark Jordan’s recent work, *Rewritten Theology. Aquinas after His Readers*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), provides an interesting study on the concept of the authority which over the years has been accorded to Thomas Aquinas. The opening words of his first chapter, ‘If only we could read Thomas Aquinas without encountering some other of his readers – especially the police,’ (1) express a sentiment in accord with the general tenor of this paper.

² For interesting insights on Thomas as a preacher see J.-P. Torrell ‘La pratique pastorale d’un théologien du XIII^e siècle’ in *Recherches Thomasiennes. Etudes Revues et Augmentées* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2000), 282-312.

spoken or written, are rooted in the Word of God, Sacred Scripture, and his goal is always the 'salvation of souls.' Despite the emphasis put by most scholars on the two great *Summa*'s of Thomas it is necessary to recall that biblical teaching was Thomas' ordinary labour. Thomas was first and foremost a *Magister in Sacra Pagina*. The importance Thomas accords to scripture as an *auctoritas* is evidenced by his use of scriptural quotations in his more strictly defined 'theological' texts.³ In the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles* we can count twenty five thousand scriptural quotations as against four thousand three hundred quotations of the works of Aristotle.⁴ While this is undoubtedly of interest, too much weight cannot be given to an argument as to the importance of scripture in the work of Thomas based merely on statistics. A single quote from one author may be more significant than many decorative quotes. Hence, what is of greater interest is the increased prominence of the use of scripture in the *Summa theologiae*, a work of his later years.⁵ The mature Thomas' increased knowledge of philosophy seems to have led him to assign it a more modest place in his theological texts resulting in a *Summa theologiae* marked by 'a more penetrating awareness of God and God's revelation through Scripture.'⁶ Valkenburg's detailed study regarding the use of scripture in the works of Thomas have lead him to conclude:

The *Summa theologiae* in general and the text on Christ the Saviour [ST III qq.1-59] in particular is characterized by its strictly theological purport . . . [ST III qq.27-59] is remarkable for its biblical character: because Thomas Aquinas is searching for the theological meaning of what Christ did and sustained according to the Scriptures, references to Scripture and to its interpreters are highly important as determinative factors in questions concerning the connection of contingent events with the will of God to save humankind (ST III q.1 a.3 c). This will of

³ Thus Daniel Keating can write that he will take Thomas' biblical commentaries as the starting point' in dealing with theological topics, and from there proceed to look at the *Summa*. This can be done because Thomas 'was first of all a commentator on the "sacred page" of scripture . . . The compressed, even terse, references to Scripture in the *Summa* are typically capsule summaries of what he has worked out at greater length in the biblical commentaries.' D. A. Keating, "Justification, Sanctification and Divinization in Thomas Aquinas" in D. A. Keating, T. Weinandy and J.Yocum eds. *Aquinas on Doctrine. A Critical Introduction*. (London/New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 139-158:139.

⁴ Torrell 'La pratique pastorale d'un théologien du XIII^e siècle,' 299.

⁵ For details on the proposed date of composition see J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* Vol.1, *The Person and His Work*. Trans. Robert Royal. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 333.

⁶ W.G.B.M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God. Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*. (Thomas Instituut, Utrecht – Peeters Leuven, 2000), 22. See also p. 36, n.86.

God is connected with God's nature: goodness, willing to communicate (ST III q.1 a.1 c).⁷

This piece of research is quite extraordinary and seems contrary to many 'traditional' ways of reading and teaching the works of Thomas, in particular the *Summa*. Valkenburg's scholarship makes even more pertinent Torrell's observation: 'on voit ainsi combien est regrettable l'ignorance encore si répandue de cette partie [biblical commentaries, specifically that on John] de l'oeuvre de Thomas. Si l'on veut avoir quelque chance de le rencontrer comme maître de vie chrétienne, il faut apprendre à le fréquenter aussi dans ces textes.'⁸

Inaugural Lectures⁹

Thomas' inaugural lectures, *Principia*, were discourses that took place in Paris between 3 March and 17 June 1256.¹⁰ The first is based on psalm 103:13, *Rigans montes de superioribus*, the second on Baruch 4:1, *Hic est liber mandatorum Dei*. A comment on the latter is of import. The title that McInerney's English translation gives summarises the content – 'Commendation of and Division of Sacred Scripture.' Thomas opens with a citation from Augustine – where we read that 'one skilled in speech should so speak as to teach, to delight and to change (*On Christian Doctrine* 4.2)'(5). Speech teaches, delights and changes – these three terms shall feature again and again in Thomas' thought. It is the chain drawn between speech and change that is of special interest. Thomas' vocation as a Dominican is based on a belief in the efficacy of the word in effecting salvation – 'Are not my words as a fire, saith the Lord?' (Jer. 23:29) (6).¹¹ For this young scholar

⁷ Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 37. Ipse autem natura Dei est bonitas . . . pertinet autem ad rationem boni ut se aliis communicet . . . unde ad rationem summi boni quod summo modo se creaturae communicet. ST III q.1 a1 c.

⁸ J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin, maître spirituel*. (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996), 161. The original French wording is used as it better communicate Torrell's feelings. The English parallel is found in Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2 Spiritual Master. Transl. R. Royal. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 122. While in this context the reference is specifically to study of the commentary on John the critique can be applied in general to a lacuna in work on Thomas' scriptural writings. That this lack is being addressed today is evidenced by works such as Valkenberg's *Words of the Living God* and Thomas Ryan's study of Thomas' writings on the psalms. For a list of some of the studies on Aquinas' use of scripture see *New Blackfriars* 83(2002) 245-251.

⁹ Editions: Mandonnet, *Opuscula*, vol. 4, pp. 481-496; Marietti, *Opuscula theologica*, vol. 1, pp. 435-443. For an English translation of the texts see Ralph McInerney, ed., *Thomas Aquinas. Selected Writings*. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 5-17. All citations are from the Penguin translation. Page references will be included in the body of the text.

¹⁰ Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* Vol.1, 53, 338.

¹¹ Thomas used what is called the 'le texte *parisien*,' a university 'version' of the Vulgate, in his work. We do not have a copy of the actual translation Thomas used. It is also believed that he had access to the *vetus latina*, a translation which preceded St.

sacred scripture is a powerful force of unquestionable authority - it originates in God. Scripture is 'living and efficient and keener than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12)' (6). The truth of Sacred Scripture is a commandment which directs 'the intellect through faith' (Jn. 14:1), it informs 'the affections with love' (Jn.15:12), and induces 'to action: "Do this and you shall live," Luke 10:28'(6). Thomas posits its efficaciousness in 'the uniformity of its sayings.'

At this stage we can say that although Thomas uses *sacra scriptura* well and insightfully, he could be judged as using it rather like a proof text. Later, with increased maturity comes the confidence to truly develop a theology rooted in *sacra scriptura*, but growing from it. This increased awareness of the richness of *sacra scriptura*, the profound messages that lie waiting to be revealed, (*revelabilia*), find a certain fruition in the *Summa theologiae*, a story of human growth into holiness.

A Matter of Argument?¹²

The *Summa theologiae*, perhaps Thomas' most read work and a labour of his mature years, teaches that God is completely knowable (ST I q.12), and that even though 'Loving God, especially in this life, is a higher activity than knowing God, yet [it] presupposes knowledge,' (ST II-II q.8, a.4, ad 2)¹³ . . . but how can one acquire this knowledge? To answer this question we turn to the opening question of the *Summa theologiae* – on the nature and extent of *Sacra doctrina* – and in particular to article 8 which asks '*utrum haec doctrina sit argumentativa.*' The first question that we must ask is what is meant by *haec doctrina*, this teaching. The Dominican translation of 1947 understands it as sacred doctrine. We accord with their translation decision as articles 2-5 of ST I q.1 are clear it is *sacra doctrina* of which they speak; article 6 speaks of *haec doctrina* and article 7 of

Jerome's work. See C. Spicq, "Le texte Biblique de Saint Thomas," in 'Thomas d'Aquin,' *Dictionnaire Theologique Catholique* t.15A (1946), 695-697. As a Dominican friar Thomas would have daily recited the divine office hence it is likely that many of his scriptural citations relate directly to this practice. Here one can only surmise as the modern reader does not have access to the Dominican liturgy from this period. See Jordan, *Rewritten Theology. Aquinas after His Readers*, 21.

¹² It is of interest to note that Reinhard Hütter, while still a Lutheran, selected the works of Thomas Aquinas for his exploration of the argumentative aspect of theology. See R. Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things. Theology as Church Practice*. Transl. D. Stott., (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge UK, 2000), 180-187. *Theologia als kirchliche Pratik*, 1997.

¹³ Quia dilectio Dei est maius aliquid quam eius cognitio, maxime secundum statum viae, ideo praesupponit ipsam. (ST II-II q.8, a.4, ad 2) See also T. Gilby, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 1 Christian Theology (Blackfriars, 1964), Appendix 10, "The Dialectic of Love in the *Summa*," 124-132.

huius scientiae, in both these cases we understand the teaching or science that is being referred to is that of *sacra doctrina*. Article's 9 and 10 speak specifically of *sacra scriptura* – which we suggest for Thomas is virtually synonymous with *sacra doctrina*. In the search for accuracy we would also like to affirm that *haec doctrina* refers to the specific part of *sacra doctrina* termed *theologia*. This we can suggest as in the preceding article, *utrum Deus sit subjectum huius scientiae*, the *sed contra*, which nearly always accords with Thomas' view affirms clearly that this science is called theology as it treats of God – *sed in hac scientia fit sermo de Deo; dicitur enim theologia, quasi sermo de Deo. Ergo Deus est subjectum huius scientiae* (ST I q.1 a. 7 sc).¹⁴ Hence throughout this paper when we speak of *sacra doctrina* we are referring to the theology that is a *sacra doctrina*, *theologia qua sacra doctrina*.

Another term that needs to be clarified before we advance is that of '*argumentativa*.' This term can be translated as either 'argumentative,' as we have chosen or 'probative,' (Blackfriars, 1964). The Oxford English Dictionary translates probative as 'having the quality or function of proving or demonstrating something; affording proof or evidence' while the second translation offered under the term 'argumentative' is 'using or characterised by systematic reasoning.'¹⁵ We suggest that both definitions describe what Thomas had in mind. The theology that is a holy teaching is the fruit of systematic reasoning, and also seeks to demonstrate something, to 'prove' something. As that which it seeks to demonstrate is God the reader can never forget that while theology is always the fruit of systematic reason it simultaneously and inseparably is a gift of grace. In theology, at its best, nature and grace flourish. The authorities that Thomas cites in the objections – St Ambrose, St John and St Gregory – all seem to posit faith and reason as in opposition, a stance Thomas repudiates, as we shall see later. Before going further however it is important to look at the term *auctoritas* and see how Thomas would have understood it.

Auctoritas¹⁶

In Roman law the term was first used to speak of the credibility of a person, but before the time of Thomas authority was being

¹⁴ Otto Bird notes that 'in the *Summa* the *sed contra* argument almost always coincides with the position St. Thomas adopts.' Exceptions include ST I q.14, a.16; q.17, a.1; ST II-II q.85, a.6. See O. Bird, "How to read an Article of the *Summa*," *The New Scholasticism* 27/2 (1953) 129-159: 130.

¹⁵ The first definition is 'given to arguing.'

¹⁶ From a different angle Mark Jordan critiques the way in which the excerpting and misreading of texts over the centuries have led to the creation of Thomas as an authority, indeed even as **the** authority. See Jordan, *Rewritten Theology. Aquinas after His Readers*. Chapter One, 'St. Thomas and the Police.' As he remarks it is an 'irony that such a dialectical author should have been made into so undialectical an authority.' (15)

accorded to documents. With the passage of time these documents came to be gathered together and slowly the idea of a canon of *auctoritates*, selected knowledge from the past in a particular area, formed the foundation for all learning. Instead of working from scattered fragments of classical and Patristic texts in *compendia* and *florilegia* scholars began to gather *auctoritates* into systematic treatises. In the Christian Church, where it was a question of human salvation, real *auctoritates* soon had to be distinguished from a myriad of possible sources of learning. Only the words of authors approved by the Church used in an appropriate context were granted valid authority. Corrupt texts, those erroneously attributed to a saint, and glosses were not deemed to have real authority. Hence a clear distinction developed between real *auctoritates* (sources of theological truth) and the sayings of theologians (*dicta magistralia*), the latter having no real authority. Hence slowly it came about that a high esteem for *auctoritates* as determining the inescapable truth of faith developed in parallel with the relative freedom of discussing this truth in a context of faith seeking understanding.¹⁷

This was the environment in which Thomas lived and worked, and in which he developed a theology that is argumentative and yet highly respectful of faith. Reason and revelation enjoy a happy existence in his thought. For Thomas *sacra scriptura* is the authority. God is the *Auctor* of all things, and of *sacra scriptura* in a particular sense. As was shown in article 1 for salvation Christians need to know the truth of God as revealed through scripture.

This means that an instruction in faith is necessary for the salvation of human beings. . . . and since faith rests on infallible truth (*sacra scriptura*) . . . in the instruction in faith, it (*sacra scriptura*) is the main authority. But human reasoning plays a part also, for faith rests on the ultimate Truth. Because God is the author of creation and revelation, there can be no contradiction between faith and reason.¹⁸

The goal of the activity will determine the method. To defend the faith, and to remove error and doubt, argument from *auctoritates* is most important, 'but if the purpose is a deeper understanding of the matters of faith by students, *rationes* are more important than *auctoritates* since the purpose of such a *disputatio magistralis* is that the hearers know why the sayings are true rather than knowing that they are true.'¹⁹ This illustrates precisely the difference between 'catechesis' and 'theology' and points toward the richness of the theology

¹⁷ Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 13.

¹⁸ Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 13, 14. In this section Valkenberg traces the development of Thomas' thoughts on the concept of *auctoritates* as it applies to *sacra doctrina*.

¹⁹ Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 15. See ST I q.1 a.2 ad 2.

of Thomas Aquinas; it recognises a world, and more particularly a Church, where many seek milk, and some even hunger for meat (ST Prol.).

To return to the article in question, and to the corpus of the response, we see clearly that Thomas is not suggesting that we argue for arguments sake, nor do we argue in proof of theology's 'principles.' Theology is rooted in divine revelation, in the articles of faith. These are indisputably accepted as truths, and sources of great riches when they are discussed. Hence Thomas can teach that from the accepted principle of the resurrection of Christ a theory of the general resurrection can be developed, just as St Paul does in 1 Cor. 15.

This *corpus* also provides a valuable response to those who see Thomas as a dry academic more concerned with books than people. For Thomas theology does not require the addition of the adjective practical, or applied, for theology of its nature is practical, is applied. His concern as to the argumentative nature of theology lies, as always in his desire to fulfil his vocation of 'the salvation of souls,' specifically here those of 'heretics.' We can argue with them, discuss the faith with them - perhaps with the goal of conversion - only if there is a certain common shared heritage stemming from divine revelation. Argument, discussion, one might suggest ecumenical dialogue, presupposes a certain shared core of belief, however small. On the other hand, and this is perhaps even more pertinent for today - if we do not share a core belief with our interlocutor, 'if our opponent believes nothing of divine revelation' the gift of reason in proving matters of faith becomes redundant. With such people we can still answer their objections against faith, as 'faith rests upon infallible truth.' Their arguments against faith are simply, in Thomas' eyes, difficulties that can be answered.

Moving directly to the response to objection 2 we read that this doctrine, *theologia qua sacra doctrina*, is 'especially based (*est maxime proprium*; most appropriately) on arguments from authority, **inasmuch as** its principles are obtained by revelation.' The 'inasmuch as' is key. The objection to which Thomas is responding reads:

Further, if it is a matter of argument, the argument is either from authority or from reason. If it is from authority, it seems unbefitting its dignity, for the proof from authority is the weakest form of proof. But if it is from reason, this is unbefitting its end, because, according to Gregory (Hom. 26), "faith has no merit in those things of which human reason brings its own experience." Therefore sacred doctrine is not a matter of argument. (ST I Q 1 a.8 Obj 2)

Sacred doctrine cannot be based on argument from authority, as this is a very weak way of arguing, unsuitable to such a dignified subject matter, while argument from reason seems to be a contradiction as we

are speaking of God, working in the area of faith, en route to our end as saints with God. The objections suggest a strict division between matters divine and those human. That these have been bridged has been suggested by the mention in the corpus of Christ and the resurrection. Here Thomas develops this thought. Firstly he agrees that argument based on human authority, human reason, is 'the weakest.' By doing so he is reminding the student that one does not believe simply because X, whoever that X might be, has said something. This is a valuable insight. However, as we are working in the area of faith if the argument of X is based on divine revelation that is the strongest authority for theology. In response to Gregory, and in the positive declaration of what it is to be human so characteristic of Thomas, Thomas affirms the importance of human reason in the activity of theology. Reason is important, not so that faith might be 'proved,' for that in itself is a contradiction in terms, but to build on the *regulae fidei*, to make clear what they say, to help us grow into deeper understanding of what Christian faith means.

Nature and Grace

This close connection of reason and faith, of grace and nature is perhaps one of the trademarks of Thomas' teachings. The frequently quoted '*cum igitur gratia non tollat naturam sed perficiat*' is generally translated as 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.' A closer examination of the text alerts us to the structure of the sentence - it opens with *cum*, since. **Since** grace does not destroy but builds up what are the implications? Thomas tells us that since . . . then 'natural reason should serve faith' (*naturalis ratio subserviat fidei* q.1 a.8 ad 2). Hence the *theologia* that is part of this broader field of *sacra doctrina* must make use of reason to serve, or minister, to faith. The centrality of faith in a revealing God is foundational.²⁰

²⁰ In what he terms an 'excursus' Eugene Rogers presents a detailed account of the relationship between faith and *scientia* in Thomas' commentary on Romans. In Romans (c.4 lect. 1) Thomas tells us that the 'act of faith is said to be threefold, namely, to believe that God exists, to believe God, and to believe into God (*credere Deum, Deo, et in Deum*).' He goes on to say that to believe in God (*credere in Deum*) is to go into God by charity, to believe that God exists shows faith as a theological virtue where God is the object while *credere Deum* is to trust God. In his interpretation Rogers shows how faith in a sense, is also one, as without love of God by the will, trust of God by the intellect will fail. 'Faith perfects (not "terminates") reason . . . Faith perfects the language of natural reason by enabling it to do what it cannot do on its own - point toward the God of faith. . . . And that 'pointing toward' is not even in the light of faith an intelligible 'terminating in' - God is not rendered intelligible even by faith.' Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God*, 176. This viewpoint seems to have been influenced by the earlier scholarship of Victor Preller. See V. Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God*, 181. In a statement wonderfully supportive of our thesis

Consequently human reason is to be used in the exploration of truths of faith.²¹ This line of thought follows inevitably from the positive anthropology Thomas has developed. Humans gifted with reason must use their reason to explore that highest good, God, whom they are destined for. Inevitably *sacra doctrina* can be argumentative. This is particularly true when it comes to *theologia qua sacra doctrina* which uses human skills, fundamentally our gift of speech, to explore more deeply the truths of our faith. It is in this sense of a deepening in understanding that we can speak of an ‘ongoing revelation.’ The concepts of ‘*revelata*’ and ‘*revelabilia*’ are prominent. Discourse about God is fundamental to this activity of *sacra doctrina*. Scripture, and implicitly *sacra doctrina*, are dynamic with depths of meaning yet to be revealed. Sacred scripture and human reason work together in order to further elucidate the truth. This is what Thomas seems to understand by *theologia qua sacra doctrina*.

While the authority of sacred scripture, canonical sacred scripture, is paramount Thomas is aware that truth cannot be limited. The authority of the philosophers is to be used in their area of expertise, (in those questions where they were able to know the truth by natural offspring), and cites St. Paul to illustrate the wonderful inclusivity of Thomas’ thought – ‘For we are also God’s offspring’ (Acts 17:28). However, Thomas is clear, these authorities are ‘extrinsic’ and offer ‘probable arguments’ whereas *sacra doctrina*

properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an **incontrovertible proof**, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as **probable**. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.²²

This insight of Thomas is normative for Christian faith and is a sure safeguard against the proliferation of so-called ‘private’ revelations which occur at various times in Church history. Private revelations may indeed occur, but their value does not lie in the area of universal Church teaching, for it is the *Sacra scriptura* that is divine

Preller later writes that to believe ‘is to think with assent!’ The exclamation mark affords the comment the attention it deserves. *Ibid.*, 191.

²¹ Utitur tamen sacra doctrina etiam ratione humana. (ST I q.1 a. 8 c) The term *etiam* is interesting as it is translated variously as ‘also’ or ‘even,’ two terms which in this context suggest very different understandings. We translate *etiam* as ‘also’ believing this to be in accord with Thomas’ respect for the intellect as the place where the rational creature is most like the Triune God.

²² Auctoritatibus autem canonicae Scripturae utitur proprie, ex necessitate argumentando. Auctoritatibus autem aliorum doctorum ecclesiae, quasi arguendo ex propriis, sed probabiliter. Innititur enim fides nostra revelationi apostolis et prophetis factae, qui canonicos libros scripserunt, non autem revelationi, si qua fuit aliis doctoribus facta. (ST I q.1 a.8 ad 2)

revelation that is the prime source for theological knowledge. The other authorities enjoy a relative importance.

Thomas goes even further in a later question. With astounding wisdom and great courage Thomas believes, and teaches, that it is the meaning, the reality intended and not the specific words of scripture that are important. This remarkable freedom allows him to write

Although the word ‘person’ is not found applied to God in Scripture, either in the Old or New Testament, nevertheless what the word signifies is found to be affirmed of God in many places of Scripture; as that God is the supreme self-subsisting being, and the most perfectly intelligent being. If we could speak of God only in the very terms themselves of Scripture, it would follow that no one could speak about God in any but the original language of the Old or New Testament. The urgency of confuting heretics made it necessary to find new words to express the ancient faith about God. Nor is such a kind of novelty to be shunned; since it is by no means profane, for it does not lead us astray from the sense of Scripture. The Apostle warns us to avoid ‘profane novelties of words’ (1 Tim. 6:20). (ST I q.29 a.3 ad 1)

This remarkable teaching shows how fully Thomas embraces the *scientia* basis of his *doctrina* together with its roots in God’s revelation. Revelation and canonical sacred scriptures are a source of freedom and truths to be gleaned. The pedagogy of the *Summa*, and of all good theology, is to lead the student not to closure, completeness, but to God. It is an activity, a process that takes place through the acquisition of a multitude of languages, and learning the virtues of prudent interpretation.²³ The richness of this vision, and its importance, have yet to be truly owned, and even discussed, by many of God’s faithful.

The Language of Metaphor²⁴

As human discourse about God brings us into the realm of mystery Thomas believes it to be fitting that the language used in dealing with so great a mystery takes the form of metaphor or symbol. The mysteriousness of the object of our study, the divine, is emphasised. Two important points can be taken from article 9, ‘whether holy scripture should use metaphors?’ Firstly Thomas observes that, as it is natural to humankind to take delight in representations, *sacra doctrina* will make use of this natural delight in metaphorical speech to lead people toward the truth. (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 1)²⁵ God works

²³ See Jordan, *Rewritten Theology. Aquinas after His Readers*, 18-32.

²⁴ See C. Ernst, “Metaphor and Ontology in *Sacra Doctrina*,” *The Thomist* 38(1974) 3: 403-425.

²⁵ *Repraesentatio enim naturaliter homini delectabilis est.* (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 1)

within the realm of human possibility. It is also important to note the fluctuating use of *sacra doctrina* and *sacra scriptura*. In keeping with what has been suggested thus far we propose that this usage implies not that the terms are synonymous, but that as the language of metaphor is fittingly used in *sacra scriptura* it is also appropriate for the larger project of *theologia qua sacra doctrina*. This is important and leads to the second point. For Thomas it would be nonsensical to talk about the ‘place and function of Scripture in theology,’ a question often muted in theological, or Church circles.²⁶ *Sacra doctrina*, in its linguistic mode often termed theology, receives its subject matter, and frequently its language, from God’s revelation in scripture. This fact, that *sacra doctrina* finds its most appropriate mode of expression in human language as expressed in sacred scripture, does not for Thomas obscure the truth (ST I q.1 a.8 ad. 2). On the contrary it serves to emphasise God’s confidence in the human language as a fitting medium for God’s revelation. God wishes to communicate with us as we are.²⁷ The metaphorical mode of expression which is frequently used serves to speak to all, whatever their intellectual giftedness – ‘God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature,’ (ST I q.1 a.9 c). This mode of expression also emphasises the fact that God cannot be captured by words. Images and symbols give us an insight into the reality of God while simultaneously illustrating the fact that the divine reality exceeds the resources of human language, ‘for what God is not is clearer to us than what God is . . . God is above whatever we may say or think of God’ (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 3). Indeed metaphorical language often serves to tell us what God is not. In arguing this point the three citations from Dionysius’ *De Caelestia hierarchia* reflect the deep influence of the neo-Platonic meditations of pseudo-Dionysius on Aquinas’ thought.²⁸ Traces of the scientific methodology of Aristotle may also be discerned.²⁹ From the arguments placed in front of us in this article we can better understand Thomas’ remarkably free use of *sacra scriptura* in his theological works. Scripture can be explained with a certain degree of flexibility because of the many possible interpretations of what God has revealed to us (ST I q.1 a.9 ad. 2).

All of this reminds the reader that while God is supremely know-

²⁶ Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 7.

²⁷ See ST III q.61, a.1. The condition of human nature ‘is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible. Now it belongs to Divine providence to provide for each one according as its condition requires.’

²⁸ The introductions by Jaroslav Pelikan (11-24) and Jean Leclercq (25-32) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, are insightful. C. Luibheid, trans. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Introductions by Jaroslav Pelikan and Jean Leclercq. Classics of Western Spirituality. New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987.

²⁹ See C. Ernst, *Multiple Echo. Explorations in Theology*. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 57-75.

able (ST I q.12 a.1 c). ‘God’ always remains a question, God remains ‘above whatsoever we may say or think of God’ (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 3). Therefore, as Thomas writes, many words, many forms of expression are needed to try and explain something of what God is. ‘The ray of revelation is not distinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled,’ on the contrary these metaphors raise the receiver ‘to the knowledge of truths,’ (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 2). In the process of coming to know God change, transformation is implied. Most importantly for all baptised Christians fortunate enough to study theology is Thomas’ insight that this knowledge is given so that ‘others also may receive instruction in these matters.’ (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 2) *Sacra doctrina* is always both a content and an activity. Thomas’ concern that his teachings make the knowledge of God available to all is quite astounding, particularly since at his time the science of education had not yet evolved to any great extent. God provides for everything ‘according to the capacity of its nature’ (ST I q.1 a.9 c), hence metaphors are useful to help the simple (uneducated, *rudes*), (ST I q.1 a.9 c); these very same metaphors, which some suggest hide the truth, on the contrary are ‘useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds.’ (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 2) It is both necessary and useful that sacred doctrine makes use of metaphors for, as we have seen earlier, it is a question of human salvation, (ST I q.1 a.1).

The Author is God

At this stage it is helpful to take a deeper look at Thomas’ understanding of the metaphorical nature of sacred doctrine, of *theologia qua sacra doctrina*. At first glance it seems rather a contradiction in terms – is not God the author? Are we not speaking of the truth? If we allow for a plurality of meaning then we will end up with confusion . . . deception . . . fallacy (ST I q.1 a.10 ob 1). What good is this to the people of God seeking secure teachings in an ever-changing world? The contemporary relevance of this article is striking. The *sed contra* of article 10 at once both profound and clear. Thomas uses the authority of Gregory to remind his students that *sacra doctrina* is a science and as a science it is at once simple and complex – ‘because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery,’ (ST I q.1 a.10 sc). This God whom we have been predestined to know (ST I q.12), and hence to name (ST I q.13), has chosen to reveal himself through the science of *sacra scriptura*, ‘*quod auctor sacrae Scripturae est Deus*,’ (ST I q.1 a.10 c). Faith, and salvation, should all be very straightforward as God’s message has been written down. However Thomas continually alerts the student to the fragility of the human intellect, in particular when it comes to things of God

(ST I q.12 a.1 c).³⁰ For, as we have just seen, ‘what God is not is clearer to us than what God is,’ (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 3). Furthermore it seems that God is not helping us as God might for the teachings received in *sacra scriptura* ‘are not literal descriptions of divine truths’ (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 3). It seems that there is, as mentioned above, a flexibility in the use of words in *sacra scriptura*. The positive aspect of this fact has been alluded to above when the passage from ST I q.29 a.3 ad 1 was cited. The difficulties that arise from a lack of mathematical clarity are discussed in this last article for *sacra scriptura* ‘ought to be able to state the truth without any fallacy,’ (ST I q.1 a.10 ob.1). Conversely, as Thomas shows, *sacra scriptura* does not teach the truth as an end point, a completion, but as a journey, a way along which truth enfolds, and the way is Christ, **the** Truth.

Before bringing us to Christ, the fullness of theology, the Word made flesh, Tomas explains the four senses in which scripture can be read - literal, spiritual, allegorical and anagogical, while reminding the reader that even these four readings do not exhaust the text. The division into four is to be seen as a division made to aid explanation and not to divide scripture. There is no confusion in *sacra Scriptura* because all the senses are founded on the literal one (*Et ita etiam nulla confusio sequitur in sacra Scriptura, cum omnes sensus fundentur super unum, scilicet litteralem*, ST I q.1 a.10 ad.1), where ‘the literal sense is that which the author intends’ (*quia vero sensus litteralis est quem auctor intendit*, ST I q.1 a.10 c). As the author of the text is God we can aver that sacred scripture is necessarily the most effective tool for the transmission of divine revelation.

The method of dividing helps to emphasise the depth of meaning available in sacred scripture, and the great richness accompanying this depth ‘for the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification’ (*quod ipsae res significatae per voces etiam significant aliquid*, ST I q.1 a.10 c). Struck by the wisdom of Thomas’ insight Valkenberg summarises well the meaning of article 10. He writes that

It is possible to give several explanations within the orbit of Christian faith. This theological plurality accepted by Aquinas in his interpretations of Scripture has a theological reason: it is an expression of the insight that the Word of God leaves scope for ‘many mansions’ (John 14:2) because theological language is unable to grasp divine simplicity even in many words. In such a conception, theology is a process characterized by an enduring openness to the Word of God as correction of the ever-defective contextual understanding of the theologian. In other words, dear to Thomas Aquinas, it is a process of following the way shown by Jesus Christ in growing conformity to the unique Word of God.³¹

³⁰ What is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect.

³¹ Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 225.

Conclusion

Having travelled thus far with Thomas I think we can accord with Leo XIII's description of the 'glorious teaching of Thomas Aquinas' and his identification of the wisdom flowing from Thomas as 'a perennial and copious spring.'³² It is the imagery of a spring, a spring of water gushing forth and giving rise to new life, sometimes in totally unexpected places and ways that I would like to finish on. I think Thomas would be pleased with both a literal and a spiritual reading of this imagery. His teachings as we have seen are profound and yet he doesn't see them as definitive. Sacred scripture, whose author is God, provides the only definitive teaching and yet as our minds are limited we can only approach a little with our words and our lives to the truth contained in these revealed teachings. The *sacra doctrinae* contained in *sacra scripturae* are simultaneously revealed **and** revealable. There is still a wealth of material, a more profound knowledge of the Truth, of God to be 'discovered,' perhaps better expressed 'uncovered.' The spring which nourishes us, sacred scripture augmented by numerous other *sacra doctrinae* of varied levels of authority, is meant to help us to grow, as individuals and as Church, so that we might better grow into knowledge of the God 'who is above whatsoever we may say or think of God' (ST I q.1 a.9 ad 3).

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³² Leo XIII, *On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy according to the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor*. Encyclical letter, 4th August, 1879. We cite this text cautiously aware that the neo-Thomism promulgated (and inherited) by this papal encyclical stems from a fantasy of Thomistic unanimity and stability, a certainty of thought that the general tenor of this paper cautions against. See Jordan, *Rewritten Theology. Aquinas after His Readers*, 3-7.