

Acts Commanded by Religion

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It is at least twenty years too late to prevent most Catholic institutions of higher education in Europe and North America from establishing departments of religious studies. It is not, of course, too late to disestablish them or, short of that rather impractical possibility, reform them along lines extending from a quite different set of principles. I believe a particularly good reason for doing no less than the latter is that the present enterprise is a contradiction to genuine Catholic education; simply one more manifestation of the stale secularism which now permeates Catholic schools. And the proof of this claim, as I intend to argue, lies in the fact that it is impossible within the regnant discourse of religious studies to reclaim what St. Thomas meant by "acts commanded by religion." The very notion of religion operating within that enterprise precludes it. The "religion" of religious studies is both too extensive in its initial presumptions but, more importantly, much too narrow in its final application to encompass what St. Thomas spoke of when he wrote on religion.

Perhaps the best route, then, to what St. Thomas meant by religion, and in particular by acts commanded by religion, is getting straight about what he was *not* speaking of. To this end we can look to the most recent *Encyclopedia of Religion*,¹ published under the editorial leadership of Mircea Eliade. The contribution on "religion" by Winston L. King provides just the sort of definition that reflects, not only the current wisdom in the field of religious studies, but a perfect antithesis to the teaching of St. Thomas.

Now those who are familiar with King's entry may believe that already there are grounds for objection; for the claim that it provides a definition of subject matter typical to religious studies flies in the face of an avowal by the article itself to eschew the search for "some distinctive or possible unique essence or set of qualities that distinguish the 'religious' from the remainder of human life." The reason for this avoidance, according to King, is that defining the essence of religion is an activity inherently biased toward Western cultural concerns. In his own words, the attempt to define religion is

the product of the dominant Western religious mode, what is called the Judeo-Christian climate or, more accurately, the theistic inheritance from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The theistic form

of belief in this tradition, even when down-graded culturally, is formative of the dichotomous Western view of religion. That is, the basic structure of theism is essentially a distinction between a transcendent deity and all else, between the creator and his creation, between God and man.²

A prominent exponent of religious studies reviewing the article, praises King's position for, as he sees it, "Winston King wisely steers clear of the minefield of definitions (which have never been known to prove much except verbal facility), though he does almost enter it when . . ."

. . . but the fact of the matter is, it is impossible to use meaningfully words that have no definition; impossible to write an encyclopedia article on religion without some fairly definite notion of where to begin and where to stop. All disclaimers aside, a perusal of King's entry gives the operative, albeit implicit, definition away: his overview of the topic "religion" is first and foremost a discussion on a particular species of *experience*. What, we ask, is the "distinctive or possible unique essence or set of qualities that distinguishes the 'religious' from the remainder of human life"? The article informs us that it is its irreducible origin in religious experience. Very much like the transcendental object *being* within a realist theory of knowing, "experience" appears to operate for King and his coreligionists as a metaphysical ground giving rise to categories of genera and species. But unlike a realist notion of being, this experience is intensely personal, determined only by the authority of the individual subject or group. If we ask how one can distinguish, for example, religion from being bowled over by a terrific sunset or peering over the edge of infinity through substantial amounts of LSD, we are instructed:

It may be said that while ecstatic, transic, and intense aesthetic experiences are found both within religious and non-religious frameworks and have many features in common psychologically, the religious experience is religious precisely because it occurs in a religious context of thought, discipline, and value.⁴

But this would seem to propose nothing more than "Religious experience is experience experienced religiously"—a rather curious statement (yet not without its ideological value, as we shall presently see). If this is so, then the statement is also a profound confusion: for, if the religious experience is religious "precisely because it occurs in a religious context," then "the ecstatic, the transic, and the intensely aesthetic" are indistinguishable from "the religious"—at least, whenever these are

experienced within a religious context. Sometimes drugs are portals of divine revelation (in the experience of Timothy Leary); sometimes not.

The problem with this encyclopedia article on religion is not the claim that its subject matter is reflected in experience. St. Thomas himself understood religion as activity expressive of faith and, presumably, his faith had some experiential basis. The problem is: utilizing a notion of experience to delineate a field of inquiry.

Definitions have as their sole function the circumscription of a certain range of discourse. They are not meant to describe anything, let alone *prove* anything. Definitions are meant only to indicate what sort of things it would be sensible to predicate of the subject defined.⁵ For example, if we define *man* as rational animal, then we do not thereby describe any particular man or woman. But we do claim that it would be sensible to say of this particular woman that she is concerned for the future, or that it is not meaningless to say of her that she has a wonderful sense of humour; whereas we allow that it would be perfect nonsense to predicate such things of a carrot. In the parallel logic of definition by experience, to criticize any particular act as irreligious, unless the perpetrator “experiences” it as sin, must be something like criticizing a carrot for not getting the punch-line; perhaps it is just a naked act of ideational aggression. Either way the criticism is deflected, and, I suppose, that may be the point.

The orientation to experience is, of course, an expression of the philosophical idealism that has become the very aether of modern academics, and it would be fascinating to know why an idealist orientation to the world is part and parcel of modernity. I suspect it has a great deal to do with the ideological distinction between public and private life championed by an emergent capitalist class. In the somewhat narrower field of religious studies that orientation is certainly due to a naive and extremely serviceable belief in academic objectivity. To define religion as a particular activity directed at God—as does St. Thomas—implies that God is an end who in fact exists. The religious studies researcher who adopted such a definition would thereby commit himself or herself to a framework in which the fundamental question for inquiry would be: “Is this activity truly religion; that is, is it activity truly directed at God, or does it merely appear as such?” That distinction hardly makes any sense outside of a prior commitment to a belief in the existence of a god distinguishable from all else; it would, in turn, make religious studies dependent in some measure upon a theological tradition, and would thus strike at the foundations of the legitimation that religious studies have tried to establish for themselves from their inception. But to say that religion is activity rooted in the *experience* of transcendence seems to let

the researcher off the hook of commitment. He or she can remain outside the judgement of what is to be judged; remain simply the disinterested and neutral observer of what others are claiming to experience.

But this is nonsense. Departments of religious studies may advertise their endeavour as the “scholarly neutral and non-advocative study of multiple religious traditions,”⁶ but this self-congratulatory rhetoric of objectivity and neutrality which continues to dog the enterprise of religious studies is mere wishful thinking. It is built upon the naive presupposition that “multiple religious traditions” exist, like so many brightly coloured stones upon the ground just waiting to be collected by the passing observer. Yet the question to be asked of the researcher claiming to encounter these cross-cultural forms of religious experience is: Experienced by whom? It is rather doubtful that the televangelist calling upon the name of Jesus to cast out demons is having experiences in which he or she would find room for the Singapore shopkeeper offering incense before the image of an ancestor. Quite the contrary: if the televangelist should happen to include the shopkeeper’s actions in her experience, she undoubtedly will experience them as indicative of someone in need of rescue by religion.

If the subject matter of religious studies is determined by experience, then it is only in the experience of a relatively few individuals, notably academics employed in religious studies, that such matter exists. It is primarily in the private experiences of religionists that “calling upon the Name” and offering worship to ancestors are analogues for erecting departments. Yet if such matters are religious only because these experience them as such, then on that score the legitimation of religious studies rests upon a rather thin claim. There are researchers, after all, who do not experience such experiences as religious, and accordingly they are constantly “reducing” what is to others an experience *sui generis* to non-religious cultural elements. They have the incorrigible habit of experiencing religion as sexual sublimation or political legitimation. In other words, in the metaphysics of experience sometimes religion is not religion; sometimes religious experience is merely superstition. Sometimes it is no more than a matter for psychoanalysis or a target for a well-supplied armourey.

St. Thomas did not think the question of experience had much value for enabling one to discern religion from non-religion. This is because when St. Thomas spoke of religion he was referring first and foremost to an act toward another, and secondarily to a moral virtue rendering the person habitually predisposed to this act.⁷ Being an act towards another, religion falls under the general discussion on justice: St. Thomas defined religion as the part of justice which seeks to render unto God the

reverence that is His due under the sole aspect that He is the sole creator and governor of the world.⁸ And in determining the religious character of an act, the matter to be discerned is not how the subject is affected by his or her external operations, but only “according to the becomingness of the thing [God] itself.”⁹

Religion is an act of justice. Religion is justice towards God (or at least as close as we can come to justice) and is not therefore a matter determined by personal experience, but rather, it is a quality of action. This would be perfectly obvious if we were discussing justice in other arenas. For example, it is entirely beside the point whether or not I experience justice in my actions, or even if I intend justice, when determining whether or not the wage I pay my employees is fair. Just so, whether or not I experience myself as standing before a sacred mystery, and even if I do not set out to do an act of religion, my actions toward God can be characterized as either just (religious) or unjust (irreligious). It does not matter even if I am foolish enough to claim that my actions do not have God as their end. It is true, of course, that if I did not experience my existence as related to that “which all men call God,” I would be incapable of *knowing* that my actions could be religious or irreligious. If I did not experience the existence of my employees, it is equally impossible that I could *know* that the money my accountant keeps subtracting from the ledgers could be just or unjust in its measure. Nevertheless, all this does not vitiate the legitimacy of a judgement concerning the justness of the wages paid, unless one is of a mind to claim that even these matters exist as a function of individual or corporate experience. But in that case we shall find ourselves back to the question of a well-supplied armoury.

To return to the formal definition provided by St. Thomas: rendering unto God what is His due under the *sole* aspect that He is the *sole* creator and governor of the world; it may seem to students of religion overly narrow.¹⁰ The emphasis upon one particular relation of the world to one particular god (*sic*)¹¹ may very well have a disconcerting result: it may prove very difficult to *find* authentic religion in the world. It may turn out that the shopkeeper offering incense to ancestors or the televangelist casting out demons, or even the privately pious modern academic, has nothing to do with religion.

Yet before jumping to conclusions as to the rarity of religion, it is important to remember that we cannot determine the extension of religion from its formal specificity alone. Definitions are obtained through abstracting from the matter in which things exist, and as it turns out, when considering the latter, St. Thomas recognizes that religion designates an activity that is coextensive with the entire range of human activity.¹² It is in his discussion on acts commanded by religion that this becomes clear.

But in order to understand his teaching in this regard we must be clear about the unique conditions determining any discussion on acting towards God. For despite whatever appearances our prayers may give, there is a very important difference between acting toward God and acting toward an employee; a distinction which, had it been acknowledged above, would have exposed what appeared to be an analogy to be merely a poor metaphor. The problem, simply put, is: employees are beings in the universe; God is not. You can find employees standing alongside rocks, trees, automobiles, and weapons of mass destruction; you cannot find God there. Spend your whole life cataloguing the cosmic inventory—spend as many lives as you please—and still you would never, could never, add God to the growing list. And so, if God is not one more thing in the universe, it is rather difficult to understand how it is possible even for religion to exist.³

The key to solving this problem is understanding what is meant when God is referred to as last end.⁴ The last end to human existence cannot exist alongside other particular goals, something like the finish line of a race which cannot be simply one more turn in the course. Unlike the other parts of the course, it is upon the finish line which every step along the way depends *so as to be a race*. Yet even so, God is final end in a manner that is much more fundamental than can be grasped through the relation of parts of a race to their finish. For unlike God, the finish line is not the reason for the race itself and therefore misses precisely what is meant by the last end. It is not enough to scratch a line in the sand in order to get someone to cross it. Nor are proximate reasons enough to explain the runner's haste. It is not enough to say that to the winner go honours and riches; one is still left asking the reason for straining after reverence and gold. No, in the last analysis, if it makes any sense at all to run a race—or to do anything, for that matter—then there must be some unique goal which is not identifiable with any particular goal or even the sum total of all particular goals but which nevertheless also is not attainable outside of those goals: that which is called the last end of human existence. The alternative to supposing this is positing the existence of actions which, in their ultimate structure, emerge outside of reason—a condition sometimes mistakenly identified as freedom. To say that God is the last end (which is simply another way of saying that God is the sole creator and governor of the world) is to say that God is the ultimate reason for why things exist. In terms of the rational being, that is, the being who possesses him or herself in freedom, it is to say that he or she is indeed free, acting within a context that provides and preserves the meaning of action. Outside of this context there is no freedom.

Leaving aside the question of freedom and returning to the main line

of the argument, it is apparent that one consequence of the nature of God thus understood is that religion, defined as activity seeking to render the honour due the creator and governor of the world, is inseparable from all other activity. Any action can be performed so as to bring honour to that which is responsible for our being. Any action can be performed with acceptance and thankfulness for reason and freedom. And therefore, because there could never be activity separable from religion, St. Thomas concludes that the formal definition of religion could never be restricted in its application to anything less than an entire life comprised of what he calls acts commanded by religion.¹⁵ The term religion most properly refers to an entire life consecrated to God.

Education can *become* religion (justice) if the final purpose of education is to glorify and honour God. Conversely, to the extent that education aims only to produce sophisticated cogs in the State machine it is irreligious and, moreover, irrational. But this latter possibility is not an expression of the nature of education, the way it would be in the metaphysics of experience; it is the expression of moral failing on the part of educators and students. To fail to see that education is itself one more act to be subsumed under the highest of moral virtues is to fail to give education itself its due character. Ultimately it is to capitulate to the secularism of educational institutions in a disordered society.

Religion is an expression of faith for St. Thomas. But when the fundamental basis for speaking of religion is experience rather than being, a peculiar possibility opens up. Religion comes to exist only insofar and only wheresoever as it is “experienced.” Going to church is religious because it is experienced religiously; going to the bank is not religious because it is experienced fiscally. And so, as one learns within the wisdom of modern religious studies, while it is true that *some* people or sects experience a heavily financial character to their religion, or a heavily religious character to their finances, the financial tie is not a universal relationship and therefore too exclusive for isolating the essence of religious experience. What is needed then is something that can get beyond a narrow provincialism to the heart of the religious—East, West, high and low. What is needed is a core common to Christian, Buddhist, Shinto, Jain, Muslim, Jewish, primitive, new-age, and civic religions. As the article on religion in the *Encyclopedia* concludes, what is needed is the recognition that they are all experienced as religion.

But for St. Thomas it is precisely when we are on the way to the bank and similar places that the question of religion finally arises in its fullness. If we are speaking only of what is religion in the strictest sense, then we are speaking first of prayer and adoration. Secondly, we are speaking of the external expressions of these purely immanent activities: sacrifice,

oblations, vows, and the like. However, as noted above, this strict definition is, like all definitions, an abstraction from the order in which the thing defined exists; and thus, if we ask what is religion as perfectly expressed in the matter of human existence, we find that it is an entire life. In other words, I go to the bank for a number of reasons, all of which are expressions of my relation to the ground of my being. I may not experience going to the bank as a matter of justice to God (and, incidentally, therefore justice to my fellow man); I thereby may even think it possible to establish a department of economics within a college that can address issues of policy separate from issues of prayer and devotion. But as far as St. Thomas is concerned, my thinking is simply an expression of superstition. I am confusing God with one more thing in the universe; one more concern.

It is with this realization that appears what is at stake in the decision to model the study of religion after the modern secular enterprise or along lines put forward by St. Thomas. What is at stake here is the range of things we are willing to admit as belonging to the discussion on religion. To put this more bluntly: there is a political struggle to control Catholic education being fought by partisans of various modernist and post-modernist positions united, if in little else, against the only theory of religion capable of making intelligible the unique identity of that education (and the latter appears to be down for the count).¹⁶ It is not a question of word-mongering; not simply a matter for a truncated traditionalism that cannot see anything outside of its canon of authorities. It is itself a question of acting toward the ground of all action. *How we define religion is itself a matter of religion.* Having already more or less ceded the struggle to its enemies, Catholic universities and colleges have aided and abetted the marginaling of religion, at the same time making the discussion of God arcane and trivial. They have perpetrated injustice.

Authentic Catholic education is easy to spot today. Not because of its prevalence—it would be a challenge to name even a handful of Catholic schools that are Catholic in any interesting sense of the term—but because it stands in marked contrast and opposition to the secular model. It has at its heart, to borrow some sage advice from the character Curly in the Billy Crystal movie *City Slickers*, “Just one thing.” The radical character of Catholic intellectual life stems from its being clear about the one thing above all else it aims at. That “just one thing” giving purpose and direction to Catholic education is religion.

In authentic Catholic education, religion is never confused with some extracurricular realm or experience that surrounds academic life and merely tempers it through its effect upon the character and interpersonal life of academics. It is never confused with something separable from

composition and analysis. In harmony with St. Thomas, authentic Catholic education realizes that intellectual life carried out in a manner befitting the dignity of the human person *becomes* religion. And therefore any academic pursuit failing to be informed by religion is expressive of moral failing; a waste of time, a waste of human life, and a most serious derogation of what belongs to God, our gratitude for His Being.

- 1 *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, editor in chief (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987).
- 2 *Op. cit.*, Volume 11, p. 282.
- 3 Besides the assertion that the "Western view of religion" is dichotomous, I have no quarrel with this statement. In fact, I think it simply reflects a quite fundamental awareness necessary for maintaining any rationality when speaking of God. I can't imagine the point of worshipping a god who is not distinct from all else. Indeed, I can't imagine *anything* that is not distinct from all else: being distinct is the minimal requirement for being a thing. But the article then goes on to equate this metaphysical attainment with a "separation of the religious from all else," and this is simply nonsense. While there has been an attempt to separate religion from all else and thus render it inconsequential, the agent of this separation is not traditional theism, but the secularism that now informs our society; and one expression of this separation in academic life is the existence of departments of religious studies. Yet before we pursue that matter it is necessary to first grasp what the article on religion means by religion.
- 3 Eric J. Sharpe, "The Study of Religion in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*" *The Journal of Religion* 70:340-352, JI 1990.
- 4 *Op. cit.*, p. 286.
- 5 See Herbert McCabe, "Categories," in *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Anthony Kenny, comp. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), pp. 54-92.
- 6 Ray L. Hart, "Religious and Theological Studies in American Higher Education: a Pilot Study," *JAAR* LIX/4, Winter, 1991, p. 716. See also, Peter Donovan, "Neutrality in Religious Studies," *Religious Studies* 26/1, March 1990, pp. 103-116.
- 7 I first became aware of the radical difference in orientation to the subject of religion by modern religionists and St. Thomas through an article by Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "Jacques Maritain, St. Thomas and the Philosophy of Religion," *University of Ottawa Quarterly* 51/4, 1981, pp. 644-653.
- 8 *S.T. I*, 81, 3.
- 9 *S. T. I-II*, 60, 3.
- 10 The specificity of the definition, however, is very important to St. Thomas' purposes of distinguishing, on the one hand, religion from other virtues, and on the other, religion from idolatry or superstition:

Since the word 'servant implies relationship to a lord or master, wherever there is a special type of dominion there is a special type of subjection. Clearly, since God makes all things and has dominion over them all, lordship belongs to God in a special and singular manner. Hence, a special type of service or subjection is due to God and religion renders it. This special form of service was called '*latría*' by the Greeks (*S.T. II-II*, 81, 4, r.3).

"Religion," writes Gilson, "is not to be confused with any other virtue. And this has to be taken in the strongest sense. It does not merely mean that the virtue of religion consists in honouring God more than anything else. The goodness of the infinite being is not only *very much greater* than that of the best of finite beings, it is *essentially something else*. To honour God as He should be honoured, an *essentially different* honour must be paid Him. This is the full sense of the expression. Its force is only too easily lost by repetition. The virtue of religion consists in rendering God the homage due to *Him alone*" (Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*).

New York: Random House, 1956, p. 334).

- 11 As Herbert McCabe (I believe) once phrased it: "The God of freedom, Yahweh, is no god. There are no gods, they are so many delusions."
- 12 This is because, as St. Thomas says, a species of virtue can pass into another if it has the latter as its end: *S.T. II-II*, 181, 2, r.3.
- 13 St. Thomas resolved this problem by distinguishing between the object of religion and its end. Religion does not have God as its proper object, and therefore the inability of human actions to be proportioned to God does not make religion an impossibility, just as the impossibility of jumping as high as the moon does not make the attempt impossible, for the object of the act remains the same, whether or not the goal is accomplished. Cf. *S.T. I-II*, 62, 2; *II-II*, 57, 1, r.3.
- 14 See Alan Donagan, *Human Ends and Human Action: An Exploration in St. Thomas's Treatment* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1985).
- 15 cf. *S.T. II-II*, 81, aa. 1,4; *II-II*, 186, 1.
- 16 I believe that Huston Smith (*JAAR* LVIII/4, Winter 1990, pp. 653–670) is correct in his judgement that both modernism and post-modernism are incapable of illuminating the subject of religion. What I disagree with, however, is his remedy: not only does it rely upon a metaphysical dualism between this world and another—how else can one make sense of his assertion that the supernatural is a realm having the capacity to "intervene in orders that are below it in ways that are comparable to the way anxiety can influence the functioning of a digestive tract to cause ulcers" (emphasis added)?—but it also relies upon the notion of "experience" to distinguish the authentically religious from all else—thus his desire to return to William James, as well as equate the subject of metaphysics with "worldviews". The present paper contends that there is no "other world" from which "this world" can be disengaged. There is, in fact, one world, the deepest structures of which are captured in "God-talk."

Indissolubility, Divorce and Holy Communion

An Open Letter to Archbishop Saier, Bishop Lehmann, and Bishop Kasper

Your joint pastoral letter regarding ministry to the divorced and "remarried" (hereinafter *PL*), dated July 10, 1993, and part IV of the accompanying principles of pastoral care (*PPC*) have been translated and published by *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* (March 10, 1994), pp. 670–76. Our letter is addressed to you personally, but is being sent also to certain other prelates and published, not only because this matter concerns the entire Church but also because of the publicity it already has received.

We focus on only one of the things you treat: a divorced and