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Theology in Praise: Aquinas on the Psalms

Teologia w uwielbieniu: Akwinata o Psalmach

Abstract: The author discusses the reasons for his interest in the role of Scripture in the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, even if his academic teaching and research in different contexts led him to focus on different topics. He shows the relevance of this Scriptural and Thomistic theology. The author demonstrates how Aquinas's focus on the mysteries of the life of Christ enabled him to teach a course that analyses musical and theological interpretations of these mysteries, even by non-Christian artists. Another course on theological interpretations of Scripture brought together theological and exegetical viewpoints in order to highlight the unity of Catholic theology with Scripture as its soul. Finally, the author gives an analysis of the Christological interpretation of the Psalms, and argues that how Aquinas in his commentary on the Psalms juxtaposes different forms of interpretation in order to show the fullness of the Word of God inspired by the Spirit that encompasses the different mysteries of the Christian faith.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, Scripture, mysteries of the life of Christ, theological interpretation, Christological interpretation, Psalms, theology and music, theology in praise

Abstrakt: W niniejszym artykule autor omawia powody swojego zainteresowania rolą Pisma Świętego w teologii św. Tomasza z Akwinu, mimo że jego działalność naukowo-badawcza była zorientowana na inne zagadnienia. W pierwszej części ukazano znaczenie tomistycznej teologii opartej na Piśmie Świętym. W dalszej części pokazano, w jaki sposób nauczanie św. Tomasza o tajemnicach życia Chrystusa umożliwiło autorowi prowadzenie wykładu analizującego muzyczne i teologiczne interpretacje tych tajemnic, nawet przez artystów niechrześcijańskich. Inny wykład św. Tomasza, poświęcony teologicznym interpretacjom Pisma Świętego, łączył teologiczne i egzegetyczne perspektywy w celu podkreślenia jedności teologii katolickiej z Pismem Świętym jako jej duszą. Na koniec przedstawiono analizę chrystologicznej interpretacji Psalmów, argumentując, że Tomasz z Akwinu w swoim komentarzu do Psalmów zestawia różne formy interpretacji, aby pokazać pełnię słowa Bożego natchnionego przez Ducha, które obejmuje różne tajemnice wiary chrześcijańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Tomasz z Akwinu, Pismo Święte, tajemnice życia Chrystusa, interpretacja teologiczna, interpretacja chrystologiczna, Psalmy, teologia i muzyka, teologia w uwielbieniu

In this contribution to the 800th commemoration of the birth of St. Thomas Aquinas, I want to show how the engagement with the theology of Thomas Aquinas has been formative for my work as a theologian engaged in interreligious dialogue and comparative theology with Muslims. Working on the boundaries between theology and religious studies, I have always been aware how Aquinas has helped me to focus on the specific nature of Catholic theology and its sources. Looking back on forty years of teaching and research, I hope to show how Aquinas has accompanied me in teaching about theological interpretations of Scripture as a way to honor the commendation in *Dei Verbum* that "the study of the Sacred Page is as it were the soul of Sacred Theology."[1] In the main part of my contribution, I want to look at Aquinas's own practice in the classroom by considering the ways in which he speaks about Christ in his commentary on the Psalms.

Words of the Living God Revisited

It is now more than forty years ago since I started the research that was completed by the public defense of my dissertation in 1990. When I started to study theology and religious studies in the Netherlands in 1972, there was among students hardly any interest in the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, let alone in the biblical sources of his theology. Yet, one of the professors, Ferdinand de Grijs (1931–2011), convinced some of us that the opinion that Thomas Aquinas would no longer be relevant for modern theology is a misconception that should be corrected.[2] He also remarked that many theologians only write about the

1 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (1965), no. 23.

2 The Flemish theologian Edward Schillebeeckx O.P. is sometimes quoted as saying that after the Second Vatican Council his way of doing theology changed to such an extent that Thomas Aquinas no longer is an eminent source of inspiration. However, I think that he underestimates the influence of Thomas Aquinas on his later theology, see Pim Valkenberg, "The Thomistic Roots of Schillebeeckx's Theology," in *The T&T Clark Handbook of Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Stephan van Erp and Daniel Minch (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 19–28.

way in which other theologians talk about God (*oratio obliqua)*, thereby avoiding to speak about God themselves (*oratio recta*). Even though I was certainly interested in contemporary forms of contextual theology and wrote my MA thesis on Mary Daly, I decided to join the newly constituted research group on Thomas Aquinas in 1981.[3] In our research we wanted to stress the theological elements in Aquinas's work, and my PhD project on the Scriptural resources of Aquinas's theology was one of the first products of this explicitly theological approach. The ecumenical context of our work, a relatively small group of Catholic theologians working alongside and sometimes together with a much larger group of Reformed theologians, certainly was an important motive that urged us to show that it would be a grave misunderstanding to characterize Aquinas's theology as "philosophical" as opposed to "biblical." More specifically, we wanted to show the Scriptural nature of Aquinas's theology as a contribution to the history of exegesis and ecumenical relationships, including the relationship with Judaism.[4] At that time, systematic theology and biblical exegesis constituted two rather different approaches in the study of theology that were often separated by thick walls, even though some theologians tried to overcome these barriers.[5] Much later, when I started to work as a Catholic systematic theologian in the United States, I was pleasantly surprised that the collaboration with exegetes was much more fruitful in the context of American Catholic colleges and universities.[6] I will come back to this context and to my own attempt to build

3 About the history of the Werkgroep Thomas van Aquino, later Thomas Instituut te Utrecht (at Tilburg University), see the website of the Thomas Instituut: http://www.thomasinstituut.org/index.php?info_id=33 (accessed May 28, 2025). The theological backgrounds are discussed in Herwi Rikhof, "Thomas at Utrecht," in *Contemplating Aquinas. On the Varieties of Interpretation*, ed. Fergus Kerr (London: SCM Press, 2003), 103–36. Along the same lines, Pim Valkenberg, "Thomas Aquinas and the Hidden Presence of God," in *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership*, Currents of Encounter 26 (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2006), 213–19; Pim Valkenberg, "Everything Related to God," in *The Enduring Significance of Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Honor of Henk Schoot and Rudi te Velde*, ed. Anton ten Klooster, Harm Goris, and Marcel Sarot, Publications of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, NS 21 (Leuven: Peeters, 2023), 193–201.

4 Ferdinand de Grijs regularly told me about the many theological conversations that he had with his colleague Rabbi Yehuda Aschkenasy, Professor of Talmudic Studies at the Catholic Theological Universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht.

5 The book *Jezus, het verhaal van een levende* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1974) by E. Schillebeeckx is often mentioned as an attempt to overcome these barriers. The three books about Jesus by Joseph Ratzinger written between 2007 and 2012 while he was Pope Benedict XVI are great examples of such an attempt.

6 I wrote about this in my contribution to a book about the Jesus-books by Pope Benedict mentioned in the previous footnote. See Pim Valkenberg, "'Die Schrift mit der Kirche

courses based on a theological reading of Scripture. But first I want to come back to the reason why I never gave up my study of Thomas Aquinas and his focus on God as central topic of *sacra doctrina,* even when circumstances led me to different contexts and methods of studying religion. Soon after I defended my dissertation in 1990, I was asked to prepare a new curriculum of studies at the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. The administration wanted to focus on interreligious dialogue according to the document *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent magisterial documents. The two most relevant dialogue partners in the context of the Netherlands were Jews and Muslims, and while I had become acquainted with Hebrew and some Jewish exegesis in my own education, I did not know Arabic and could therefore not get access to the sources of a growing Muslim population in the Netherlands.[7] While I started studying Arabic and later Qur'an and Hadith at the Department of Eastern Languages and Cultures in Nijmegen, I met David Burrell C.S.C. (1933–2023) from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, and discovered that he was a scholar who studied Thomas Aquinas with a view to relationships with Jews and Muslims in the Middle Ages. He was a friend of F. de Grijs and an associate of our research group. A well-known scholar of Thomas Aquinas, he argued that it is important to pay attention to the specific language that Aquinas uses when talking about God. He stresses that Aquinas in his God-talk reflects on the nature and the limits of human language and knowledge. This "linguistic" approach to Aquinas influenced the members of the Utrecht research group to stress the "hidden presence of God" in Aquinas, which resonated with D. Burrell's book on *Knowing the Unknowable God*, where he researched the influence of Ibn Sina and Maimonides on Aquinas's God-talk.[8] Quite shortly

lesen': Joseph Ratzinger, die Tradition der Geheimnisse des Lebens Jesu und 'theologische Exegese' in Amerika," in *Der Jesus des Papstes: Passion, Tod und Auferstehung im Disput*, ed. Hermann Häring (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), 37–54.

7 In the research for my dissertation, I discovered the relevance of some of the Jewish interpretations for my understanding of what Thomas Aquinas writes about the resurrection "on the third day" (Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis*, ed. Maria Fabianus Moos, vol. 3 [Parisiis: P. Lethielleux, 1956], d. 21, q. 2, a. 2 and Thomas Aquinas, *Tertia pars Summae theologiae*, vol. 11–12, Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII P. M. edita [Rome: Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1863], q. 53, a. 2 [hereafter *STh III*]). See Wilhelmus G. B. M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Publications of the Aquinas Instituut te Utrecht, NS 6 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 61, 85–86.

8 David B. Burrell, *Aquinas, God and Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979); David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn Sina, Maimonides,*

after I defended my dissertation, Burrell gave a lecture in Utrecht about his ongoing research on divine creation and human freedom, and his lecture was published in the Yearbook of the Thomas Instituut.[9] I started studying his work on this topic and met him again when I was invited, together with my colleague Carlo Leget, by Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering to attend a conference on "Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas" in Michigan in 2001.[10] David took me and another friend and Aquinas scholar, Frederick ("Fritz") Bauerschmidt to a Middle Eastern restaurant in Dearborn to discuss possibilities of further collaboration on Aquinas and other religions between the three of us, and this encounter would soon bear fruit, first in a special issue on "Thomas Aquinas in Dialogue," edited by F. Bauerschmidt together with Jim Fodor, in which D. Burrell wrote about "Thomas Aquinas and Islam," while I wrote, together with my colleague Henk Schoot from the Utrecht research group, about "Thomas Aquinas and Judaism."[11]

The second fruit of this encounter was my visiting the two scholars in their academic environments, first Burrell at the University of Notre Dame during my sabbatical leave in the Fall of 2004, and next Bauerschmidt and his colleagues at Loyola University Maryland during the academic year 2006/2007.

When the chair of the department, Prof. Stephen Fowl, called me to ask whether I would be available as a visiting scholar of Christian theology with specialization in theological relations with Muslims, I was happy to respond because I had used Fowl's work in my dissertation to establish a reflection about a contemporary parallel with Aquinas's theological exegesis.[12]

Aquinas (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986). For the Utrecht research group, see footnote 2.

9 David B. Burrell, "Freedom of Creatures of a Free Creator," *Jaarboek 1990 Thomas Instituut te Utrecht*, 1991, 5–23. More backgrounds in three of Burrell's books: David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); David B. Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); David B. Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Chichester: Wiley, 2011).

10 Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, eds., *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005). My contribution (pages 277–89) was on the influence of the *Lectura super Ioannem 20–21* on the *Summa Theologiae*.

11 David B. Burrell, "Thomas Aquinas and Islam," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2004): 71–89, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2004.00243.x; Henk Schoot and Pim Valkenberg, "Thomas Aquinas and Judaism," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2004): 51–70, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2004.00242.x.

12 See Stephen E. Fowl, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997);

Theological Interpretations of Scripture

During my five years of teaching at Loyola University Maryland, I was able to participate in a few endeavors to reconnect Catholic theology with its biblical and patristic sources. One of them was the theological reading of Scripture, another the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, originally developed by Jewish scholars who wanted to reconnect contemporary philosophical traditions with the Talmudic resources of Jewish exegesis. Reading Scriptures together in a slow and careful way was the key to theological and interreligious conversations grounded in respectful analysis of the Word of God. Even though I started to focus my research more and more on Christian – Muslim relations, I still identified as a systematic theologian educated in the Thomistic tradition. While the majority of scholars who engage with Islam wish to do so while bracketing any theological presuppositions, it was my conviction that my theological background helped me to understand the religion of Muslims better because the God-centeredness of Aquinas's theology enabled me to glimpse a bit of what Islam as God-aligned life is about.[13] More specifically, the method of comparative theology helped me to find resonances in my own Christian tradition to what the *Qur'an* has to say about Jews and Christians as People of Scripture.[14]

While teaching in the United States of America between 2006 and 2023 I used Thomas Aquinas and his theology about God the Savior in two different courses. The first started as a course in the general education program of undergraduate students with a focus on the relations between theology and music. The course focused on the notion of the mysteries of the life of Christ, as expressed by Aquinas in *STh III* q. 27 to 59, diversified into the entrance of Christ into this life, the progress of his life, the end of his life and the exaltation after this life. I taught this course always in the spring semester so that it could follow the liturgical cycle from Christmas and Epiphany to Easter and Pentecost. Alongside theological texts (by Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius Loyola,

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Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998). See also Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God,* 5–7, 221–27.

13 See Pim Valkenberg, *Renewing Islam by Service: A Christian View of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017); Pim Valkenberg, "A Faithful Christian Interpretation of Islam," in *Faithful Interpretations: Truth and Islam in Catholic Theology of Religions*, ed. Philip Geister and Gösta Hallonsten (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 165–82.

14 Pim Valkenberg, *No Power over God's Bounty: A Christian Commentary on the "People of Scripture" in the Qur'ān* (Leuven: Peeters, 2021).

among others) I gave musical examples, starting with the *Messiah* by Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759) and ending with the *Matthäuspassion* by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). But I included modern Christian composers such as Arvo Pärt (born 1935) and Sir James MacMillan (born 1959) as well. Apart from these Christian resources, I enjoyed analyzing the works of two Jewish composers who gave musical interpretations of the Christian tradition: the *Mass* (1971) by Leonard Bernstein, and *la Pasión según San Marcos* (2010) by Osvaldo Golijov. In this analysis, a basic theological idea expressed by Aquinas in his commentary on the Psalms – but by Church fathers such as Augustine before him as well – that the Christological interpretation of Scripture refers not to Christ as an individual, but to head and body, that is Christ and the members of the Church, opened my eyes to some aspects of the communal understanding expressed by Bernstein and Golijov (in different manners) in their interpretations of the mysteries of the life of Christ.[15]

While the course about the mysteries of the life of Christ was an expansion of the contents discussed in my dissertation, the course on theological interpretations of Scripture was an expansion of the method in the dissertation. At the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., doctoral students in the area of Historical and Systematic Theology requested a course to be added to their regular program that would integrate approaches to Scripture from exegetical and systematic theological perspectives. Even though I taught most of my courses in the area of Religion and Culture where interreligious dialogue and the relations between Christianity and Islam were my main focus, I was a member of the area of Historical and Systematic Theology as well. Together with my colleague Ian Boxall, professor of New Testament, I was able to schedule a course on theological interpretations of the Gospel according to Matthew in the fall semester of 2019. We started with a theoretical introduction, centered on the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* (1965) by the Second Vatican Council, and the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) by the Pontifical Biblical Commission.[16] We also discussed modern theological approaches to Scriptures in interreligious perspective.[17] But the main part of the course was

[15] See Pim Valkenberg, "'How Easily Things Get Broken': Leonard Bernstein and Oswaldo Golijov on the Body and Blood of Christ," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 41 (March 2024): 20–26.

[16] We used Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture: Dei Verbum*, Rediscovering Vatican II (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), and J. L. Houlden, ed., *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1995).

[17] David F. Ford and Frances Clemson, eds., in "Interreligious Reading After Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 4 (2013): 1–229. For publications by Stephen Fowl, see footnote 12.

devoted to Scriptural interpretations of lectures from the Gospel according to Matthew. For an exegetical approach that focuses on the history of interpretation (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of Matthew, we used I. Boxall's recent commentary, while we used The Church's Bible series for Patristic commentaries, and Aquinas for a Medieval interpretation.[18] While the students read these sources, I took the opportunity to read the *Catena Aurea* as well, to see how Aquinas's selection of Patristic sources related to his own commentary on Matthew.[19]

The students asked for this course to be reiterated in 2021 and 2023, but this time no exegete was available to co-teach the course with me, so I decided to fulfill my old wish to teach on the Psalms. In the meantime, my study of the Qur'an, and a number of discussions with my colleague Robert D. Miller II, O.F.S. (1966–2023) had convinced me that the study of the Psalms was a fruitful way not only to discuss the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament with the students, but also to include my Muslim students in this course.[20] In this article, I cannot discuss this extensively, so I need to limit myself to three short references. The German scholar Angelika Neuwirth stresses the importance of the Psalms as a text that often offers the strongest resonance to the language of the Qur'an.[21] Peter Ho has studied the first Psalms

[18] Ian Boxall, *Matthew Through the Centuries*, Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Chichester: Wiley, 2019); Daniel H. Williams, ed. and trans., *Matthew: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, The Church's Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018); Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 1–12*; chs. 13–28, trans. Jeremy Holmes and Beth Mortensen, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, 33–34 (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013).

[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Gospel of St. Matthew*, vol. 1 of *Catena Aurea*: *Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, ed. John Henry Newman (London: John Henry Parker, 1841), Reprint (London: Aeterna Press, 2014).

[20] In 2022, Bob Miller discussed with me the plans for his sabbatical leave in South Africa during the academic year 2023/2024, focused on the reading of the Psalms in five religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Rastafari, Baha'i). Due to his untimely death, he was never able to follow up on these plans. Among Miller's books touching upon the topic of the theological reading of Scripture, are: Robert D. Miller, *The Psalms as Israel's Prayer and Our Own*, Christian Heritage Rediscovered 2 (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2013); Robert D. Miller, *Many Roads Lead Eastward: Overtures to Catholic Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016).

[21] See, among other works, Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010); Angelika Neuwirth, *Early Meccan Suras: Poetic Prophecy*, vol. 1 of *The Qur'an, Text and Commentary*, trans. Samuel Wilder (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

in comparison to the first chapters of the Qur'an in some detail.[22] Since both the Psalms and the Qur'an are texts that are used in prayer, Emilio Platti points out that the Dominicans, when praying in Arabic, often use prayer formulas from the Psalms that are very much reminiscent of the prayer formulas from the Qur'an. He points out that Psalms and Qur'an have a common spiritual foundation in their vision of God and humankind.[23]

Since a Christian understanding of the Psalms should include their historical setting as the book of praise (*sefer ha-tehillim*) of the Jewish faith communities, I used the translation by Robert Alter and the Jewish Study Bible to get access to Jewish readings and interpretations of the Psalms.[24] For the exegetical interpretations, we used works by Walter Brueggemann and Susan Gillingham, while we used works by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas for the theological interpretations.[25] A fascinating aspect of these courses in 2021 and 2023 was the different ways in which the students – in majority, priests, religious of several orders and congregations, and some students with Eastern Christian, Jewish and Muslim backgrounds – were able to relate the classical theological interpretations with their own spiritual life and preaching.

22 Peter Ho, "The Successful Life: Comparing the Opening Chapters of the Psalms and the Qur'an," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 33 (2 2023): 203–20, https://doi.org/10.2143/SID.33.2.3292475.

23 Emilio Platti, *Islam, van nature een vijand?*, 2nd ed., Christenen in dialoog (Averbode: Altiora, 2007), 25–27. When visiting and praying with the Dominican community at the Institut dominicain d'*é*tudes orientales in Cairo in September 2024, I noticed this spiritual resonance as well. The community in Cairo was the spiritual home of Emilio Platti, O.P. (1943–2021).

24 Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

25 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985); Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, vol. 1 (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012); Susan Gillingham, *A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, vol. 2 of *Psalms Through the Centuries* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2020). Saint Augustine, *Essential Expositions of the Psalms*, ed., with an introduction, by Michael Cameron, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 2015); Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007); Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms: Rigans Montes: Hic Est Liber*, trans. Albert Marie Surmanski, Maria Veritas Marks, and John R. Gilhooly, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 29 (Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute; Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021).

Aquinas and the Christological Interpretation of the Psalms

Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the Psalms shows similar relationships between teaching, praying, and preaching. One of the most significant prayers in the life of the Church is Ps 50, *Miserere mei, Deus,* arguably the most famous of the penitential Psalms.[26] In one of its first publications, the Utrecht research group on Thomas Aquinas gave a wide-ranging analysis of guilt and forgiveness in the theology of Aquinas, in the context of which I published my first impressions of his commentary on Ps 50.[27]

At this place, however, I want to come back to an issue that has always puzzled me: the status of the so-called Christological interpretation of the Psalms in Aquinas's commentary. In an article on Thomas Aquinas and Judaism, mentioned above, H. Schoot and I wrote:

> the Spirit as the author of Scripture has ordered the words of the Psalms in such a way that some of these words have as their principal meaning that they are signs of things to come. Some words refer to historical facts in the life of David, the human author of the Psalms, and may be interpreted as referring to Christ as well; but some other words refer mainly to Christ. This gives a certain inconsistency to Aquinas's interpretation of the Psalms: in some cases, the Christological interpretation belongs to the literal sense of the Psalm; in other cases, it belongs to the spiritual sense. This inconsistency is caused by the fact that Aquinas takes seriously the Jewish way of interpreting Scripture by applying it to new situations, as the first followers of Jesus did in their testimonies.[28]

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[26] Psalm 51 according to the Hebrew, Ps 50 according to the *Vulgata* numbering. Since Aquinas reads the Psalms in the *Vulgata* version, although he notices the different translations by St. Jerome in the prologue (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 24–25), I use the *Vulgata* numbering in this article. In my class on the mystery of the life of Christ in theology and music, I discussed Gregorio Allegri's famous setting of this Psalm, composed around 1638 for exclusive use in the Sistine Chapel and the two myths connected to this setting. The first myth was that this setting was only handed down orally without ever being written down until – second myth – young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart heard the music in 1770 and wrote down the entire setting. Both myths point to the special place of the *Miserere* in the liturgy of Holy Week.

[27] Henk J. M. Schoot, ed., *Tibi Soli Peccavi: Thomas Aquinas on Guilt and Forgiveness: A Collection of Studies Presented at the First Congress of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht*, Publications of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, NS 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 1996).

[28] Henk Schoot and Pim Valkenberg, "Thomas Aquinas and Judaism," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2004): 59, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2004.00242.x.

I would still agree with what we wrote twenty years ago, yet at the same time add that Aquinas's interpretation of the Psalms is determined by the Jewish authors of the New Testament, first and foremost Jesus praying the Psalms during his life and on the cross. Aquinas explains the Psalms as a Dominican friar for whom the idea of living according to the Gospel (*vita evangelica*) is the foundation for his religious call. Moreover, he teaches the Psalms to his students as a way to lead a Christ-like life.[29] As Bauerschmidt writes:

> The obvious answer to the question of why Thomas became a Dominican is that Thomas wanted to do what Dominicans were in fact founded to do: to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to care for souls, primarily through hearing confessions . . . Thomas, as a preaching friar, is oriented primarily toward communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that his hearers are disposed to the inner movement of grace.[30]

This explains why, in my opinion, Aquinas explains Scripture first and foremost by Scripture, focused on the Gospel.

With reference to the quotation from 2004 above, I would also specify "Christological interpretation" as an interpretation that takes as its point of departure the work of God the Savior (*de Deo Salvatore*) in the person of the Son united with the praying human being Jesus of Nazareth, and the members of the Church united with Christ as their head. In his monograph *Redeemer and Friend: Towards Soteriological Christology of St. Thomas Aquinas in the light of* Super Psalmos, the Polish scholar Piotr Roszak points out that such a soteriological Christology is the central focus of Aquinas's interpretation of the Psalms.[31] He notices that the Psalms speak of Christ in three different ways.[32] Some of the Psalms refer to Christ; this is most clearly the case where Christ prays the Psalm, and therefore it refers to Christ.[33] The best example here is Ps 21. At the beginning of his interpretation of this Psalm, Aquinas writes:

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29 See Thomas F. Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms*, Studies in Spirituality and Theology 6 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 146.

30 Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175.

31 See Piotr Roszak, *Odkupiciel i Przyjaciel: U podstaw chrystologii soteriologicznej św. Tomasza z Akwinu w świetle* Super psalmos, Biblioteka Instytutu Tomistycznego. Teksty i Studia 12 (Poznań: Wydawnictwo W Drodze; Warszawa: Instytut Tomistyczny, 2020), 169–92. I'm grateful to Dr. Sławomir Zatwardnicki for making this publication accessible to me.

32 Roszak, 159–68.

33 Roszak, 219.

> As was said above, just as in the other prophets, so certain things present then are treated here insofar as they are figures of Christ, and some are treated which belong to prophecy itself. And so, sometimes certain things that refer to Christ are mentioned which surpass, as it were, the scope of the history. And among these particularly is found this psalm, which treats the Passion of Christ, which is its literal sense. This is why he spoke this psalm in particular during his Passion when he cried out, *Eli Eli lama sabachthani,* which is the same as, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matt. 27:46), which begins this psalm. And so, although this psalm is spoken figuratively about David, nevertheless it is particularly referred to Christ according to the literal sense. And at the Synod of Toledo, Theodore of Mopsuestia, who explained this as being about David in the literal sense, was condemned, both for this and many other things, and so it must be explained as about Christ.[34]

In mentioning the error of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428) and the condemnation of the Third Synod of Toledo (589), which took over the condemnation by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, Aquinas refers back to what he said about the Psalms and their interpretation in the prologue to his commentary, where he gives a similar reasoning about the necessity to explain some Psalms as literally referring to Christ. Even though Aquinas here seems to use a Christological doctrine as decisive criterion for a Christological reading of the Psalms, I never get the impression that Aquinas reads the Psalms through such a theoretical lens.[35] The lens that he uses is no other than the way in which the Church prays the Psalms frequently, since they seem to contain the entirety of Scripture.[36] This entirety of Scripture refers to Christ and his Church, either explicitly or figuratively, which is a rule of interpretation that Aquinas derives from St. Jerome.[37] As we will see, this rule implies quite some

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[34] Thomas Aquinas, *In psalmos Davidis expositio*, vol. 14 of *Opera omnia* (Parmae: Typis Petri Fiaccadori, 1863), *Ps 21*, no. 176 (hereafter *In Ps.*). English translation: Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 254 (slightly modified). Roszak, *Odkupiciel i Przyjaciel,* 161, gives a somewhat shorter quote of the same text.

[35] *In Ps.*, prol.: ". . . evitare debemus unum errorem damnatum in quinta synodo. Theodorus enim Mopsuestenus dixit, quod in sacra Scriptura et prophetiis nihil expresse dicitur de Christo, sed de quibusdam aliis rebus, sed adaptaverunt Christo." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 25.

[36] *In Ps.,* prol.: "magis frequentatur Psalterium in Ecclesia, quia continent totam Scripturam." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 21.

[37] *In Ps.,* prol.: "Beatus ergo Hieronymus super Ezech. tradidit nobis unam regulam quam servabimus in psalmis: scilicet quod sic sunt exponendi de rebus gestis, ut figurantibus aliquid de Christo vel ecclesia." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 25.

flexibility, which is necessary because there is no fixed relationship between the text of the Psalms and the prophecy concerning Christ by David.[38] The only fixed rule is that the Psalms, when read by a Christian, are related to our salvation in Christ. This salvation is prophesied in the Old Testament and testified in the New Testament, beginning with God the Savior who, as a human being, prayed the Psalms according to the witnesses of the New Testament. Therefore, in the text quoted above, the word *unde* ('this is why') in the argument seems to imply that Christ, praying the Psalm, confirms the theory ("ideo hic est eius sensus litteralis. Unde specialiter hunc psalmum in passione dicit"), but in fact it is the other way around: Christ's praying is the foundation for the literal Christological interpretation. As I observed in my dissertation, what seems to be a confirmative quotation from Scripture is in fact a reminder of what was, in fact, the premise of the entire argument.[39] In a similar manner, the words "excedunt quasi virtutem historiarum" ("surpass, as it were, the scope of the history") seem to suggest that Aquinas first looks for a historical meaning in the events that happened at the time of the Prophet, and only starts to notice the insufficiency of such an interpretation when he observes things that exceed such a meaning. Again, Aquinas says something similar in the prologue: since they are a prophecy, the Psalms sometimes discuss matters that refer to what happened at the time of David and Solomon, but mainly in as far as they prefigure something of the future. For that reason, the Holy Spirit inserted some things that exceeded the historical facts, so that the mind is elevated to what is prefigured.[40] I would like to stress words like "sometimes" and "some things," indicating that in interpreting the Psalms, one needs to start with the text that may refer to our salvation in different ways. Maybe the best rule is to read and the pray the Psalms like a Gospel that contains what belongs to the faith in God incarnate.[41] Aquinas employs

38 *In Ps.*, prol.: "incipit liber hymnorum, seu soliloquiorum prophetae David de Christo." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 22. See also Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms,* 109. Ryan notes that Aquinas applies multiple strategies with respect to the Christological interpretation of different Psalms.

39 Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God,* 138, 208.

40 *In Ps.*, prol.: "Prophetiae autem aliquando dicuntur de rebus quae tunc temporis erant, sed non principaliter dicuntur de eis, sed in quantum figura sunt futurorum: et ideo Spiritus Sanctus ordinavit quod quando talia dicuntur, inserantur quaedam quae excedunt conditionem illius rei gestae, ut animus elevetur ad figuratum." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 25.

41 *In Ps.,* prol.: "Omnia enim quae ad fidem incarnationis pertinent, sic dilucide traduntur in hoc opera, ut fere videatur evalngelium, et non prophetia." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 21.

what we would call a "Christological interpretation" of the Psalms, but almost always it is one of several possible interpretations, and, moreover, it is employed in many different ways. As I hope to show below, it is always the Gospel that guides Aquinas in his preference for one of these interpretations. Yet, in any case, the point of departure is not a Christological theory, but the reality of God the Savior who became incarnate and as a human being prayed and lived the Psalms throughout his life.

Therefore, as Roszak notices, some Psalms should be interpreted as referring literally to Christ because of the Gospel witnesses.[42] Other Psalms contain elements that speak truly and properly about Christ, because a historical interpretation of the Psalm would be too weak. Roszak considers Aquinas's interpretation of Ps 19 as a good example, since Aquinas writes "although according to the literal sense, those things which are said do apply to David to some extent, nevertheless they properly and truly pertain to Christ."[43] A close reading of the commentary shows different ways in which interpretations referring to David, or to Christ, are juxtaposed.

The third category that Roszak distinguishes is that of figuration. He writes that the concept of "figure" is not an arbitrary judgment or a simple association, but rather shows an implicit and constitutive reference to Christ.[44] He states that these figures are somehow hidden under the surface of the direct content, but can be unearthed following the guideline by Christ in Luke 24 that the Scriptures speak of him.

While the third category distinguished by Roszak, texts from the Psalms that refer to Christ *in figura,* opens the possibility for manifold interpretations that are often juxtaposed by Aquinas, connected with *vel potest* ('or we can . . .'), there is space for such a plurality of interpretations in Psalms that refer to Christ literally. This shows that there is no neat distinction between the three categories (literally, truthfully, figuratively), nor do the categories coincide with the schematic three- or fourfold sense of Scripture. Moreover, since we are dealing with prayer texts that often shift perspectives, even a Psalm that is said to refer to Christ literally turns out to give rise to a plethora of different strategies of interpretation. One of these strategies is the famous Augustinian rule of *totus Christus, caput et membra,* according to which texts may refer to, or be said by, either Christ as head of the body of the Church, or the members

42 In his commentary on Ps 21, Aquinas states that this is one of five Psalms that treat the passion of Christ in some detail. The other Psalms are 34, 54, 68 and 108. Other Psalms touch upon the passion of Christ more briefly. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 254.

43 *In Ps. 19* (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 237).

44 Roszak, *Odkupiciel i Przyjaciel,* 164.

of the Church, or both.[45] Another strategy that we will see in the commentary on Ps 29, is a three- or fourfold juxtaposition, according to which the text may refer to David, to Christ, to the members of the body of Christ, or to human beings in general. Sometimes, there is real juxtaposition, sometimes there is a certain preference: it is better to explain this specific text as referring to Christ.

A Christological Reading in Practice: Ps 29

I want to give an example of the oscillating nature of Aquinas's interpretation of a Psalm, even if it is mainly seen as literally referring to Christ.[46] I have a specific reason to come back to his interpretation of Ps 29. At the time of the research for my dissertation, I did read Aquinas's commentary on Ps 29, but I did not include it in the chapter on the sources for Aquinas's discussion of the resurrection of Christ in the *Summa theologiae*.[47] It makes sense, therefore, to go back and read the commentary on Ps 29 again as an example of the role of Christological exegesis. I deliberately follow the order of verses instead of making a systematic survey, since this is how Aquinas reads in the rhythm of the Psalms.

Just like Augustine in his *Enarrationes*, Aquinas often pays quite some attention to the titles of the Psalms, and discusses them as giving guidelines for interpretation.[48] In this case, the title is: *Psalmus cantici, in dedicatione domus David*. Historically speaking, David did not dedicate the House of the Lord, since he was not allowed to do so by prophet Nathan.[49] He did, however, start to build Jerusalem and therefore we can speak about the house of David. It is better (*melius*), however, to understand the Psalm as referring to the house of David, that is: Christ, who is the head and body of the Church.[50] At this point, Aquinas refers to the previous Psalm, where the title reads *in consummatione*

45 See also Roszak, 180.

46 Roszak, 160–62.

47 See Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God,* 182–86. I did discuss the commentary on Ps 29 in the context of *STh III* q. 56, a. 2 s.c. (126).

48 The contemporary exegete S. Gillingham (*Psalms Through the Centuries,* 7; see n. 25) remarks that the titles are added later to the text of the Psalms, so that they can be seen as a first attempt at interpreting the text.

49 This refers to the 2 Sam 7. *In Ps. 29,* no. 249 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 345).

50 *In Ps. 29*, no. 1: "tamen melius intelligitur quod referatur ad mysterium domus David, id est Christi, qui est Ecclesiae caput et corpus." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 346.

tabernaculi ("at the finishing of the tabernacle"). The sequence of the two psalms has an ecclesiological meaning: a tabernacle indicates a place for those who fight, and therefore it refers to the place of the *ecclesia militans*. Aquinas adduces a text, Rev 21:3, "See the tabernacle of God with the people," that uses the same word, even if its context at the end of the book of Revelation does not fit with the situation of the *ecclesia militans*. In contrast, the word *domus* ('house') indicates a place of rest, as in "Let us go to the House of the Lord" (Ps 121:1). Similarly, the Church expects the rest of the heavenly kingdom. After this first ecclesiological interpretation, Aquinas adds a soteriological interpretation, focusing on the phases of building a tabernacle or house: first, it is constructed, and this corresponds to the arrangement of the incarnation, and next it is dedicated, which corresponds to the resurrection, when the body of Christ is clothed in the glory of immortality. A second ecclesiological interpretation follows: the body of Christ is continually constructed and will be dedicated by the conversion of the faithful when it will be in glory.

The first words of the Psalm, "I will extol you, Lord, because you have received me" (Ps 29:2a) are explained in different ways. There is a historical interpretation, since God has received David in his protection, as is written in 1 Sam 16. Or it can be interpreted as God receiving the just people, uniting with himself those who attach themselves to him by the unity of love. The third, Christological interpretation is introduced by *sed* ('but'): but Christ has united the human being with himself by receiving it in perfect unity. This is confirmed with a reference to Ps 3:4 "You, o Lord, are my protector (*susceptor*)."[51] The next few words, "you have not made my enemies to rejoice over me" (Ps 29:2b) seem to create a problem: even though it is true of David, it does not seem to be true of Christ, since his enemies mocked him (see Matt 27:40) and the same is true for the just whom evil people insult (Job 30). Aquinas answers (*sed dicendum*) that the joy of the enemies (here: *Judaei*) lasted but for a while, but not in the end, since the name of Christ grew stronger because of his resurrection. Again, we see a reference to the resurrection of Christ here, confirmed by a significant quotation: "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy, because I fell; I will arise" (from Mic 7:8).[52] These frequent references to the resurrection of Christ will come into focus with verse 4 of the Psalm; in between there is verse 3, "Lord, my God, I have cried to you and you have healed me." Again, Aquinas compares

[51] In Aquinas's commentary on Ps 3:4 we find the same possibility of referring to Christ in an interpretation that mentions both the incarnation and the resurrection: *In Ps. 47,* no. 15.

[52] *In Ps. 29,* no. 264 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 347).

the situation of David with the situation of Christ. Verse 3 addresses healing of internal evil, which can be bodily or spiritual. In the case of David or us, both evils can be present, but in the case of Christ only bodily evil. "I have cried to you" can be interpreted both of David (see Ps 119:1) and of Christ (see Heb 5:7), yet the healing refers to both body and soul in David, but to body only in Christ.

Verse 4 addresses healing of external evil: "you have brought forth my soul from hell." This time Aquinas wants to be clear on the difference between David and Christ: these words cannot refer literally (*ad litteram*) to David, since his soul was not brought forth from hell when he made this Psalm; however, it can be said of him metaphorically (*secundum metaphoram*) as if he was liberated from mortal sin. However, these words are understood literally of Christ (*ad litteram intelligitur de Christo*), whose soul was brought forth from hell by God. At this place, another place from the Psalms is quoted as confirmation: "you will not leave my soul in hell" (Ps 15:10).[53] Aquinas adds that the words "you have brought forth my soul from hell" also fit those whom Christ resurrected. As confirmation he adds a text from Zachariah (9:11) that uses the same word *eduxisti* ('you have brought out'): "you have led out your prisoners from the pit without water." This quotation has a double concordant relation with Ps 15:4, since it contains the word *lacus* ('lake, cistern, pit') as well. Aquinas comments on this word in the second half of the verse ("you have saved me from those who go down into the pit") as follows: literally, it means a hollow place or a cave, since this was where the dead were buried in antiquity. Yet, he prefers an interpretation referring to God the Savior here (*de Christo exponitur optime*), according to which "pit" means eternal damnation, and Christ descended into hell in order to liberate those who were in the pit. Or, rather a Christological interpretation in which "pit" means 'sin': Christ was immune from sin.[54]

The text of Ps 29:6 is: "For wrath is in his indignation; and life in his good will. In the evening weeping shall have place, and in the morning gladness." In Aquinas's discussion of the relation between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of our souls, he states that this refers to our justification (Rom 4:25), according to a gloss on this verse from Ps 29 that says: "resurrectio

[53] *In Ps 29,* no. 265 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 347). In his commentary on Ps 15:10, Aquinas discusses resurrection as a union of body and soul, and the necessity for the soul to remain separated from the body for some time, in order to prove the reality of the human flesh. It is thus a parallel for *STh III* q. 53, a. 4 and indicated as such in editions of the *Summa.* This is the reason why I discussed the commentary on Ps 15 – unlike Ps 29 – in my dissertation.

[54] *In Ps. 29*, no. 265.

Christi causa est resurrectionis nostrae et animae in presenti, et corporis in futuro," thus asserting a twofold relation between the resurrection of Christ and us: his resurrection causes the resurrection of our souls (justification) in the present, and the resurrection of our bodies in the future.[55] In fact, this gloss contains in a nutshell the entire discussion of *quaestio* 56 of the *tertia pars*. Yet the gloss is not quoted in Aquinas's commentary on the verse, and therefore the commentary on this Psalm is not mentioned as a parallel text for *STh III* q. 56. Instead, Aquinas begins by saying that "in the evening weeping shall remain" literally (*ad litteram*) is a sign of God's clemency and mercy, since it says that the Lord leads from sorrow to consolation in a short time. Next, Thomas gives three reasons why weeping belongs to evening, and joy to morning.[56] The first reason refers to the external disposition: the evening is the beginning of darkness that makes one sad, whereas morning is the beginning of light. Aquinas adds the experience of a blind man who sits in darkness according to the book of Tobit (5:12): "What manner of joy shall be to me, who sits in darkness, and shall not see the light of heaven?" The second reason refers to the internal disposition, and Aquinas uses the science of medicine at his time: the morning is related to blood, which makes one happy, while the evening is related to black bile (*melancholia*), which makes one sad. The third reason refers to the nature of sleep, which is rest of souls, and therefore sorrow is quieted by sleep. After this explanation of the literal meaning, Aquinas adds that the text is clear according to a mystical interpretation (*Mystice littera est plana*), which is a good example of the second category distinguished by Roszak (texts that speak truly and properly – albeit not literally – about Christ). In the evening, at the burial of the Lord, there was sadness because the faithful bewailed the death of Christ; however, in the morning, there was joy because of the announcement of the resurrection. This interpretation directly refers to the text of the Gospel stories; Aquinas adds, however, two more interpretations as possibilities, introduced by *si referatur*. If the text refers to the entire human race, the sadness of the evening stands for the sin of the first human beings, since Gen 3 indicates that this happened after noon. Aquinas adds that this sadness cannot be qualified as short, since even after the restoration of grace, remnants of sin remained. This short reflection might be seen as an interpretation of the word *demorabitur* ('shall remain'), since it is derived from a root, *morari,* with the meaning 'to delay, to detain'. It introduces a tension, however, with the interpretation above, according to which the Lord "leads from sadness to consolation in a short time." That short

[55] *STh III* q. 56, a. 2 s.c.
[56] *In Ps. 29,* no. 267 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 349).

time fits with the interpretation that refers to the short period that Christ was in the grave, whereas this interpretation has a much longer salvation historical arc: from the sin of the first parents to Christ who is the morning itself ("sed in matutino, it est in Christo, laetitia"). Here we encounter traditional motifs from the Easter liturgy and the typology that contrasts Adam with Christ, as for instance in Rom 5. Aquinas adds one more interpretation, this time tropological (pertaining to spiritual and moral life of human beings): the evening is when the spiritual light begins to fade in human beings, and therefore there is weeping; but when it start to light again, there is joy. Here, Aquinas adds a final corroboration from Ps 5: "in the morning I will stand before you, and I will see." In his commentary on that verse, Aquinas adds the verse from Ps 29 as confirmation of one of the four possible interpretations of the verse "in the morning I will stand before you," adding that "morning" can refer to eternity; according to this interpretation, *ad vesperam demorabitur fletus* can refer to the present life, while *ad matutinum laetitia* can refer to eternity. This is an anagogical interpretation that can be added to the many interpretations that can be given of these words.[57]

The next verse (Ps 29:7), "I have said in my abundance, 'I will not be moved in eternity'," has a gloss that says that this should be understood twofold: about Christ and about every human being ("secundum glossam prima intelliguntur de Christo, et de quolibet homine"). This time, Aquinas first and foremost discusses the presumptuous situation of human beings who assert that they have plenty and will not be moved. With reference to Christ, however ("Sed si exponatur de Christo"), there is no presumption but certainty of knowledge. This is a Christological interpretation, focused on the knowledge of Christ,[58] confirmed with a quotation from the prologue of the Gospel according to John "We have seen his glory, a glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14). The words, "I will not be moved," are glossed as: "from the will of God," and this is confirmed by another quotation from John: "what pleases Him, I always do." The reason is that "you gave strength to my beauty" (Ps 29:8a), namely by performing miracles and resisting adversaries (confirmed by a quotation from Rom 1:4). Aquinas ends this *lectio* by explaining the difficult last part of verse 8: "You turned away your face from me, and I became troubled," quoting Ps 21 ("God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") as confirmation. So when God turned away from him in his passion, he became troubled in senses yet not in reason (John 12:27 "now my soul is troubled"). It is clear that Aquinas here

[57] *In Ps. 5,* no. 27 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 62).
[58] See *STh III* q. 9ff.

refers to the story of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, explaining that he felt separation from God in the sensual part of his soul, but not in the reasonable part of his soul. Aquinas discusses these matters in the *Summa theologiae* both in a Christological context (the defects of the soul, *STh III* q. 15) and a soteriological context (the suffering of Christ, *STh III* q. 46).[59]

The next verse, "to you, O Lord, will I cry, and I will make supplication to my God," (Ps 29:9) receives a short threefold interpretation. The first interpretation refers to Christ, presumably under the influence of the parallel of Ps 29:8 with Ps 21:2 just quoted.[60] The second interpretation refers to the sinner, and the third to any human being. The word *clamabo* ('I will cry') needs to be understood as a prayer that removes evil. In Christ, this refers to his passion; in the sinner, to sin; in the human being, to adversity. The word *deprecabor* ('I will make supplication') refers to something good to be given. In the case of Christ, it is glory, in the sinner it is grace, and in an afflicted human being it is prosperity. Yet another interpretation is proposed, introduced by *vel* ('or'): *clamor* may refer to affliction of heart, and *deprecatio* to constancy in prayer. This is confirmed by a quotation from the letter of James (5:16), "The continual prayer of a just man avails much."

This very short *lectio* sets the tone for the interpretations of the final verses. In each case, it is possible to interpret them concerning Christ (*si de Christo exponatur*) or to interpret them concerning any human being (*si exponatur de homine*). With reference to Christ, the words "what profit is there in my blood, while I go down into corruption?" (Ps 29:10a) are explained as follows: there is much profit in the blood of Christ, since "it will be shed for many unto remission of sins" (Matt 26:28). Yet, there would not have been any profit if Christ would not have been revived quickly, but his resurrection would have been delayed until the end of the world, or if his body had been totally putrefied. There is a parallel here with the question about the necessity of the resurrection of Christ, where the words of this verse are quoted.[61] At this point, a theological question (*sed numquid*) arises: was the passion (of Christ) not sufficient for our salvation? The answer is: yes (*sic*). But if Christ would not have quickly risen, his divinity would not have been believed, and so there would not have been any profit. Again, there is a parallel here with the discussion about the necessity of the resurrection in the *Summa theologiae*.[62]

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59 *In Ps. 29*, no. 268 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 350–51).
60 *In Ps. 29*, no. 269 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 351).
61 See *STh III* q. 53, a. 1, resp.; a. 2, arg. 2.
62 See *STh III* q. 53, a. 1, arg. 3.

The final two verses, "you have turned my mourning into joy for me; you have cut my sackcloth and have surrounded me with gladness" (Ps 29:12) and "so that my glory may sing to you, and I may not regret" (Ps 29:13a) again can be explained as referring to Christ (*secundum quod loquitur de Christo*) and to any just human being (*vel de quolibet justo*).[63] If it refers to Christ, "you have turned my mourning into joy," can refer to the inner mourning that Christ had (*in se*) during his passion ("My soul is sorrowful," Matt 26:38 is quoted), but it can also refer to the mourning of his followers (*in suis*), "you shall lament and weep" (John 16:20). This mourning "is turned into joy," the joy of resurrection. Again, there is a *totus Christus* interpretation here: in Christ (*quantum ad se*), it means "Lord, in your power the king will rejoice" (Ps 20:2); in his followers (*quantum ad suos*), it means "the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (John 20:20). "You have cut my sackcloth and surrounded me with gladness" refers to an external change from evil to good things. Aquinas explains *saccus* ('sackcloth') as a cloth that one wears in times of austerity, made from the hair of goats. First, there is a Christological meaning: in Christ, the sackcloth refers to his flesh, according to which he has a "likeness of sinful flesh" (implicit quotation of Rom 8:3). As the gloss on this verse says, goats and their kids mean sins, since they are offered for sins. "You have cut my sackcloth" refers to the passion of Christ, when he was pierced with nails and a lance; yet, he was restored to immortality: "surrounded with gladness." After this long Christological interpretation, a very short moral interpretation follows: the words can be explained of any just person, meaning that their mourning is changed into joy (John 16:20 and Tob 3:22). The final words of the Psalm, "so that my glory may sing to you and I may not regret," again receive a dual interpretation. The first refers to the resurrection of Christ: it is the glory given him in the resurrection. The second refers to the saints: the glory that will be given to them in heaven. In this way, the resurrection of Christ is connected to the resurrection of the saints in the future.

Conclusion

After this long series of Christological and soteriological reflections on Ps 29 by Aquinas, my conclusion will be relatively short. As I stated before, what strikes me most is that Aquinas follows the flow of the text while analyzing it carefully in his countless divisions of the text. He seems to be ready to read any Psalm

[63] *In Ps. 29,* nos. 271–72 (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms,* 353).

in a Christological fashion whenever possible, but never makes the impression of forcing such a reading – except in cases where the Gospel suggests it.[64] His reading of the Psalms seems to juxtapose several possible readings instead of selecting only one reading; it is as if he enjoys the multiplicity of the possible readings suggested by the Spirit.[65] One can imagine how such a juxtaposition of possible interpretations is connected with the life of a Dominican friar: the *vita apostolica* is nourished by a life of praying the Psalms, and turned to the sanctification of souls by preaching to the people. But theologically such juxtapositions serve to highlight the *nexus mysteriorum,* the connection between the different aspects of the Christian faith. While Aquinas's systematic theological works focus on an insightful ordering of the different aspects of the Christian faith, his exegetical works juxtapose these different aspects in dazzling short suggestions that help us to understand that Christ is the center and the way to return to God, yet the world around us is full of signs and persons and events that refer in different ways to the Triune God as the goal and the origin of our existence. This is what a renewed reading of Aquinas's theological exegesis of the Psalms has made clear to me.

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[64] Thomas F. Ryan (*Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms,* 61–62) suggests that the Commentary on the Psalms is in many places not as Christological as one would expect, and that, while Christ is mentioned in almost every comment on individual Psalms, often one gets only elliptical discussions where one would expect extensive elaborations.

[65] See Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God,* 188.

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