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Leaders and Religious Prelates

"To be sure, the light of reason is placed by nature in every man, to guide him in his acts towards his end."

—St. Thomas Aquinas

As the United States moves through its presidential election processes, we are reminded once more of our deep concern regarding the separation of church and state in Western societies, for we as a nation are suspicious of candidates who appear to have aligned themselves with the teachings of religious authorities. Simply ask Bush, or Bauer, or Keyes. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy, each has borne intense scrutiny by those who fear even the slightest influence of religion within the realm of American politics.

Few find such fears surprising, however, for their origins are deeply rooted in our culture. They stem from an era when leaders found it quite appropriate to subject themselves to the leadership of God's representative on earth: the Vicar of Christ, the Pope. And while there are many historical events from which to explore these alliances, from a strictly philosophical perspective, their origins can be traced directly to the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

As we examine the philosophical foundations of leadership in Western culture, however, it is important to consider briefly the intellectual climate of those 800 years between Augustine and Aquinas. Indeed, they were years of stifling suppression. Reason had been abandoned. There were few insights concerning the core questions of leadership: *What is the nature of man? Who should lead? What gives one the right to exact obedience from another?* With the Roman Catholic Church having become the ultimate source of authority in all matters, both religious and secular, faith and dogma had

become the sole avenues through which men sought understanding of the universe. In brief, these years were the darkest of ages for Western Civilization.

By the thirteenth century, however, glimmerings of social progress were on the horizon. Feudalism was on the wane. The crusades had opened trade routes to the East, and cities were expanding throughout Western Europe. Gleams of intellectual light were beginning to sparkle from within those few universities that had emerged despite centuries of repression. Most significantly, having been preserved for centuries by Arabic cultures, Latin translations of the teachings of Aristotle began to seep in to Western thought once more. As a result, scholastics began to challenge the notion that the material world could be the cause of sin; they began to argue against the concept of a *fallen nature*. Although for the most part they maintained their allegiance to Christianity, their break from the teachings of Augustine nurtured seeds of change that would impact our understanding of leadership. And the most notable of these scholastic philosophers was St. Thomas Aquinas.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas was a *realist*. Although he believed in the *ideal*, he thought it to be *one* with the matter it informs. He shared Aristotle's proposition that what we perceive through our senses is not, as Plato had taught, a mere imitation of the *real* world. *It is the real world itself*. Thus, he drew a clear distinction between faith and reason, and in doing so, taught that the two are only different approaches to the same truth. They should not be viewed as contradictory, but as complementary to one another. Considering his philosophy to be the handmaiden of his theology, his thought is significant, for it signaled a major shift in the manner in which humans viewed themselves within the hierarchy of existence.

In terms of the nature of humans, Aquinas taught that our end is to be happy. Like Aristotle, he proposed that happiness cannot be found in carnal pleasure, or wealth, or glory. Yet, Aquinas ventured beyond Aristotle's teachings that it can be attained through the pursuit of truth and virtuous living, for he did not believe that knowledge obtained exclusively through the senses to be sufficient for one's understanding of the *Absolute*. Thus, he included faith as a part of his equation regarding the nature of humans. Although he agreed that reason might provide us a form of limited happiness, Aquinas taught that our ultimate happiness can only be achieved in

the heavenly kingdom through the beatific vision. In his work *Summa Contra Gentiles* he relies on faith to support his conclusions:

For man can arrive at a full understanding of the truth only by a sort of movement of inquiry; and he fails entirely to understand things that are by nature most intelligible, as we have proved. Therefore neither is happiness, in its perfect nature, possible to man; but he has a certain participation of it, even in this life. This seems to have been Aristotle's opinion about happiness. Hence, inquiring whether misfortunes destroy happiness, he shows that happiness seems especially to consist in deeds of virtue, which seem to be most stable in this life, and concludes that those who in this life attain to this perfection are happy *as men*, as though not attaining to happiness absolutely, but in a human way.

Therefore man's ultimate happiness will consist in that knowledge of God which the human mind possesses after this life, a knowledge similar to that by which separate substances know him. Hence our Lord promises us a *reward . . . in heaven* (*Matt. v. 12*) and states (*Matt. xxii. 30*) that the saints *shall be as the angels*, who always see God in heaven (*Matt. xviii. 10*).¹

Even though Aquinas taught that man's ultimate happiness consists in the contemplation of God, his political philosophy was rooted in natural law: "to the natural law belong those things to which a man is inclined naturally; and among these it is proper to man to be inclined to act according to reason."² He rejected Augustine's notion that deceit and greed and sin and evil lie at the heart of social relationships. In his work *On Kingship* he explains,

To be sure, the light of reason is placed by nature in every man, to guide him in his acts towards his end. Wherefore, if man were intended to live alone, as many animals do, he would require no other guide to his end. Each man would be a king unto himself, under God, the highest King, inasmuch as he would direct himself in his acts by the light of reason given him from on high. Yet it is natural for man, more than any other animal, to be a social and political animal, to live in a group.

This is clearly a necessity of man's nature. For all other animals, nature has prepared food, hair as a covering, teeth, horns, claws as means of defence or at least speed in flight, while man alone was made without any natural provisions for these things. Instead of all these, man was endowed with reason, by the use of which he could procure all these things for himself by the work of his hands. Now, one man alone is not able to procure them all for himself, for one man could not sufficiently provide for life, unassisted. It is therefore natural that man should live in the society of many.³

Not all within this society of interdependence, however, were of equal talents and abilities. Like Aristotle, he perceived a natural hierarchy among humans. Some were superior to others. There were freemen, those who are wise and virtuous. There were slaves, those who do not exist for their own sake, but for the sake of others. Ac-

cordingly, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* he explains that the primary trait that gives leaders the right to exact obedience from their followers is the rational power of their respective intellects:

And since man has both intellect and sense, and bodily power, these are ordered to one another, according to the disposition of the divine providence, in likeness to the order to be observed in the universe. For bodily power is subject to the powers of sense and intellect, as carrying out their commands; and the sensitive power is subject to the intellectual power, and is controlled by its rule.

In the same way, we find order among men. For those who excel in intellect are naturally rulers, whereas those who are less intelligent, but strong in body, seem made by nature for service, as Aristotle says in his *Politics*. The statement of Solomon (*Prov.*xi.29) is in agreement with this: *The fool shall serve the wise*; as also the words of *Exodus* (xviii.21,22): *Provide out of all the people wise men such as fear God . . . who may judge the people at all times.*⁴

Aquinas also shared Aristotle's belief that although women participate in *humanness* with men, their functions in society are quite different. Whereas men are properly ordered toward intellectual activity, women are more ordered for reproduction. For Aquinas, these two common but distinct natures are brought to fulfillment through the act of coitus wherein the two are made one. Once again, in his *Summa Theologica* he supports his philosophy with theology:

It was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a *helper* to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation. . . . Among perfect animals, the active power of generation belongs to the male sex, and the passive power to the female. And as among animals there is a vital operation nobler than generation, to which their life is principally directed, so it happens that the male sex is not found in continual union with the female in perfect animals, but only at the time of coition; so that we may consider that by coition the male and female are one, as in plants they are always united, even though in some cases one of them preponderates, and in some the other. But man is further ordered to a still nobler work of life, and that is intellectual operation. Therefore there was greater reason for the distinction of these two powers in man; so that the female should be produced separately from the male, and yet that they should be carnally united for generation. Therefore directly after the formation of woman, it was said: *And they shall be two in one flesh* (*Gen.*ii.24).⁵

Given this distinction between the purposes for which men and women were created, Aquinas further proposes that the individual nature of women, that is, her *womanness*, is defective. A woman is a misbegotten man. Within their common nature, however, they are brought together as one in the act of generation. Nevertheless, although unified at coitus, women were created to be subservient to men:

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As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active power in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness according to the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active power, or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence, such as that of a south wind, which is moist, as the Philosopher observes. On the other hand, as regards universal human nature, woman is not misbegotten, but is included in nature's intention as directed to the work of generation. Now the universal intention of nature depends on God, Who is the universal Author of nature. Therefore, in producing nature, God formed not only the male but also the female.

Subjection is twofold. One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit; and this kind of subjection began after sin. There is another kind of subjection, which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. For the good of order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discernment of reason predominates.⁶

It is through this hierarchy of human inequality, then, that we can more readily delineate Aquinas' answers to the underlying question regarding leadership. *Who should lead?* Certainly, his answer would not include the less intelligent among us. It would not include those who are strong of body yet weak of mind. It would not include women. It would, instead, include only the freemen, those born with the intellectual capacity to understand and seek the common good of all within our society.

But who among the freemen should lead? In his commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*, Aquinas suggests that some are born with greater capacities for virtue than others, that leaders differ naturally from their followers through the possession of a certain greatness of goodness.⁷ Thus, we might readily conclude that the one who possesses the highest level of goodness *should* lead. As we shall discover below, however, the person of high virtue is not always the one who *does* lead.

And Aquinas emphasizes the word *one*. He has little use for leadership by the *few*, much less by the *many*. Aristocracies are divisive, he explains. Democracies oppress the rich. In his work *On Kingship*, he explains that unity must be paramount, for it is the underlying reason for which societies are formed. Without unity, we have no peace. Without unity, we have no justice.

Now the welfare and safety of a multitude formed into a society lies in the preservation of its unity, which is called peace. If this is removed, the benefit of social life is lost and, moreover, the multitude in its disagreement becomes a burden to itself. The chief concern of the ruler of a multitude, therefore, is to procure the unity of peace.

Among bees there is one king bee and in the whole universe there is One God, Maker and Ruler of all things. And there is reason for this. Every multitude is derived from unity. Wherefore, if artificial things are an imitation of natural things and a work of art is better according as it attains a closer likeness to what is in nature, it follows that it is best for a human multitude to be ruled by one person.⁸

At the same time, Aquinas acknowledges that not all leaders are just. Tyrants within our societies and organizations are often brutal and self-serving, seeking gain for themselves at the expense of their followers. Even so, Aquinas taught that tyranny is not the worst of conditions. It is preferable to disunity, for without unity, there is only chaos and anarchy. Consequently, revolution against tyranny held no stead in the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Instead, Aquinas taught that tyranny is a result of sin. It is punishment by God. Accordingly, the only recourse for tyranny lies in the hands of the Creator. Thus, to gain His mercy, those having been subjected to tyranny should not complain. They should not revolt. Instead, they should pay reverence to the tyrant, turn their backs on sin, and pray for forgiveness:

But to deserve to secure this benefit from God, the people must desist from sin, for it is by divine permission that wicked men receive power to rule as a punishment for sin, as the Lord says by the Prophet Osee: 'I will give thee a king in my wrath' and it is said in *Job* that he 'maketh a man that is a hypocrite to reign for the sins of the people.' Sin must therefore be done away with in order that the scourge of tyrants may cease.⁹

Aquinas' understanding of the leadership dyad, then, blends the natural with supernatural; his philosophy complements his theology. And it is this complement of reason and faith that gives rise to his assertion that effective leaders should align themselves with the heavenly kingdom.

As noted above, he would agree that leaders should pursue truth and virtue. Yet, for Aquinas, these are but intermediate ends that can be attained through the senses. They can be achieved through reason. The ultimate end for humanity is the contemplation of God, however, and in order to achieve this end humans must reach beyond reason. Only faith allows us the beatific vision. Thus, in accordance with our ultimate end as humans, even the most notable of our leaders among earthly societies should align themselves with the representative of God's kingdom on earth, namely, the Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff. In his book, *On Kingship*, he explains,

Yet through virtuous living man is further ordained to a higher end, which consists in the enjoyment of God, as we have said above. Consequently, since society must have the same end as the individual man, it is not the ultimate end of an assembled multitude to live virtuously, but through virtuous living to attain to the possession of God.

If this end could be attained by the power of human nature, then the duty of a king would have to include the direction of men to it. . . . But because a man does not attain his end, which is the possession of God, by human power but by divine—according to the words of the Apostle: 'By the grace of God life everlasting'—, therefore the task of leading him to that last end does not pertain to human but to divine government.

Thus, in order that spiritual things might be distinguished from earthly things, the ministry of this kingdom has been entrusted not to earthly kings but to priests, and most of all to the chief priest, the successor of St. Peter, the Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff. To him all the kings of the Christian People are to be subject as to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For those to whom pertains the care of intermediate ends should be subject to him to whom pertains the care of the ultimate end, and be directed by his rule.¹⁰

In summary, then, we are able to discern more clearly Aquinas' understanding of the leadership dyad. First, all leadership should be aligned with the teachings of the kingdom of God. Second, only good and virtuous men should lead: the king over his realm; the master over his slave; the father over his children, and the husband over his wife. And followers should obey, for to disobey one's leader is to disobey God. Even tyranny is preferable to revolution and disunity. And should evil and less virtuous men rise to power, such events should be viewed as God's punishment for sin.

As we seek further illustrations of how Aquinas has contributed to our understanding of leadership, we need to look little further than to the influences of Aristotle. Although there are inherent differences in their philosophies, in many ways their thought is parallel. When we insist that our leaders be wise and virtuous, for example, when we demand that they seek the common good of all rather than pursue their particular selfish interests, we are expounding the teachings of these philosophical giants.

Similarly, both viewed the leadership dyad as a natural hierarchy. The more intelligent should lead. The less intelligent should follow. Physical prowess should be subservient to rational power. Women should subject themselves to the rule of men. Thus, when we justify inequalities based upon the accidents of one's birth, whether in our politics, our educational institutions, our corporate boardrooms, our

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Likewise, Aquinas was in agreement with his Greek predecessors regarding the need for unity within our organizations. To be fragmented is to fail. It is the responsibility of leaders to assure unity within their organizations. Certainly, few leaders within Western civilization today would argue that tyranny is preferable to disunity. At the same time, many would be hesitant to allow organized dissent among their followers. Most would command obedience, regardless of the situation. And although they might encourage participation within the managerial process, they would join with Aquinas in his teachings of oneness and unity and the importance of hierarchy within their organizational structures.

Among the major distinctions regarding their thoughts on leadership, however, is the contention of Aquinas that noble and virtuous leaders should subject themselves to the rule of the Vicar of Christ in order that they might attain their ultimate end, that is, the contemplation of God and the beatific vision. Certainly, such a proposition would have been foreign to Aristotle. In terms of the leadership dyad, however, it is important, for within Western society, the concept has influenced both secular and religious leaders for centuries. Even in this era of democracies and egalitarianism, we find isolated incidences of leaders who willingly subject themselves to the teachings of religious prelates. More commonly, however, there are many who perceive a transcendence from the natural to the supernatural, a connection between themselves and the kingdom of heaven, and, thus, they lead in accordance with their religious beliefs. Indeed, such leadership is in keeping with the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas.

Certainly, the teachings of Aquinas are important as we seek a deeper understanding of leadership, for they demonstrate a continuity of political thought among Western societies. They highlight man's continued awareness of himself within a hierarchy of existence. They acknowledge his attempt to find unity within nature. They underscore his struggle to relate the universal to the specific, the transcendental to the real, the supernatural to the natural. More important, however, is that they reflect a deep respect for reason and natural law, reinforcing our belief that people are something more than mere subjects to blind faith. As a result, the teachings of Aquinas rekindled a spirit of individualism that would alter the course Western thought.

But it would be several centuries before such influences would reach their threshold. Other challenges would occur. There would be a return to the Christian love of Augustine by those who sought meaning and understanding through a less legalistic approach to the nature of the universe. Humanism would clash with rationalism. Reason would give way to faith; then again, faith to reason. Yet, because of St. Thomas Aquinas and the scholastic philosophers of the thirteenth century, the shackles of dogma had been loosened. The human intellect, its reason, had been set free, released from the suppressive bondage of the Dark Ages. Indeed, Western culture was preparing for a reformation, a renaissance, and an enlightenment unparalleled in its history.

Notes

1. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Contra Gentiles," in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1944) 2:86-87.
2. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica" in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* ed. Anton C. Pegis, ed., 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1944), 2: 777.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 4.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2:152-153.
5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1:879-880.
6. Ibid. 880-881.
7. Thomas Aquinas, "Commentary on the Politics," in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, eds. R. Lerner and M. Mahdi (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 330-331.
8. Thomas Aquinas, *Kingship*, 11-12.
9. Ibid. 29.
10. Ibid. 60-62.

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