

**‘Obedience as a Religious Virtue: An Essay on the Binding of Isaac from the
Perspective of Thomas Aquinas’**

Rudi te Velde

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OBEDIENCE AS A RELIGIOUS VIRTUE
An essay on the Binding of Isaac from the Perspective of
Thomas Aquinas¹

Rudi te Velde

Introduction

It is hard to imagine an authentic religious attitude without the virtue of obedience. After all, religion is concerned with the desire and the willingness to answer to a higher authority, which transcends us and on which we depend for the ultimate goodness of our lives. Religion has to do with surrendering oneself to a higher power, that by virtue of its essential goodness attracts me to itself. And obedience is a form of surrender. But is obedience rightfully called good and virtuous? Should one not feel distrust whenever obedience and compliance are preached? Does not obedience require submission to the authority of another, whose word is law? Obedience seems to imply that you relinquish the responsibility for your own actions. How then can this be held as a commendable attitude? But if obedience is essential to being religious, then it is of prime importance to get clear about its positive meaning, which may hide behind the deformed image of an obedience which belittles, imprisons and enslaves people.

In this essay I would like to focus specifically on obedience as a religious virtue. It is a complex and confusing subject, because religious obedience summons up both the image of Mary, and her unconditional openness to receive whatever God had intended for her, but also the image of Abraham, who seemed prepared to kill his innocent son in blind obedience to God's command. Within the Christian tradition, Abraham is known as the father of the faithful. In the trust that God would give him a future of abundant life, he

¹ This essay is a re-working of an older article, published in Dutch under the title 'Gehoorzaamheid als religieuze deugd', in the volume *Doen wat God wil: zegen of ramp. Over ethiek en religie in het licht van Abrahams offer* (edited by Rudi te Velde), Budel: Damon, 2003.

exemplified the obedience of faith. But at the same time, the story of the near sacrifice of Abraham's son is highly problematic, in particular (but not only) to a culture that values the moral autonomy of man and responsibility for one's own actions. The story of the binding of Isaac (the Aqadah) shows us how religious obedience – listening to an authoritative voice that comes from without – can lead to irresponsible behavior, that goes beyond the limits of ethics. Acting on God's command, Abraham embarks on a lonely adventure, in which he finds himself isolated from the moral community, and risks the very future of his family. We can read this story as a deterrent or maybe even as a fascinating example of how religion brings man into contact with a dimension beyond ethics, beyond human normality, in which he experiences an absolute claim that shatters the moral order of human existence.

In what follows I would like to examine in what way obedience may be called a religious virtue, without minimalizing the moral idea of autonomy. I will do this by discussing Thomas Aquinas' take on the virtue of obedience and its role in the relationship between ethics on the one hand, and religion, in particular the virtue of charity, on the other. The core of my discussion will be the thesis that religious obedience does not negate the autonomy of the moral subject, but that it opens it up to a promise of a meaningfulness, that the finite freedom of man can neither produce by itself nor realize. What I am trying to do is to conceive of the relationship between ethics and religion in which the latter points to a space beyond the law and beyond the will that justifies itself before that law. It is within this perspective that I will finally propose an interpretation of the story of Isaac's near sacrifice, inspired by Aquinas' view on the virtue of obedience as linking the moral domain to the domain of the theological virtues, in particular the virtue of *caritas*.

The Virtue of Obedience

It feels slightly uneasy to defend the positive value of obedience in a religious sense in a time when the traditional political culture of obedience belongs to the past and has been replaced by a modern democratic society, based on values such as individual freedom, autonomy, human rights and the equality of all human beings

before the law. Obedience seems to belong to traditional societies, in which every individual has to find a 'good' place for himself within the whole, by fitting himself into a preestablished and fixed order. Through the virtue of obedience, the individual seeks to conform himself to the general moral order of society, which is embodied by figures of authority (parents, church, government). As such, obedience functions as the glue that binds the members of the society together, and which directs it at its communal goal.

It is exactly in this sense, as the glue that binds society together, that the Christian tradition has always praised the virtue of obedience, along with humility and servitude. Saint Augustine for example, speaks of obedience as the "mother and keeper of all virtues".² In his view, obedience generates in man the moral disposition required for all the other virtues, a disposition which consists in the readiness of the will to submit itself to the rule of God's will. The goodness of God is both the end and the norm for the goodness of human action within the moral-religious order of society. Living well is not possible for man other than by conforming his will to the will of God.

In his *Moralia in Job*, very popular in the Middle Ages, Gregory the Great follows Saint Augustine in praising obedience as the only virtue in the human mind which engrains and protects the other virtues.³ The virtue of obedience grounds the basic moral attitude which is required to live in accordance with the demands of virtue. A virtuous life demands that the will is obedient to what the virtues command. Through obedience, man submits to the moral order of virtue.

For Thomas Aquinas too, obedience is the most important among the virtues.⁴ In the *Summa Theologiae* he argues that obedience is

² St. Augustine, *City of God* XIV, 12. The immediate context of this citation is the biblical story of Paradise and the Fall. According to Augustine, Adam and Eve have been given just one precept so that they, by following this precept, might learn the importance of obeying the will of God instead of doing their own will.

³ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 35, 14 (CCSL 143b): "Obedientia sola virtus est quae virtutes ceteras menti inserit, insertasque custodit."

⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 3.

the greatest among the moral virtues because and insofar as it directs the moral life of man toward the love for God. As such it is the link between the moral virtues and the theological virtues. Virtuous acts only have merit (*meritoria sunt*) before God when they are done in obedience to God's will.⁵ Through obedience stemming from love (*ex caritate*) the onus of the moral life is transferred from the will of the individual to the will of God: "not mine, but thy will be done". It is thus through the virtue of obedience that ethics is incorporated into religion. The ethical commitment is placed within the perspective of the love for God, for which the good of the virtue is done.

For Saint Thomas, obedience as moral attitude has its meaning within hierarchically ordered relationships between people who form a community. Among others, he points to a significant passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves" (13, 17).⁶ Taken in this way, obedience first and foremost is a social/political virtue, which determines the relationship between subordinate and superior. There is no community without obedience, without the willingness to submit to the authority of its superiors, who are responsible for the wellbeing of the community.

Thomas grounds the moral duty of obedience in the natural law (*ius naturalis*), which in turn is an expression of the divine order of justice. Just as in nature the lower is moved by the higher, so too must within the human community, the subordinate be moved by the will of his superiors, because of their "divinely established authority" (*ex vi auctoritatis divinitus ordinatae*).⁷ Through the virtue of obedience, the particular will of individuals is incorporated into the moral order of the community under authority of those people who are responsible for the wellbeing of the whole. The reference to natural law means that the individuals are not

⁵ Ibid.: "[Q]uacumque alia virtutum opera ex hoc meritoria sunt apud Deum quod sint ut obediatur voluntati divinae."

⁶ This passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews is cited in the *sed contra* of the first article of the *Summa's* treatment of obedience (*STh* II-II, q. 104).

⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 1.

thought of as independent entities which move each in their own direction and which therefore must be disciplined and coordinated from the outside, by some political force, into a communal entity (cf. Hobbes). In that case, obedience would entail a form of disciplining and social conditioning which necessarily includes a certain renunciation of one's own will and desire. For Thomas, obedience seems to consist precisely in the individual's willingness to let his striving after his own good be mediated by the order of the whole. Since, for him, the individual is part of the whole.

Thomas identifies obedience as part of the virtue of justice.⁸ One owes obedience to one's superior. By being obedient we offer the other what is owed to him by natural law. The authority which the superior receives from the natural law is ultimately founded in the divine law. The divine will is the "first rule" (*prima regula*) by which all creatures with a rational will are ruled. The more a human being expresses this rule within the moral quality of his will, the higher he stands in the moral order. He obtains the moral authority to direct and regulate another will as a "sort of secondary rule" (*quasi secunda regula*).⁹ Thomas sees the authority that one person has over another as theologically founded and legitimized. The ground shape of obedience is adherence to the *prima regula* of the moral community of all "rational wills", which is the will of the Creator.

A certain paternalism is part and parcel of his view on the hierarchical ordering of human relationships. Subordinates need to follow their leaders because, and to the extent that, those leaders are concerned with their wellbeing and, based on their moral status, have a better perspective on how the good can be realized for the community.¹⁰ This view is unmistakingly shaped by the feudal-monarchist form of society of the Middle Ages. As such, it shows

⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 2.

⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 1, ad 2.

¹⁰ The order of justice, Thomas says, requires that subordinates obey their superiors. However, in case that the superiors are not just and have usurped power, they need not to be obeyed. Obedience is conditioned on the actual justice of the political order. See *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 6, ad 3.

a strong contrast with the principle of autonomy of Kant, which expresses the civil revolution which defends the equality of all citizens before the law. In this new constellation the preaching of obedience smacks of the old regime. And precisely because of this, it is so important to formulate a meaningful religious sense of obedience which can be valued apart from the traditional culture of obedience.

Should one be obedient to God in every respect?

From what has been said it became clear that Thomas treats of the virtue of obedience from a mostly (moral) theological perspective. Although obedience in itself is broader than just the religious attitude of submitting to the will of God, it is true that obedience within the relationship of subordinate and superior has its final foundation in God's will, which is the *prima regula* of all rational wills. Seen from the perspective of the *prima regula*, there exists a direct continuity between ethics and religion, between doing good and being obedient to God's commandments. But does it follow from all of this that one should be obedient to God in every respect? If we substitute 'God' with 'the instance which decides what the good will be', then it seems that the answer must be affirmative. For as long as the good is what needs to be done, it is our moral duty to be obedient to a will which is the highest authority and norm of the good. Expressed like this, it also immediately brings to light the inevitable autonomy of ethics. The moral duty to obey God is founded in the intrinsic demand of practical moral reason to do the good. The ethical is already presupposed in the duty to do what God demands.

Thomas recognizes the (relative) autonomy of ethics. For him, acting morally cannot be simply identified with doing God's will. The rule of the human will, according to Thomas, is twofold. On the one hand, there is the immanent rule of human reason itself, the *ratio recta*; on the other hand, there is the first and transcendent rule, the 'eternal law', which is, as it were, the divine reason.¹¹ Man has no knowledge of the eternal law (*lex aeterna*) other than

¹¹ See *STh* I-II, q. 71, a. 6.

through the immanent expression of that law in the human (rational) nature (*lex naturalis*), or through the revelation of God's will (*lex divina*) on which faith is based. For Thomas, the moral law of human reason is the way in which God's will is known in the immanence of rational creatures. We could say that God 'imprints' upon the nature of every rational creature a "law", and that that creature 'obeys' that law by acting in accordance with its nature.¹² The relationship between the human will and the *prima regula*, which is God's will, is thus mediated by the natural law, which is the law of practical reason itself. Thomas thereby breaks with a purely religious ethics of divine command. Moral duty has its foundation in reason itself.

Given this (relative) autonomy of human moral reason, the question presents itself how to understand those instances when God's will appears to be contrary to the rule of reason. Are we bound to obey God, even when his command is contrary to what the moral law prescribes? It is precisely this problem that is raised by the story of Abraham's sacrifice.

The story of Abraham's sacrifice plays a small but intriguing role in the writings of Thomas. He points to it in objections as an example of how the moral order of virtue seems to be suspended by a direct command of God, just like the regular order of nature is suspended by a divine miracle. The Biblical story of Abraham is never treated or explained within a broader theological context. However, in those places where Thomas refers to the story, we are offered some clues about how he views the relationship between religion and ethics.

The story of the near sacrifice of Isaac is, among a few other places, mentioned in an objection regarding the question whether "God should be obeyed in everything".¹³ The Biblical story poses a

¹² See the foundational text about the *lex naturalis* in *STh* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

¹³ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 4, obj. 2; the story of the binding of Isaac is mostly mentioned in the context of the question on the mutability of the natural law: see *STh* I-II, q. 94, a. 5, obj. 2; *STh* II-II, q. 154, a. 2, obj. 2; *In I Sent* d. 47, q. 1, a. 4; *In IV Sent* d. 33, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 1; *De pot* q. 1, a. 6, obj. 4. For the medieval discussion of the mutability of

problem to Thomas. After all, nobody can be required to do something which is contrary to moral duty. But in the story of Abraham it would appear that God commands him to do something that goes against moral duty and is therefore a moral sin. Of course, the theologian Thomas believes one should obey God in everything. But the question is how to make this understandable. How can one be bound to obey a God who commands Abraham to murder his innocent son? We know, Kant's answer here is negative: nobody can be held to obey a God who places himself outside the unconditional imperative of the moral law not to kill an innocent person.

But the case is not that simple. In his answer, Thomas points out that obeying God in principle cannot be against the moral order. He wants to relieve the tension between religion and ethics by showing that this tension is only apparent. The tension between ethics and religion only becomes unsolvable when ethics would have its own foundation, independent of God. But then an impossible situation presents itself: the human will would then be subject to two imperatives, that are both unconditional but at the same time exclude one another. God would then be forcing man to act against the unconditional moral demand, not to kill an innocent person. To avoid this conflict, Thomas traces human morality back to its ultimate foundation in God's will. "The virtue and moral justness of the human will in principle consists of her being in accordance with God's will".¹⁴ The divine will is the first and highest rule and as such she is the foundation of right reason (*ratio recta*). It might

the natural law, see Isabelle Mandrella, *Das Isaak-Opfer. Historisch-systematische Untersuchung zu Rationalität und Wandelbarkeit der Naturrechts in der mittelalterlichen Lehre von natürlichen Gesetz*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2002. Also Matthew Levering, 'God and Natural Law: Reflections on Genesis 22', in *Modern Theology* 24:2, April 2008, 151-177. My interpretation of Thomas' argument is primarily based on *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 4, where the focus is on the issue of obedience to God.

¹⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 4, ad 2: "...quia in hoc principaliter consistit virtus et rectitudo voluntatis humanae, quod Dei voluntati conformetur..."

happen that God asks something of people that goes against the current moral practise (*contra consuetum virtutis modum*), but it is impossible that God would ask something that goes against virtue, because ultimately God's will is the foundation of all virtue. Therefore, according to Thomas, God asking Abraham to kill his son cannot be against justice. After all, God is the creator (*auctor*) of life and death.¹⁵

This line of reasoning deserves some explanation. What does it mean to say that God has power over life and death and that He is therefore justified to reclaim Isaac's life? First, it needs to be emphasized that this is not about an unfathomable and capricious God who cares nothing about what we hold to be a fundamental moral principle: unconditional respect for human life. The point is not that God must be thought as a sovereign power which is exempt from the moral law. This is not what Thomas has in view. What he is saying is that, in principle, a command of God cannot go against virtue. For what are we talking about when we talk about "God"? God reigns over life and death. Or to put it negatively: we control neither life nor death. Every human must die. In relation to God, the creator, we have no right to death nor to life. Theologically speaking, this inevitable "must" falls under God's justice. Faith in God implies an obedient acceptance of this "must" in the confidence that behind this 'must' of death stands God, not Fate. In the judgement of man, death can come too early (or sometimes too late). Or death can overcome us as an injustice, when we are murdered. But whichever death we face, we can never say that we are done injustice by God. No human being can claim a right to life before God.

One misses the point of the story when one reacts to it, as such quite understandable, from the ethical impulse of the unconditional respect for the dignity of human life. Thomas' reading is theological in the strict sense of the word. It is about the relationship

¹⁵ *Ibid*: "...quia Deus est auctor mortis et vitae." See for the same type of reasoning *STh* I-II, q. 94, a. 5, ad 2: "...secundum illud I Reg. 2,6: 'Dominus mortificat et vivificat'. Et ideo absque aliqua iniustitia, secundum mandatum Dei, potest infligi mors cuicumque homini, vel nocenti vel innocenti."

between God and Abraham. Within that relationship, it does not constitute injustice on God's part when he reclaims the son which he himself gave to Abraham. Even the taking of the riches of the Egyptians constituted no robbery in the strict sense, according to Thomas, because there was no unjust appropriation of other people's possessions. After all, everything belongs to God, and he gives it to whomever he wants (and to those who need it).¹⁶ Nobody can claim a right to his own property before God, who is the Lord of all of Creation.

The answer that Thomas provides might feel unsatisfactory, or at least, it deserves further analysis. We might say that whatever God commands is *ipso facto* good and just, but the problem then remains that the discrepancy between God's will and human morality threatens to undermine the rational foundation of that morality. Within Thomas' theological universe, it is apparently possible at any given moment that human morality is swept aside by an extraordinary divine command. Does the moral order (the order of the *lex naturalis*) not represent a temporary and hypothetical arrangement, if God can 'break in' at any given moment?¹⁷ This is exactly Kant's fear and the fear of modernity in general. The violent potential of religion, with its absolute claims and the dangers of its particular form of heteronomy, must be kept within the 'safe' boundaries of autonomous universal ethics.

One could also say that Thomas' explanation has a certain formal character and abstracts from the specific religious meaning of the story of the near sacrifice. God, as Creator, may be fully justified in reclaiming the life of Isaac, just as he reclaims the life of every mortal human being at some point. But why would God want to do so in this specific case? Why is it important that Abraham learns to see his son as the son of God's promise, as a son (=future) that has

¹⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 4, ad 2; the story of the taking of the riches of the Egyptians by the Jews is one of the classical examples of a precept of God against natural law; cf. Exodus 12,36.

¹⁷ In *In IV Sent* d. 33, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 1 the term 'dispensatio' is used (*dispensatio in praeceptis legis naturae*); Abraham was given dispensation of the precept of natural law which forbids the killing of an innocent.

been given (back) to him by God? Why must Abraham's son first be 'expropriated' before being returned to Abraham, to be given to him as the promise of future life?¹⁸ These are the relevant questions which are raised by Abraham's story and which have everything to do with the religious virtue of obedience. Thomas passes these questions by, although he does offer some useful hints to interpret the story of Isaac's near sacrifice.

How to understand obedience as a religious virtue?

In the introduction, we said that for Thomas obedience is the most important virtue, or rather, the most important of the moral virtues. The reason for this is that obedience orders human moral life to the love for God. The significance of obedience lies in the fact that it liberates man from his attachment to his own will, for the sake of God and man's salvation. Thomas' elaboration of this is interesting with regard to our quest for the positive value of religious obedience.

First I will present a short summary of the ground plan of Thomas' theory of the virtues. This is important if we want to locate the virtue of obedience between ethics and religion. To Thomas, the moral life according to the virtues is intrinsically connected to the religious life, which is a life lived through faith in Christ, who puts man on the road to salvation in God. It is hard to isolate his ethics from the Christian religious framework. Ethics and religion, although they are not the same, are treated in one integral movement in the moral-theological part of his *Summa Theologiae*, within the context of the 'final goal' (*ultimum finis*) of all human actions: the beatitude of a life in unity with God. Thomas bases his treatment of the moral and religious life on the pattern of seven basic virtues, first and foremost among them the three theological virtues (hope, faith and love), followed by the four cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, courage and justice). Obedience resides under the cardinal virtue of justice. The theological virtues are the

¹⁸ These considerations concern what we can call the 'divine message' signified by the story of Isaac (cf. the phrase "mysterii divini significandi vel ostendendi", used in *In IV Sent* d. 33, q. 2, a. 2, qc. 1).

most important to Thomas, because they direct man to the ultimate end. These virtues, which are a gift of grace, do not concern the moral quality of human actions, but their focus is God himself, as the ultimate end of our life. The cardinal virtues, on the other hand, function as the foundation of moral life in the here and now. They have more to do with the way in which we try to reach that goal, through the way in which we live, than with the actual goal itself. The theological virtues are valued higher than the cardinal virtues, just as the goal itself (*finis*) is valued higher than the way there (*ea quae sunt ad finem*).

The theological virtues are expressions of God's grace. These virtues make us convert to God and adhere to him. The movement of conversion has two sides, the negative side of distancing ourselves from the world, from the goods of this world, and the positive side of approaching God and his goodness. That is why the theological virtue which makes us adhere to God (*inhaeret Deo*) deserves more praise than the (moral) virtue which makes us turn ourselves from the world and which releases us from our attachment to our will. The moral virtues do not make us attach to God yet and are therefore, in themselves, without 'merit'. Their meaning lies precisely in the fact that they detach man from worldly affairs and opens him up to a goodness which is given to him by God. The appraisal of the moral virtues thus lies in their contribution to the fostering in man of a religious stance of openness and receptiveness.

It is exactly seen in the light of the conversion to God that obedience, of all moral virtues, is valued most. Because it is obedience which makes us give up on the good of the own will. Obedience is more important than sacrifices, Thomas quotes Gregory, because "through sacrifices we offer up extraneous flesh, through obedience we offer up our own flesh".¹⁹

¹⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 104, a. 3: "Unde Gregorius dicit, quod *obedientia victimis iure praepositur: quia per victimas aliena caro, per obedientiam vero voluntas propria mactatur.*" Cf. *Moralia in Job* 35, 14. Gregory refers to a passage in 1 Sam. 15,22: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams."

All virtue and good works mean nothing, if they are not performed in obedience to God's will. Obedience is the highest of all moral virtues because, and as far as, man gives up the interest in his own will, and seeks to fulfil God's will in everything he does. Obedience is not the highest in itself; it finds her meaning in that it makes man turn away from concentration on his own will and opens him up to the promise of goodness which is included in God's will of grace. It is precisely because of this that one must say that it is not obedience itself which makes the works of virtue meritorious. But obedience is important because it fosters a stance of self-emptying and openness which is essential to the love (*caritas*) through which man attaches himself to God and performs all of his actions (all meritorious works) for the greater glory of God. Therefore, love is called the principle of merit. But there can be no love without obedience. Or rather: the love for God includes in itself an obedient willingness to act in accordance with God's will under all circumstances.

Thomas' account of religious obedience seems to me meaningful, even apart from the traditional politics of obedience, and important with regard to the possibility of a religious culture. However, it also holds true that religious obedience is vulnerable to all kinds of ideological distortion or perversion. For instance, a wrongly understood obedience can cause the individual will, or the collective will of a group (think of the crusades), to act as an instrument of God's will. When the individual will is morally legitimized by pointing at the will of God, which it carries out, then that will becomes beyond reproach or doubt. The individual will is thus 'filled up' by God's will instead of being emptied out. '*Deus vult*' thus affords the individual action with an ideological backing so that the fulfilment of God's will becomes dependent on the success of individual action, no matter how destructive these actions might be to others. However, the possible perversion of religiously motivated obedience should not conceal the positive phenomenon of obedience in the sense of responsiveness to a call, the fulfilment of which is a gift.

Conclusion: Imitating Abraham?

Recently, a small news item appeared in the newspaper: in Bangladesh, an imam had slit the throat of his infant son during the Muslim Sacrifice Feast, because he was convinced that God had commanded him to do so in a dream. This is one story among many. The man had probably projected himself into the story of Abraham's sacrifice, of which the Sacrifice Feast is a commemoration. Exactly like the prophet Ibrahim, who showed obedience to God, he apparently felt the deep-seated need to give up his most valued possession – his son – on behalf of his faith in God. Does this constitute an example of religious obedience? Is this what the story of Abraham seeks to promote? More to the point seems to me the question: what went wrong in this case? It is immensely tragic that the biblical story of Abraham has motivated the imam to kill his newborn baby. But what makes this terrible event different from the story of Abraham itself? Did Abraham not want to do the same? From the outside we might not see any significant difference. Abraham intended to do what the imam actually did. We could say that both men act in a temporary fit of madness. A father who murders, or is willing to murder his own son in obedience to a divine voice is not in possession of his full faculties. And is not a religion that enables this or even propagates this form of obedience morally rejectable?

If the imam had been inspired by Abraham's story, is it then true that he correctly understood its meaning? Or could we say that he did not understand it at all, that we are dealing with a radical misunderstanding of what the story is trying to convey? I think so. The misunderstanding concerns the true nature of religious obedience as requiring the 'emptying' of one's own will. The story of Abraham is exemplary. God tells Abraham that "the only sacrifice that you can give me, and which will satisfy me, is the sacrifice I have given you; you have shown your willingness to give it to me, and that is enough". That willingness is precisely the obedience of faith. When Abraham answered Isaac's question, as to the whereabouts of the sacrificial animal, namely that God would provide one Himself, he expressed, maybe without even realizing it himself, the truth of the whole story. It is, in my view, a

perversion of obedience to think that you can realize and execute that willingness in a real sacrifice of your own flesh and blood. There is a precise difference between obedience as an attitude of receptive willingness and obedience according to which one identifies oneself with the superior will (“I will do what God asks me to do”). It is in this light that we should understand the enormous misunderstanding of that man in Bangladesh. He sacrificed his son as if there was no God and everything depended upon his own doing. He equated his own will with the presumed will of God (“that which has to be done”) without first emptying his will in order to make himself receptive and really obedient.

SUMMARY

This essay explores Thomas’ thoughts about the virtue of obedience (based on *STh* II-II, q.104), which is particularly valued as a link between the moral virtues and the theological virtue of charity (love of God). Obedience generates in the human person the moral disposition required for all the other virtues, a disposition which consists in the readiness of the will to submit itself to the rule of God’s will. Reflecting on the question whether one should be obedient to God in every respect, Thomas is confronted with an objection pointing to the story of how God commands Abraham to kill his innocent son, which is prohibited by natural law. I use the scarce but intriguing remarks Thomas made in response to this objection to propose a meaningful interpretation of obedience as a religious virtue, essentially different from its distorted imitation which consists in an immediate identification of one’s own will with the presumed divine will.