

**‘More Than Hillbilly Thomists: Three Attentive Readers of Aquinas’  
Pim Valkenberg**

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**MORE THAN HILLBILLY THOMISTS  
THREE ATTENTIVE READERS OF AQUINAS**

*Pim Valkenberg*

In the past two years I have been reading three books about Thomas Aquinas written by former colleagues of mine. Ever since I offered to write a review essay about these three books, I have often wondered whether they have anything specific in common, but even though it was relatively easy to find characteristics common of two out of the three books, it took me a long time before I finally realized why I kept reading these books even though teaching or researching Aquinas is not an official part of my present duties in the area of religion and culture. The common characteristic of the three books and the reason why I kept reading them was that they were written by attentive readers of Aquinas.

Well of course that should not be exceptional at all. Every good book about Aquinas should be the result of attentive reading. So why did I end up seeing this as a specific characteristic? The answer is probably that each of the three authors has discovered Thomas Aquinas more or less on his own, not mediated by a school-tradition in which Aquinas was the default choice. Even though each of the three scholars spent some time at a Catholic institution, they did not come to the study of theology from a Catholic background. The reason why I call them attentive readers of Aquinas is that they were drawn to their reading of Aquinas on the basis of a personal match between their theological insights and what they discovered in Aquinas, without the traditional approach to Aquinas as the main theological authority that is still maintained – positively and sometimes negatively – in many Catholic theological institutions.

The best way to explain what I mean here is to compare their more or less individual paths toward Aquinas with a way of reading Thomas Aquinas that seeks to build on a strong continuity between him and the later tradition bearing his name, the tradition

of (neo-) Thomism. This is a way of reading that is fairly successful nowadays at the Thomistic Institute situated within the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception housed at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington D.C. The mission statement of the Thomistic Institute says that it “promotes research into the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas and the subsequent Thomistic tradition. The research of the institute is both historic and systematic, deeply rooted in the classical Catholic tradition while engaging contemporary discourse and thought. It recognizes also the importance of the philosophical heritage of the Common Doctor of the Church as a well-spring that can enrich the study of theology.”<sup>1</sup> Since the Pontifical Faculty at the Dominican House of Studies is a partner in the Washington Theological Consortium, together with the university where I work, I have had the occasion to attend quite a few of their conferences and lectures. The choice of the themes of these conferences and lectures is determined by two of the characteristics mentioned above: a study of Aquinas in continuity with the Thomistic tradition, and with special attention to its philosophical dimensions as foundation for the theological training of future Dominicans.<sup>2</sup> I do not want to suggest that one approach to Thomas Aquinas is better than the other – even though I certainly have a preference, based on my own theological training – but I want to draw attention to the fact that the three books that I want to review are in a certain sense a-typical in their approach to Aquinas. Some German scholars of Thomas Aquinas have coined the term *thomanisch* as different from *thomistisch* to express such an a-typical approach that concentrates more on Aquinas’s own theological approach than on the broad Thomistic tradition that sets forth his name.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Found on the website of the Thomistic Institute, accessed on July 8, 2015. See <http://www.thomisticinstitute.org/about-ti/>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.thomisticinstitute.org/past-conferences/> for a list of past events.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Richard Schenk – a member of the Board of Advisors of the Thomistic Institute – in his *Die Gnade vollendeter Endlichkeit: zur transzendentaltheologischen Auslegung der thomanischen Anthropologie* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1989), p. 76.

Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt – whose newest book on Aquinas I will discuss below has characterized his own approach to Thomas Aquinas as “being a hillbilly Thomist”.<sup>4</sup> For those who are not familiar with the term “hillbilly”: it refers to someone from the Southeast in the United States who is considered to be an outsider to the civilized manners of the urban Northern elite. While the term clearly has a pejorative connotation, Bauerschmidt defends himself quite well in a biting footnote: “My own experience is that one only writes of Thomas with fear and trembling, because there is always some Thomist lurking around the corner, ready to leap out and demonstrate that you have focused too much on the *Summa Theologiae* and ignored the Aristotelian commentaries or, even worse, your Latin is so poor that you have failed to appreciate Thomas’ use of the ablative absolute in a particular passage. Of course, one might respond that Thomas himself dared to interpret Aristotle without knowing Greek, making him perhaps a ‘hillbilly Aristotelian’.”<sup>5</sup>

So what is the added value of “hillbilly Thomism” or perhaps “outback Thomism” or even “*heikneuter* Thomism”?<sup>6</sup> I would say that the virtue of being aware of one’s not knowing the fine details of traditional readings of Aquinas makes one more attentive to what Thomas actually has to say and therefore such a reading might actually become more compelling than the default reading. The disadvantage of unfamiliarity is compensated by greater attentiveness.

After some extended study of Thomas Aquinas, though, one can no longer hide one’s growing familiarity with the object of

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Also, O.H. Pesch, *Thomas von Aquin: Grenze und Größe mittelalterlicher Theologie* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1988), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> F.C. Bauerschmidt, ‘Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing: on being a hillbilly Thomist’, in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by J. Fodor, F. C. Bauerschmidt, *Modern Theology* 20/1 (2004), 163-83.

<sup>5</sup> F.C. Bauerschmidt, ‘Shouting in the Land of the Hard of Hearing’, p. 179 nt. 17.

<sup>6</sup> My Van Dale dictionary for “hillbilly” says: “boer, heikneuter, pummel. Oorspronkelijk iemand uit het zuidoosten van de USA”.

one's study and this is certainly what Fritz Bauerschmidt showed in his *Holy Teaching*, an introductory set of translations of the *Summa Theologiae* with copious footnotes published in 2005.<sup>7</sup> There were two main reasons why I liked to use the book in my teaching: the attention to theological and Christological themes, and maybe most importantly the vivid examples about children and dogs that often succeed in bringing Aquinas's sometimes dry analyses much closer to the experiences of our students. And yes: the new book contains more vivid examples about the same children and the same dogs.

The title of the new book is *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*, and in the midst of many other introductory volumes to Aquinas, it is without a doubt the element of "following Christ" that stands out.<sup>8</sup> While most scholars have approached Aquinas mainly as a theologian in the context of the university school, particularly in Paris where he spent two important periods of his life, Bauerschmidt wants to approach Aquinas predominantly as a Dominican friar who goes wherever his Dominican superiors want him to go. Certainly, he is a *magister in sacra Pagina* but his academic career is definitely subordinate to or, rather, is a consequence of his ecclesial vocation.<sup>9</sup>

While the book can certainly serve as a general introduction to the life and thought of Thomas Aquinas, its real objective is to show how Aquinas tried to "relate faith and reason for the sake of following Christ" (x). Consequently, after an introductory chapter that situates Aquinas in the context of his time,

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<sup>7</sup> F.C. Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2005). Note the dedication to Stanley Hauerwas, "fellow hillbilly Thomist" in front of the book.

<sup>8</sup> F.C. Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> It is no coincidence that Bauerschmidt introduces himself not only as a professor of theology at Loyola University Maryland, but also as a Deacon of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Nor is it a coincidence that the same combination (professor of theology and permanent deacon) characterizes several members of the 'Thomas Instituut te Utrecht'.

two series of three chapters shed light on the two main themes of the book: Faith and Reason (chapters 2-4) and Following Christ (chapters 5-6). It is interesting how this division in two parts almost reminds one of the classical two-layered approach to the study of Thomas Aquinas: first his philosophy, next his theology. This is not at all what Bauerschmidt intends to do, and yet his interest in what he calls the “intellectual project” of Thomas Aquinas – later corrected into “intellectual ministry” (81) – almost suggests such an order – as does the order of the *quaestiones* in the *Summa Theologiae* itself. Again, it would be a misunderstanding to think that Bauerschmidt simply offers a cross-section of that famous compendium since he furnishes much more, but maybe it is the geniality of his approach that it can be read in such a simple way.

In the first half of the book (chapters 2-4) Bauerschmidt discusses a number of classical topics, sometimes tending toward a close reading of Aquinas’s texts, sometimes toward engaging in debates between different traditions of reading him. He does not hesitate to side with Étienne Gilson in characterizing Aquinas as a preeminent practitioner of “Christian philosophy” (43) and with Josef Pieper in characterizing his philosophy as primarily a “way of life” (77). Again, it is the choice to live as a Dominican friar that determines Thomas’s choices in his intellectual ministry. Chapters three and four, about *praeambula fidei* and *fides quaerens intellectum* contain some of the vintage discussions that one would find in any classical compendium to Aquinas, and Bauerschmidt shows that he – even though still identifying as a “Hillbilly Thomist” (xi) – knows his Thomism thoroughly, with the French Thomists and the Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophers on top of it. But at the end of these sometimes long-winded discussions he returns to his main thesis toward the middle of the book: even though Aquinas was very much interested in Aristotle, he always used this knowledge for an ulterior perspective. In the felicitous phrase by Vivian Boland (quoted 175): “His option for Aristotle is to be understood within his option for the Dominicans.” It is a bit easier to recognize this ulterior perspective in the two chapters devoted to soteriology: “the way of God Incarnate” and “the way of God’s people”. The basic metaphor of the way is of course derived from Aquinas’s insistence that the final part of Holy

Teaching discusses our way back to God and how Christ has shown us the way in himself. In this part, Bauerschmidt often refers to Aquinas's sermons, an often neglected part of his tasks as a Master of the Sacred Page but of course foremost as a Dominican friar. He shows very well how the "architectonic role of creation in Thomas's thought" (197) plays an important part in his discussion of the incarnation, since what is true in general, viz. that God and creation can never be rivals in a zero-sum game, is true in a special way in Christ. This gives a decidedly theological reason for the renewed emphasis on the humanity of Christ that Aquinas displays in his soteriology. The specific stress on religious life as one of the characteristics of Bauerschmidt's approach shows again in his discussion of Christ as teacher and exemplar (222), but also in the specific attention to the priestly identity of Christ, following the lead of the letter to the Hebrews (207). Bauerschmidt has a nice way of integrating themes from the second part of the *Summa* into his main attention to themes from the first and the third parts. His insistence that Aquinas discusses the work of the Holy Spirit as gracefully stimulating human action oriented to the beatific vision (229) is a case in point. Consequently, chapter six about "the way of God's people" discusses principles of human action, the life of grace and formation in virtue before it arrives at the sacramental life. A sustained reflection about the Eucharistic poem *Adoro te devote* forms the apogee of this chapter.

As if to show that this hillbilly Thomist knows his classics, Bauerschmidt ends his book with a final chapter on Thomas in history. His goal is to show "how a figure like Thomas Aquinas must be constantly thought and rethought anew within shifting historical contexts" (291). Just before his final insightful pages about the way in which historical theology is able and not able to retrieve Thomas Aquinas, I was struck by Bauerschmidt's observation that "the career of the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009) is instructive and, in some ways, typical of post-Conciliar theologians" (307) in that his earlier work is a very fine example of historically-formed Thomist engagement with modern culture, while Thomas does not seem to play any major role in his later work any longer. At the same time, one still has the

impression that the basic idea of “openness to secular learning and new intellectual developments” is still very much Thomistically – or maybe *thomasisch* – informed. The bibliography contains a list of Latin editions with English translations and it shows the meticulousness and at the same time willingness to serve a more general public that characterizes this very rich book.

The two other books are rewritten versions of PhD theses about a specific aspect of Aquinas’s ethics. The book by David Decosimo started under the direction of Jeffrey Stout as a PhD thesis at the Department of Religion of Princeton University, and it ripened in the “scholastic disputations” at the lunch table of Loyola University Maryland that Fritz Bauerschmidt mentions in his preface as well.<sup>10</sup> Starting this fall, David Decosimo will join the school of theology and the graduate division of religious studies at Boston University. In this book, he discusses Aquinas’s view on the possibility of “pagan virtues”. The fascination for this theme is related to the fact that Aquinas’s two major *auctoritates* – apart from Scripture – viz. Aristotle and Augustine embraced such widely divergent positions on this point. A pagan himself, Aristotle’s virtue ethics was of course about “pagan virtues” yet Augustine thought that pagans lacked grace and charity and could not, therefore, display any real virtue. Decosimo insists that Aquinas needs both Aristotle and Augustine to find a proper answer to this question, but how does he do that? In the introduction Decosimo makes clear that the field of research has been dominated by what he calls “hyper-Augustinians” such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank who interpret Aquinas through an Augustinian lens and thus conclude that pagans are incapable of real virtue.<sup>11</sup> A rival

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<sup>10</sup> D. Decosimo, *Ethics as a Work of Charity: Thomas Aquinas and Pagan Virtue* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> In his article “St. Thomas Aquinas’s Theory of Pagan Virtues: A Pilgrimage Towards the Infused Cardinal Virtues” in this *Jaarboek*, Wang Tao discusses the same debate with Augustinian interpretations of Aquinas, but he reacts to the supernaturalist tendency of the secondary literature that he discusses by making a rather forced opposition between philosophical and “strong theological” understandings of Aquinas.



interpretation, labeled “public reason Thomism” by Decosimo, appeals to the tradition of natural law but discusses virtue ethics only tangentially. Decosimo refuses to choose between Aristotle and Augustine with a motivation that sounds much like Bauerschmidt’s approach just discussed: “Impelled by commitment to Christ, Thomas strives to be Aristotelian by being Augustinian and vice versa” (9). The argument that he develops says that Aquinas “welcomes pagan virtue *for charity’s sake*, not against but because of his Christian convictions” so that the commitment to charity shapes not only his moral theology but his very life as a Christian moral theologian. Decosimo calls his own approach a specimen of “prophetic Thomism” that seeks to unite and transform tradition and liberation. He is aware of the two different ways in which he uses the concept of charity in this book as he appeals to Thomas as a virtue ethicist who generously and charitably makes space for the possibility of pagan virtues while defining pagan virtue as a charitable way of life not informed by charity itself since it lacks the infused theological virtues. It is quite clear that Thomas thought it very well possible for ancient pagans to live a life of virtue, but how is this virtuous life related to the Christian life of virtue? Decosimo starts tackling this questions by paying attention to Thomas and his approach to the outsiders of his time, Jews and Muslims. After that, he discusses the basic notions of his moral theology: God, the good, and the desire of all things. In this manner, he seeks to elucidate how his ethical vision is part of *sacra doctrina* that discusses God and everything else in its relation with God. After this opening that shows the theological context of Aquinas’s discussions on ethics, Decosimo zooms in on the concept of virtue in chapter three. Again, he highlights the theological character of virtue ethics in Aquinas: a virtue is a kind of habit that is ordered toward seeking the Triune God. But how does he conceptualize pagan virtues? They can be called human virtues because they are attainable by non-Christians based on human nature, but they lack the possibility for infused virtues that are dependent on God’s

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Decosimo has a better take on how the two need to go together in Aquinas, I think.

grace. Chapter four focuses more precisely on the analysis of these virtues. In this chapter, Decosimo shows why he is opposed to a narrow reading of Aquinas – Thomas Osborne is a name often mentioned in this context – that characterizes such human virtues as unstable, unconnected and imperfect. In contrast, Decosimo reads Aquinas in such a way that he affirms such human moral virtues as true and connected, even though they are of course imperfect because they lack the connection with beatitude as their ultimate aim. Chapters four to eight contain a sustained close reading of crucial passages from Thomas’s works, mainly from the *prima secundae* of course, but also from the *quaestiones disputatae* and the commentaries on Scripture. Time and again Decosimo repeats his main thesis: “not against but because of Thomas’s Augustinian commitments, the outsider is welcomed as capable of a virtue fully worth the name” (139). I like the way in which Decosimo meticulously explains his reading of texts that are often quoted by those arguing that Aquinas does not allow for pagans to have genuine virtues. This is the case with *STh* I-II.65.2 (on the possibility of virtues without charity) in chapter five and with *QD Virt.* 5.2 (on the unity of the virtues) in chapter six. For me, working in the context of the Catholic dialogue with other religions, chapter eight (pages 198-235) about *infidelitas* and the role of conceptions of final ends was the most exciting chapter.<sup>12</sup> The point of departure here is Aquinas’s statement that someone without faith lacks charity and therefore every single act of such a person is sin insofar as that person acts as unbeliever (*STh* II-II.23.7). Decosimo explains that Aquinas means that the act of an unbeliever is sinful if it is done with a view on a final end that is characterized by unbelief. The point is here that even acts that seem to be good, like giving alms, are necessarily sinful if done for purposes of a religion that is, from Aquinas’ point of view, unbelief. So doing good becomes sinful when it is motivated by the Buddhist ideal of *karuna* (compassion). Decosimo discusses two main texts: *STh* II-II.10.4 and the commentary to Romans 14:23 (“whatever does not proceed

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<sup>12</sup> For my approach, see “How Others Bear Witness to Our Faith: Aquinas and *Lumen Gentium*”, in Henk J.M. Schoot (ed.), *Jaarboek 2013 Thomas Instituut te Utrecht*, pp. 55-75.

from faith, is sin”). He discusses two opinions that are in his eyes insufficient. The first opinion (“Accidental virtue”) says that unbelievers can perform good acts, but these are always accidental to an otherwise sure path to a bad end, yet Decosimo quite convincingly argues that such a viewpoint sees good and evil as equal possibilities for human being, and that is contrary to Aquinas’ anthropology in which humans always choose - along with possible bad choices – some good according to their nature. The second opinion (“*sola religio*”) argues that only specifically religious and charitable acts are sinful since they are done with unbelief as end. Again, Decosimo argues, this is too simple, since there is not a one on one relation between religious acts and religious ends; often, people have several motives for their acts, and an end can be a mixture of false and good elements. So he proposes a more nuanced conception of final ends that allows for such multiplicity, while still defending Aquinas’s position on the importance of people’s religious convictions for their final end. Part of this solution is the distinction between strong and weak unbelief: strong unbelief is an active opposition to Christianity, while weak unbelief is adhering to religious beliefs that might be incompatible with or contrary to Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Now Decosimo proposes that only strong unbelief leads to sinful acts, while weak unbelief can be seen as a mixture of good ends with the end of unbelief that makes the acts of unbelievers good as long as an opposition to the Christian faith has not been established. For instance, believing that God is one is not an act of unbelief, but believing that God is not Triune.<sup>14</sup> In proposing this interpretation, Decosimo is aware that he advances a “maximally charitable view that can still claim to keep faith with Thomas.” (218-19). Even though I share the charitable view, I am

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<sup>13</sup> A third form that Decosimo discusses later, is simply unfamiliarity with Christianity (225). In this case, I would translate *infidelitas* as non-belief instead of unbelief. Aquinas makes the distinction between *negatio pura* (non-belief) and *contrarietas* (unbelief). See *Jaarboek 2013*, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> D. Decosimo, 217. I would rather say – as Decosimo does elsewhere – that denying the Trinity would constitute an act of unbelief, but believing that God is not Triune would not necessarily do so, since one can do so while misunderstanding the proper meaning of Trinitarian discourse.

not sure whether I agree with the “keeping faith with Thomas” aspect of Decosimo’s interpretation here. I would rather say that this is a reading that is motivated by our present-day sensibilities but at the same time forces Aquinas into a way of thinking that is alien to his own sensibilities in his own time. For instance, when Decosimo talks about the possibility for a Muslim to pray to honor God and Muhammad – a juxtaposition that most Muslims would find strange – he thinks that praying for Muhammad’s sake is not in itself an attack on Christianity (217). Yet if one reads what Aquinas has to say about Muhammad, one cannot but conclude that for him honoring Muhammad equals dishonoring God and is therefore always an act of unbelief. As I have explained elsewhere, this is a refusal to take Islam seriously as a theological challenge for Christians, a lack of engagement that simply cannot be saved by an act of charity as Decosimo tries to do. This also explains why Aquinas was able to take Islam seriously at the philosophical level, but not at the theological level.<sup>15</sup> In that sense, I’m afraid that I come close to the *sola religio* opinion that Decosimo finds unsatisfactory. When Decosimo pleads in favor of a principle of interpretive charity (223) he uses a hermeneutical principle that Aquinas uses in his interpretation of the Fathers of the Greek Church: their sayings need to be interpreted with reverence (see the prologue to his *Contra errores Graecorum*). In ecumenical matters, and maybe sometimes in relation with Jews (see below) Aquinas was able to offer the interpretive charity that Decosimo proposes, but in relations with Muslims he was not.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> P. Valkenberg, ‘Can We Talk Theologically? Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa on the Possibility of a Theological Understanding of Islam’, in *Rethinking the Medieval Legacy for Contemporary Theology*, ed. by A. Min (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 131-66.

<sup>16</sup> In the article just mentioned, I argue that this principle of *pia interpretatio* was exactly what makes the difference between Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa in their interpretation of the Qur’an (and, to a lesser extent, the person of Muhammad). One can of course argue that Nicholas had access to sources that Aquinas had not in his possession, but then again it might be true that Aquinas was just not interested in knowing more about Islam as a religion.

Before I come to Decosimo's final conclusions, I need to address a stumbling block in my reading of his excellent book and that is the way in which he refers to Aquinas's Latin texts. First of all, I need to say that it is admirable for an American scholar to follow the Latin original texts instead of being satisfied with English translations. In this respect, Bauerschmidt, Decosimo and Tapie are all impeccable scholars. Yet, the way in which Decosimo refers to Latin, using single words or parts of phrases in his English sentences instead of quoting the Latin in the footnotes, sometimes makes no sense.<sup>17</sup> Instead of quoting the Latin texts, Decosimo uses the footnotes very often to give some further explanation or deliberation, but in such cases one would want the footnote to be actually on the bottom of the page since no reader will leaf to the extensive notes section on pages 273-327 every time he or she encounters a footnote sign.

In the two final chapters, Decosimo comes back to his conviction that his charitable interpretation of Aquinas nevertheless does justice to the Augustinian strand in Aquinas's theological discourse. For that reason, he discusses the role of sin and grace in limiting the extent of pagan virtues (*STh* I-II.109.3) while at the same time upholding it in its imperfect integrity. In the final chapter, Decosimo explains the title of his book: *Ethics as a Work of Charity*. Driven by Augustinian charity, Aquinas welcomes the pagan outsider – Aristotle is of course the key model here – not only in his reflections on their virtues but also in the process of writing his ethics. “Precisely his commitment to charity leads him not only to welcome pagan virtue, but, more than that, to construct a way of doing so that, in its very form, itself *performs* that welcome” (256). In his insistence on this act of interpretive charity, Decosimo indeed steers a middle course between “hyper-Augustinian” and

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<sup>17</sup> One example only: on page 160 Decosimo quotes *STh* I-II.65.1 as follows: “Right choice (*rectam electionem*) requires not only...” In the English sentence, “right choice” is the subject of the sentence, but the Latin says *ad rectam autem electionem non solum sufficit...* so Decosimo gives an accusative case ending for the subject of the English sentence which is awkward.

“Aristotelian” interpretations of Aquinas, and at the same time he shows us how Aquinas can be a support for a Christian theology and ethics that is able to welcome the stranger without neglecting its own grace-based existence. Yet, still, I think that we need to make another act of interpretive charity, recognizing that Aquinas was able to welcome a non-believing outsider such as Aristotle who had never heard the Gospel, but had more trouble welcoming monotheist Aristotelians (Jews, Muslims) whom he would respect as philosophers but would still classify as unbelievers who refused to open themselves for the Gospel.

The third and final book originated as a PhD in the field of moral theology as well. Matthew Tapie defended his PhD on Thomas Aquinas and his view on the observation of the Jewish law in 2012.<sup>18</sup> After a short period as visiting assistant professor of theology at the Catholic University of America, and shorter periods at Georgetown University and Loyola University in Maryland, he has recently started his new job as assistant professor of theology and director of the Center for Catholic-Jewish studies at Saint Leo University in Florida. Since Tapie has discussed his views in the previous *Jaarboek*, I can suffice with a somewhat shorter description.<sup>19</sup> Tapie’s book starts with an introductory chapter on the history of supersessionism as an almost perennial attitude of the Church towards Judaism. Tapie uses the work of Jules Isaac and of R. Kendall Soulen to make a distinction between economic supersessionism (God has replaced Israel with the Church because Christ has fulfilled the ceremonial Jewish law) and punitive supersessionism (God has replaced Israel with the Church because of the sins of the Jews). In the second chapter, he focuses on the discussion about Aquinas and supersessionism: was Aquinas a representative of a specific form of supersessionism or not? On the

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<sup>18</sup> M.A. Tapie, *Aquinas on Israel and the Church: the Question of Supersessionism in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> See M.A. Tapie, ‘Out of Zion the Deliverer Shall Come: St. Thomas Aquinas on Jewish Worship as *Figura praesentis spiritualis beneficii*’, in H.J.M. Schoot (ed.), *Jaarboek 2013 Thomas Instituut Utrecht*, pp. 77-109.

one hand, the Jewish scholar Michael Wyschogrod argues that Aquinas teaches that Jewish observance of the Law after Christ is obsolete and sinful. On the other hand, Matthew Levering argues that Aquinas does not hold a form of punitive supersessionism, but he does not adequately distinguish this from economic supersessionism. In the final part of this chapter, Tapie discusses the more specific interpretations of supersessionism in Aquinas by two well-known scholars of Aquinas: Bruce Marshall and Steven Boguslawski. One of the problems in the entire discussion about Aquinas and supersessionism is, according to Tapie, that it concentrates entirely on texts about the ceremonial laws from the *Summa theologiae* and neglects Aquinas's much richer expositions in his commentary on the letters ascribed to Saint Paul. Therefore, the heart of Tapie's book consists of four chapters that introduce Aquinas' commentaries on the letters to the Hebrews, Romans, Galatians and Ephesians. His survey ends in the conclusion that we have three "Rival Versions of Christ's Fulfillment of the Law" as the title of chapter eight reads. One version, derived from the commentaries on Hebrews and Galatians, says that Jewish fulfillment of the law after Christ is fulfilled, destroyed and deadly (= economic supersessionism). The second version, derived from the commentary on Ephesians, says that it is fulfilled and destroyed (= economic supersessionism mixed with post-supersessionist resources), while the third version, derived from the commentary on Romans, says that it is fulfilled and upheld (= post-supersessionist resources). So Aquinas is much more positive on the present Jewish fulfillment of the Law in the commentary on Romans than in his other commentaries, or in his *Summa theologiae*. At this point I have a question on method: Tapie's presentation is very careful and balanced, and yet I do not exactly understand what type of argument he wants to make about the "rival versions".<sup>20</sup> He does not seem to work with a chronological

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<sup>20</sup> The language evokes of course the famous book by A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame IN, 1990) quoted on page 185 but not in the bibliography. The same book is discussed by Decosimo because of its alleged Augustinian interpretation of Aquinas.

hypothesis as a way to explain the differences, nor does he discuss stylistic differences between Aquinas's commentaries on the Pauline letters.<sup>21</sup> The only reason that he gives for the somewhat singular order of his presentation of Aquinas's commentaries in chapters 4-7 (Hebrews, Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians) is the different ways of relating the grace of Christ to the people of Israel according to Aquinas' prologue to the Pauline commentaries (page 57-59). Yet, the consequence of such an approach should be that Tapie analyzes the different relations between the Jewish observance of the Law and the grace of Christ as three different facets of a nuanced discourse rather than as three rival versions. Moreover, Aquinas tries to do justice to the nuances in Paul's discourse and therefore in his commentary he tries to be faithful to the specific accent that Paul emphasizes in his rhetoric. This is how I understand Tapie's argument that "Aquinas provides a model of reading of Scripture that is open to the possibility of locating and repairing inconsistencies" (185). Yet he seems to force his interpretation of Aquinas a bit in saying that "In the same way that Aquinas invoked 'Aristotle against Aristotle,' Aquinas seems to invoke a positive Pauline statement on the value of circumcision to overturn the negative Pauline statement that Jewish Law has no value after Christ" (185). At the end of his book, Tapie comes back to the conversation with Michael Wyschogrod that encapsulates his motivation to write this book: in his commentary on Romans 11, Aquinas states that it would be unfitting (*inconueniens*) if the prerogatives of the Jewish people were to be abrogated on account of the Jewish unbelief in Christ, as this would call into question the faithfulness of God. When Tapie explained this to Wyschogrod, he answered, "it would not simply be 'unfitting.' It would be unacceptable." (188). So I think that it would be incorrect to say that the positive statement about Jewish observations after Christ in the commentary to Romans outweighs the negative statements in his commentary on the other letters and in the *Summa theologiae*. It is correct, however, to say that Aquinas shows openness for multiple possible readings, as he often does in his commentaries on

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<sup>21</sup> Tapie adds a footnote on the problem of working with a chronological hypothesis regarding Aquinas's Scriptural commentaries on page 179.



Scripture. And I also think that we can – and must – read Aquinas nowadays in a way that maximizes openness to others rather than narrowness, even if Aquinas expressed himself in his own historical context in a way that seemed to favor narrowness. We must do so because of the historical realities in which we live. After the Holocaust or the *Shoah*, *inconveniens* indeed can no longer simply mean unfitting, but it means unacceptable. Not because a Jewish scholar says so, but because he has made us sensitive to realities that we have overlooked. In this case, Tapie of course can agree with Wyschogrod because of the important role of the letter to the Romans in the history of the origins of *Nostra Aetate*, fifty years ago.<sup>22</sup> We should be aware though, that such a benevolent interpretation, as advocated by Decosimo as well, is our decision, albeit facilitated by theological possibilities that Aquinas provides us with.

Finally, it is the combination of such attentive readings and of the willingness to ponder these benevolent interpretations that makes Bauerschmidt, Decosimo and Tapie more than hillbilly Thomists. Even though they have no obvious connection to the Thomas Instituut of Utrecht, it is indeed fitting – *conveniens* – that their work is discussed in the *Jaarboek*. After all, they have been guests or will be guests at the conferences of the Thomas Instituut as well.

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<sup>22</sup> M.A. Tapie points to this in the *Introduction* to his book (p. 1-6) as I do in my *Preface* to the same book (p. ix-xii).