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CHRIST CRUCIFIED CONTESTED.  
THOMAS AQUINAS ANSWERING OBJECTIONS FROM JEWS AND MUSLIMS

*Henk Schoot*

Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) ranks among the most influential philosophers and theologians in the West. In the course of less than two decades, he wrote and dictated a great number of works, most of which are still read today. Among them are commentaries on biblical books and philosophical works (e.g. Aristotle, Boethius), and theological syntheses such as the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*. He wrote many short treatises as well, in which he responded to questions that people addressed to him as an expert, in the hope of obtaining some useful answers. In fact, all of Aquinas' writing was in response to some need or some request. Most of his writing is meant for students in the arts or in theology. But his large *Summa contra Gentiles* is said to have been written at the request of Raymundus of Peñaforte, Aquinas' former master general, who was the driving force behind the Dominican effort to preach the gospel to Jews, Muslims and 'heretics'. Whether this *Summa contra Gentiles* actually is a handbook written for missionaries in the Iberian peninsula or, on the contrary, much wider in scope is still a matter of dispute. But it is without any doubt that most of what Aquinas has to say about dialogue with those who are not Christian, and about Islam or Muhammad, is contained in this work.

In the same period that Aquinas was working on his *Summa contra Gentiles*, he received some questions from a certain cantor living in Antioch. At the time, Antioch was a crusader city state. It was constituted in the period after the first crusade, at the end of the eleventh century, and was about to be recaptured by Egyptian Muslims in 1267. There was a Dominican presence in Antioch, and perhaps the cantor was a Dominican himself. In any case, he wrote a letter to Thomas Aquinas, presenting him with a number of religious questions that had apparently arisen from contacts with Jews, Muslims and Eastern Christians. It is from Aquinas' answer to this letter, entitled *De Rationibus Fidei*, that we shall offer a few pages in translation, concerning the person of Christ in the foreground, and the doctrine of religion, divine providence and human free will in the background.<sup>1</sup> We have chosen this text, because in the vast work of Aquinas it is one of two instances where 'Jews', 'Christians' and 'Muslims' are mentioned in one breath. Aquinas indicates some basic insight that is common to the three Abrahamic religions. This text forms a good specimen of the way in which Aquinas contributes to the discussions with Jews and Muslims in his day.<sup>2</sup>

### **Aquinas and Islam**

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<sup>1</sup>...There are several suggestions for dating Aquinas' answer. Some propose 1264 (Grabmann, Walz-Novarina, Weisheipl), others 1265 (Gauthier) and yet others shortly after 1265 (Dondaine, Torrell). Cf. J.-P. Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin, Sa personne et son oeuvre* (Paris/Fribourg Suisse, 1993/2002), pp. 182-83. All agree, however, on the fact that the answer must have been written shortly after completing the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which took place, according to the most recent findings, in 1265.

<sup>2</sup>...*S. Thomae de Aquino, Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita* (Romae: Commissio Leonina, 1969), t. 40, ed. by H.-F. Dondaine. See: *Traité 'Les Raisons de la Foi' et 'Les Articles de la Foi et les Sacraments de l'Église'*, Introduction, traduction du latin et annotation par Gilles Emery (Paris, 1999). *De Rationibus Fidei*, Kommentierte lateinisch-deutsche Textausgabe von Ludwig Hagemann und Reinhold Gleiß (Altenberge, 1987). J. Kenny, 'Saint Thomas Aquinas, Reasons for the Faith Against Muslim Objections (and One Objection of the Greeks and Armenians) to the Cantor of Antioch', *Islamochristiana*, 22 (1996) 31-52. *Rekenschap van het geloof. Antwoord op bezwaren van moslims, joden en oosterse christenen*. De Latijnse tekst, ingeleid, vertaald en geannoteerd door Henk Schoot (Zoetermeer, 2003). The English translation offered in this contribution is mine.

Thomas Aquinas, being raised in the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino from the early age of six years, did his first studies at the University in Naples, where the famous emperor Frederic II reigned. It was here that he met for the first time with the philosophy of Aristotle, the fascination for which would never leave him. Aquinas would employ and reinterpret Aristotle in undertaking his most important tasks: explaining the Bible, disputing theological questions, and preaching. One can hardly pinpoint any area of theology where Aristotle is not employed: whether it is the doctrine of God, the question of the eternity of the world, the discussion of human moral life, natural law, politics, anthropology. His influence is everywhere. One could call this ‘Greek’ influence, but because of the way Aristotle was transmitted to the west, it is Islamic as well. For it is through a number of Islamic scholars that the West received most of the teaching of Aristotle: their Arabic translations as well as their commentaries were translated into Latin and studied in the West. In fact, whenever one tries to describe Aquinas’ relation to Islam, one should make a distinction between Islam as a religion, and Islam as the religion of a number of very great philosophers. Aquinas had a vast knowledge of the works of the Muslim scholars Ibn Sīnā (980-1037), al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198). They made a large contribution to Aquinas’ thought on questions such as the attributes of God, fatalism, God’s knowledge of singulars, naming the divine, the human soul, and the relation between reason and revelation.<sup>3</sup>

Surveying Aquinas’ scattered remarks on Muslims (*Sarraceni*)<sup>4</sup>, however, one cannot but gain the impression that his knowledge of Islam as a religion is quite limited, and his position rather polemical. Still, at some points Aquinas admits, by clear implication, that the God of Muslims must be the same as the God of the Christians. He mentions that Muslims (and Jews) do not deny that God is one and almighty.<sup>5</sup> He also compares the divine promises given to Muslims (rivers of milk and honey), with those given to the Jews (the promised land) and to the Christians (to be glorious as angels).<sup>6</sup> Another instance of what Muslims, Jews and Christians have in common, says Aquinas, is their common religiousness, which implies that they hold that all of nature and all human acts are subject to divine providence. It should lead them to investigate the intelligibility of divine providence, instead of assuming that there is either no created causality in reality (occasionalism – God directly causes all that happens; laws of nature do not exist), or holding that everything happens according to necessity (fatalism). Some aspects of these views of Aquinas are contained in the text that we will present below.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>...There is a hermeneutical difficulty here that I cannot avoid. To distinguish between Muslim religion or theology on the one hand, and Muslim philosophy on the other might betray a modern preoccupation, just as the general distinction between theology and philosophy seems to be, in its sharp form, introduced into Aquinas only afterwards. But without this distinction one may be led to consider Aquinas’ study of e.g. Arabic philosophy (or Jewish philosophy for that matter) as part of his interest in Islam (or Judaism). These writers, however, are not valued by Aquinas for their Islamic descent, but for the power of their reasoning. Therefore we chose not to address Aquinas’ dealing with Arabic philosophers, even though we admit the validity of the opposite choice, also in view of Aquinas’ position that only a rational argumentation, not one based on revelation, can be employed when discussing with Muslims (see below).

<sup>4</sup>...On some 30 occasions in total, including employment of the alternative *Mauri*, and the name of Muh%ammad .

<sup>5</sup>...*Super Decretalem* 1.

<sup>6</sup>...*Collationes in decem preceptis* 1, XII (ed. J.-P. Torrell, *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 69 (1985), 5-40).

<sup>7</sup>...*De Rationibus Fidei* 7; cf. *Summa contra Gentiles* III 97.15, where Aquinas mentions commentators on the Qur’an who hold occasionalist views. Cf. also *Summa contra Gentiles* III 65,10 and 69,1. In *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate* 5,9 ad 4 and *Quaestiones De Potentia* 3,7c, Aquinas traces occasionalism to the book *Fons Vitae* by the Jewish philosopher Ibn Gabirol (c. 1021-1058), and mentions Maimonides (1135-1204) who says that it is held by commentators of the Qur’an. On the other hand Aquinas reproaches Muslims for holding fatalism: *De Rationibus Fidei* 10.

It seems that Aquinas' major problems with Islam are, in fact, concerned with two issues. One of these issues is absent in *De Rationibus Fidei*, but is addressed as many as eight times in the rest of Aquinas' work: the question of whether there will be physical pleasure after the general resurrection.<sup>8</sup> Time and again Aquinas reproaches both Jews and Muslims for holding that human happiness consists of eating, sexual intercourse, and other physical pleasures.<sup>9</sup> Eternal bliss, however, is the reward for virtue, and therefore cannot be associated with these.

The other major issue Aquinas addresses is closely related to the one just mentioned. It concerns the nature of Muslim belief which, for Aquinas, is connected too much with these promises of carnal pleasures. Aquinas considers Muslim belief as a kind of unbelief<sup>10</sup> which betrays credulity as well. The spread of Christianity was a miraculous affair where both Jesus' preaching, as well as the preaching by the Apostles, were a miracle in themselves through their strength and vigor. Aquinas refers to Augustine, who seems to have said that the rich were won by the poor preaching poverty, and the wise by idiots who preached a knowledge which goes beyond understanding.<sup>11</sup> People came to a Christian faith that contains a truth which is hard to swallow: mysteries of faith beyond reason, contempt for the world, and keeping physical pleasure in check. Arguments, miracles and inspiration worked in this persuasion of people. Through their death the Apostles attracted believers. But the spread of Islam did not know of arguments, of miracles, of wisdom. People were forced by the power of arms and attracted by the promises of carnal pleasures. There was no testimony of preceding prophets, and Muhammad's followers were forbidden to read either Testament. Those who were persuaded were brutal men and desert wanderers, not wise men, but easily persuaded and credulous.<sup>12</sup>

A certain aspect of this view returns in the text offered below, albeit rather implicitly. Aquinas' stress on the poverty of Christ serves to distinguish the ways in which Christianity and Islam were spread. Muhammad was rich and lived a worldly life, whereas Christ was poor, suffered badly, did not assume any public office, and had no power but the power of his word and the power to perform signs. So the spread of Islam can be explained on the basis of circumstances within the world, but the propagation of Christianity can not; this spread is miraculous and has divine origins.

So, Aquinas' approach to Islam seems to be dominated by the alleged carnality of both Muhammad's promises and its picture of life eternal. They make Aquinas doubt the nature of Islamic belief in the first place, since it seems to be established on wrong premises. Christians and Muslims, however, share their belief in one almighty God, who rules the world providentially. Being religious means worshipping the divinity to whom all are subjected.<sup>13</sup>

## Aquinas and Judaism

<sup>8</sup>...Cf. *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 27, 11; IV 83, 13; *In IV Sententiarium* III 21, 2, 4, arg. 1; IV 44, 1, 3, 4, 4m; *In I Cor* 15, 1. 3; 1. 5; 1. 7; *In Symb. Apostol.* 11. For this reason J. Weisheipl is not entirely correct in asserting that "...the reply to the cantor of Antioch is a summary of the main problems faced in the *Summa* against the Muslims, Greek and Armenians, all of them embraced in the title of 'Gentiles'." (*Friar Thomas d'Aquino. His life, thought and works* (Garden City N.Y., 1974, 1983), p. 176)

<sup>9</sup>...As for the Jews, Aquinas may have derived this information from Matt. 22,28 (the woman will have one of seven husbands in the resurrection).

<sup>10</sup>...*In Ps* 2, 1. 6.

<sup>11</sup>...*In I Cor* 15, 1. 1.

<sup>12</sup>...*Summa contra Gentiles* I, 6 and *In I Cor* 15, 1. 1.

<sup>13</sup>...Other points of dissension that Aquinas mentions are the concept of accidental divine attributes and the legitimacy of divorce. In passing Aquinas mentions the Muslim habit of eating at night, and the adoration of the tomb of Muhammad.

Aquinas' position vis-à-vis the Jews of his day is much more complicated than his approach to the Muslim faith.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the Muslims, Jews are part of Medieval Western society. Unlike the Muslims, Jews have a Law that is part of Christian Scripture as well. Jesus was a Jew.

Aquinas acknowledges these differences. He is well aware of Jesus' descent, calling him, once, '*Frater Iudaeorum*'.<sup>15</sup> Since, for him, salvation history revolves around the person and work of Jesus Christ, Aquinas interprets the Old Testament as prefiguring Christ. Sometimes this is the literal meaning, for instance of some psalms, whereas at other times Christ is prefigured in the hidden, spiritual meaning of the Old Testament. To Aquinas this does not mean any depreciation of the Jewish Scriptures. Since it is his view that Christ was the Messiah to come, and would fulfil the Tora, he cannot interpret it otherwise.<sup>16</sup> In fact, of course, such a method of interpretation was already dominant among the writers of the New Testament themselves.

An interesting case, in this respect, is Aquinas' evaluation of circumcision in the days of the Old Testament. In the course of his lifetime he changes his view on the question of whether this 'sacrament of the old law' can be considered to effect, as such, its salvific work, or not. At first, Aquinas endorsed the view that it did, that it was able to bestow grace upon those circumcised, in a direct manner. Later on, he abandoned this position. Circumcision was still able to confer grace, but only inasmuch as it is connected with belief in Christ to come, prefiguring baptism in Christ. Some consider this change in Aquinas an unhappy one, since it diminishes Aquinas' appreciation of this Jewish rite on its own merits. Others, however, consider it the consequence of a Christ-centered theology that nevertheless allows for a salvific sacrament among the Jewish people in the days of old.<sup>17</sup>

Jews who still wait for the Messiah to come, are wrong in the eyes of Thomas. This, however, does not mean that they are to be considered as heretics. Aquinas himself considers contemporary Judaism as a kind of disbelief, somewhere in the middle between pagan unbelief (not expecting any Messiah at all) and heresy (denying the truth of Christian belief formerly accepted).<sup>18</sup> But in his day, especially among his fellow Dominicans, there was an increasing tendency to view Rabbinical Judaism and the books of the Talmud as heretical. Rabbinical Judaism was seen as heretical both in the sense that in not recognizing Christ it fails to acknowledge its own Law, and therefore loses the status of legitimate heir to this Law, and in the sense that it poses a threat to Christians since it could lead them to abandon their faith. The Talmud was burnt on several occasions, one of which was in Paris in 1242, shortly before Aquinas' first arrival there. Aquinas, however, never subscribed to this negative view on Rabbinical Judaism.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Aquinas must be considered as rather 'conservative'

<sup>14</sup>...A more elaborate account can be found in H. Schoot and P. Valkenberg, 'Thomas Aquinas and Judaism', *Modern Theology*, 20:1 (2004) 51-70.

<sup>15</sup>...*In IV Libri Sententiarum* IV 1,2,2, qua. 3.

<sup>16</sup>... "The people of the Jews were elected by God to give birth to Christ. And therefore it had to be that the total status of this people would be prophetic and figurative, as Augustine says", *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 104, 2, 2m.

<sup>17</sup>...Richard Schenk, 'Covenant initiation: Thomas Aquinas and Robert Kilwardby on the Sacrament of Circumcision', in *Ordo Sapientiae et Amoris. Image et Message de Saint Thomas d'Aquin à travers les récentes études historiques, herméneutiques et doctrinales*, Hommage au professeur Jean-Pierre Torrell OP à l'occasion de son 65<sup>e</sup> anniversaire, ed. by Carlos-Josaphat Pinto de Oliveira OP (Fribourg, Suisse, 1993), pp. 555-93. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, 37,1 where Aquinas lists seven grounds for Christ's circumcision, the second of which consists of the approval of circumcision as a divine institution itself, and the third argues that through his circumcision Jesus explicitly proves himself to belong to Abraham's race.

<sup>18</sup>...*Summa Theologiae* II-II 10,5 and 11,1. Such a distinction influences e.g. the question whether Christians are allowed to communicate with non-Christians, cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II 10,9 c and 2m; here Aquinas confirms the traditional position that the Church has no spiritual power over the Jews, 'since they are outside', as Paul is quoted (1 Cor 5, 12), and therefore cannot inflict spiritual punishment such as excommunication.

<sup>19</sup>...This 'heresy-thesis' is brought forward by Jeremy Cohen (*The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (New York, 1982)), and caused much debate. The thesis was challenged by a.o. Robert Chazan, who maintains that the condemnation of the Talmud by the Church was not founded on a general

regarding Jewish matters. He seems to have been strongly opposed to the practice of earning money by lending money, following the traditional Christian ban on usury. Whether this point made him liable to the reproach of providing, later on, the wrong people with the wrong pretext for confiscating Jewish property, is debatable.<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, however, favors the legal rights that Jews are given by canon law, regards it as unlawful for the church to intervene in internal Jewish affairs, and is strongly opposed to anything like forced baptism of Jewish children.<sup>21</sup> No verbal abuse against Jews is recorded in his entire writings, and no spreading of popular tales concerning, for example, Jewish sacrifice of Christian children or Jewish ‘schemes’ to deceive Christians.

### The Method Used

Aquinas is well aware of the need to distinguish between arguments taken from reason, and authoritative arguments taken from revelation. In fact, the relationship between reason and revelation is one of the topics that will motivate Aquinas’ authorship during his entire life, of which the period of the *Summa contra Gentiles* that we are dealing with now, is only one stage. But the Antiochene cantor himself asks for ‘*rationes morales et philosophicas*’, because these might convince those with whom Christians do not share any holy writ, i.e. the Muslims (*De Rationibus Fidei* 1). Aquinas, when formulating some general remarks on how to dispute with infidels, at the outset of *De Rationibus Fidei* (2), draws up a distinction quite similar to the one he draws in his *Summa contra Gentiles* (I, 7-9). The doctrine of the faith that is contained in the articles of faith, which is, in fact, the object of the questions formulated by the Antiochene cantor, surpasses human reason. Human reason cannot prove its truth. We can only rely on God’s authority, and believe his word. But, on the other hand, its truth cannot be conclusively refuted either. For divine truth is not opposed to human truth, which means that God’s truth cannot be proven wrong on the basis of human reasoning. ‘Only the false is opposed to the true’, as Aquinas remarks in *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 7. The Author of divinely revealed truth is also the Author of our human mind, the principles of which are naturally known by all, and through which natural reason works. Therefore the one and the other cannot be opposed. Thus, presenting Christian apologetics to those who do not

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conviction, but on a number of specific abuses and errors that former Jews signalled in the texts. The accusations reflect internal Jewish dissatisfaction with rabbinic legislation, told to a Christian public as evidence of Jewish malfeasance. Cf. Robert Chazan, ‘The condemnation of the Talmud Reconsidered (1239-1248)’, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 55 (1988), 11-30 and Cohen’s response in *Living Letters of the Law. Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1999), part IV: ‘The friars reconsidered’. Cohen interprets Aquinas’ position as essentially ambiguous. Despite Aquinas’ endorsement of the traditional Augustinian view of contemporary Jews as useful witnesses, he seems to blur the distinction between Rabbinic Judaism and heresy. Cohen founds this interpretation on a study of Aquinas’ remarks on who is to blame for the crucifixion and the related question of whether at least some Jews believed in Christ or knew who he was.

<sup>20</sup>...John Hood defends this position in his *Aquinas and the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1995). Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II 78,1, 2m.

<sup>21</sup>...Aquinas confirms the usual opinion of his day that Jews are to be considered slaves of the Church, and that no new situations in which Jews are in authority over Christians are to be accepted (*Summa Theologiae* II-II 10,10 c). On some matters of mostly financial government of Jews, cf. Aquinas’ *Epistola ad ducissam Brabantiae* (better: *ad comitissam Flandriae*). On forced baptism of children, cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II 10, 12, on forced conversion, cf. II-II 10,8, on communication with unbelievers and the question of spiritual power over outsiders, cf. II-II 10,9. In this *quaestio* about unbelievers Aquinas also confirms the Augustinian view that the Jewish rites are, unlike those of other non-Christians, to be tolerated because such tolerance is good. Tolerance is sometimes admitted because it avoids unhappy consequences of interference such as dissent or scandal. But Jewish rites are of old to be interpreted as signs of the future events concerning Christ and the Church. Aquinas seems to think that their existence provides an independent testimony of the truth of Christian faith: Christians did not invent the prophecies of the coming of Christ, as the preserved Jewish scriptures attest.

share the holy scriptures would seem to be a fruitless enterprise. It undertakes to prove the counter argumentation to be false, to unveil what is opposed to revealed truth as error. Its thrust, however, is not entirely negative: ‘...that which is above the human reason we believe only because God has revealed it. Nevertheless, there are certain likely arguments that should be brought forth in order to make divine truth known. This should be done for the training and consolation of the faithful, and not with any idea of refuting those who are adversaries.’ (*Summa contra Gentiles* I, 9).

This analysis explains why certain lines of argumentation, also in the work at hand, do not seem to belong to a dialogue with adversaries, but are aimed at strengthening Christians themselves. Some arguments are meant to destroy the arguments brought forward against Christian articles of faith, whereas others seem to do no more than establish the logical and factual order of the divine economy of salvation. Arguments for the fittingness of the incarnation, for example, are of this order.

Aquinas’ major interest in the questions here is in Muslim positions, and much less with Jewish or Eastern Christian ones. When the Eastern questioning of purgatory arises (in nr. 9), clearly a different type of argumentation is selected, directly engaged in detailed exegesis of scripture. Aquinas could have chosen to search for arguments in the Jewish writings. A few years later, when Raymundo Martini’s *Pugio Fidei* appears, which was to be the major medieval sourcebook for Christian disputation with Jews, this would become the new Dominican strategy. But Aquinas does not make such a choice. In fact, no Jewish texts are referred to. The major emphasis in this work, even though Jews are mentioned and some objections could be Jewish as well, is on Muslim views of the Christian God and Christ. But the absence of Jewish texts shows that, even if Jewish views are considered, Aquinas is not part of the new Dominican effort that attempts to convince Jews of the Christian interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth by appealing to their own holy scriptures, especially the Talmud.

### Introducing the Text

The text that we translated is a part of a small work which came to be known as *De Rationibus Fidei*: ‘On the Reasons for the Faith’. This title refers to one of the main texts from Scripture that has inspired Christian apologetics: 1 Peter 3,15. Aquinas quotes this text at the outset: ‘...and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope and the faith that is in you.’ Aquinas answers some eight questions that have been put before him by this otherwise unknown Antiochene cantor. Apparently these questions have arisen in the contacts with Muslims, Jews, and Christians of the Eastern rite, i.e. the Greek-Orthodox and the Armenians.

Aquinas considers the questions as central ones. They are central regarding the Christian faith, which primarily consists of the confession of the Holy Trinity and the salvific value of the suffering and death of Christ. They are also central to the Christian hope, which is focused upon what is expected after death, and upon divine assistance when freely striving to merit this future bliss. These four central issues, concerned with the two theological virtues of faith and hope, divide the eight questions into four categories:

Faith: Holy Trinity

Why do you call Christ the Son of God, when God has no wife?

Are you insane to profess three persons in God, which results in a belief in three gods?

Faith: Christ crucified

Is it not ridiculous to say that Christ the Son of God was crucified for the salvation of man?

Assuming that God is almighty, could he not have saved humanity in a different way?

Could he not even have created humanity without its faculty for sin?

Do Christians not eat their God daily on the altar, and even if Christ's body were as large as a mountain, is it not eaten up by now?

Hope: Eternal life

a) Is it right to assume that the souls after death, since they lack their bodies, can be neither punished nor rewarded, but stay in a certain waiting room, waiting for judgment day?

Hope: Human free will

Is it right to say that a man can only die, and even only sin, if God has thus predestined him, and that divine foreknowledge or decree imposes necessity on human actions?

In developing his answer, Aquinas first deals with the concept of generation when reflecting upon the Triune God, and explains the Christian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, focusing upon the Spirit. Next he treats two central issues concerning the Son: why did he become man, and how should one analyze the statement 'God has become man', demonstrating his understanding of the central christological dogma of the two natures and one person in Christ. This together forms the first category, devoted to the Holy Trinity. The third and fourth category both treat one issue: the existence of purgatory, a moot point in the relation between Western and Eastern Christianity, and the question of divine predestination in view of, among other issues, Muslim fatalism. The text that we present belongs to the second category, however, concerning Christ crucified Aquinas devotes one single exposition (covering the numbers 5-7) to the three questions mentioned under a – c, of which the central one is the first: how can one understand that the Word of God has suffered and died, and how does it fit into Gods economy of salvation? We take up the last part of Aquinas' exposition, where the questions are answered.

### ***De Rationibus Fidei* – on the Reasons for the Faith**

7. How it should be interpreted that the Word of God has suffered and died, and that no unfitness follows from this.

The foregoing shows sufficiently that from our confession that God, i.e. the only begotten Word of God, has suffered and died, nothing unfitting follows. For we do not attribute this to him according to his divine nature, but according to his human nature, which he assumed into the unity of his person for our salvation.

The text in the numbers 5 en 6, preceding the text offered here, deals with the incarnation as such, with the mysterious union of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. Aquinas explains his understanding of the so-called hypostatic union, the union of both natures in the hypostasis, the person of Christ. He underlines the fact that we are dealing with a mystery that transcends human understanding, and indicates that the things that are said about Christ can be distinguished; some things are said of him according to his divine nature, whereas other things are said according to his human nature. This does not lead to a separation in Christ, and Aquinas' explanation can certainly not be translated into a sort of biography about him. It serves however, on a metalevel, or a level of second order, as an analysis of that which is narrated about Christ in Scripture, and leads to the idea that whatever way in which Christ acts or suffers, neither is ever isolated from either divinity or humanity; they always imply both divinity and humanity. So it is true to say that God suffers, when talking about Christ's cross. On the other hand it is only true in the way that Christ, or the Son of God, is thought to suffer according to his human nature. Following this tack, at least some of the Jewish and Muslim objections may be answered.

The long exposition on the hypostatic union is brought to bear upon the question, attributed to Muslims, about the suffering of the Son of God. God's unspeakable perfection, his eminence or his loftiness, are not in danger. When the Son of God suffers, he does so according to his human nature.

Aquinas now turns to the second question asked, concerning the way in which God has saved humanity. Could it not have been done in a different way?

Now, someone might object that God, since he is almighty, could have saved the human race otherwise than by the death of his only-begotten Son. Such a person, however, ought to observe that in God's deeds we must consider what was the fitting way of acting, even if he could have acted differently. Otherwise such an argument will render all God's deeds arbitrary. Thus if it is asked why God has made a heaven of such a size, and why he has created stars in such numbers, a wise thinker will look for what was fitting for God to do, even though he could have done otherwise. I say this in line with our faith that the whole disposition of nature as well as human acts are subject to divine providence. For without this belief all worship of divinity is excluded. Yet, we undertake the present discussion with those in view who consider themselves worshippers of God, whether they are Christians, Muslims or Jews. With those who say, on the contrary, that everything proceeds necessarily from God, I have discussed (the issue) at length elsewhere.

Aquinas explains elsewhere that whenever people attempt to develop knowledge of processes that depend directly on the will of God, and do not happen according to law, they must rely on Scripture and will never get beyond the discovery of a certain convenience or fittingness (cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, 1,3). One can indicate that the three days of Christ's death fit into the rest of salvation history (think for example of the prophet Jonah) but one can never reach, or even demonstrate, the reasons why God did what he did. The proper method of all historical soteriology is to indicate the fittingness of that which happened within the overall context of salvation history, and thus it constitutes Aquinas' primary method in, for example, christology, and dealing with Christ's acts and suffering.

This fundamental feature of Aquinas' methodology bears upon his dealing with other religions as well. One is not able to prove, by adducing rational or philosophical arguments, the truth of Christian beliefs concerning the person and work of Christ. One cannot do so for Christians, and one cannot do so for those who challenge Christian beliefs. The only way to proceed is twofold. We mentioned above a possible strategy for showing the inconsistencies in one's opponent's position. And here we meet the other strategy, which consists in showing the factual consistency and coherence of the Christian interpretation of the history of salvation.

Aquinas' short remark about the threatening arbitrariness of all God's deeds is telling. It betrays a conception of theology which was to be abandoned widely in the century to come, when theologians started to distinguish between God's almightiness and the actual exercise of it. It made a type of reflection common, which focuses on all God could have done, instead of what he has in fact done. Instead of reflecting, for example, on the best of all possible worlds, or on the best of all possible ways of saving the world, Aquinas concentrates on God's actual way of saving the world, and assumes that there is a historical and natural intelligibility to be found in it. God's deeds could have been otherwise, his freedom is in no way affected, but his actual working is not arbitrary and betrays a certain ground, aim, or reason.

It seems that Aquinas considers two alternatives. One may believe that the order of the world was produced out of necessity. This possibility Aquinas believes to be at odds with God's freedom and providence. He treats it in *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 23-24 and III, 72-73.

The alternative belief is the one that unites all those who are religious. Christians, Muslims and Jews commonly hold that nature as well as history is under God's free providential guidance. Only in the case of the latter, not of the former, does it make sense to ask why God has ordered things thus, and not otherwise. For when everything proceeds out of necessity, there is no 'otherwise'. It is quite interesting to see that, in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas refers to Maimonides' refutation of some Muslim commentators: 'What has been said shuts out two errors, the error of those who believe that all things follow mere will without reason, which is the error of some commentators of the Islamic law, as Rabbi Moses says; according to whose teaching, the only difference between fire warming and fire freezing is God's willing the former alternative; and again the error is shut out of those who say that the order of causes springs from divine providence by way of necessity.' (*Summa contra Gentiles* III 97,15) Aquinas proposes to avoid both unhappy alternatives of divine arbitrariness, or occasionalism and fatalism. It is clear from this quotation, compared to section 12 of *De Rationibus Fidei*, that in Aquinas' view both opinions can be found among Muslim scholars, and consequently that there is not one uniform Muslim position here.

There is only one other instance in the works of Aquinas, where he mentions Christians, Muslims and Jews in one breath, as he does here. When preaching on the first of the ten commandments (see above), Aquinas holds that God's promise to the Christians was the largest. Muslims have been promised rivers of milk and honey, and Jews the promised land, but to Christians God has promised the glory of angels. See also Aquinas' commentary on the Creed (*Firmiter*) formulated by the Lateran Council in 1215 (*Super Decretalem* 1). There Aquinas states that Christians share with Jews and Muslims the belief in one almighty God.

Now if someone will consider, with a pious intention, the fittingness of the passion and death of Christ, he will find such profound wisdom, that, every time he thinks about it, more and greater things will present themselves to him, so that he can experience as true what the Apostle says: 'We are preaching a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot surmount, to the gentiles foolishness, but to us Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God.' And again: 'God's folly is wiser than human wisdom.' [I Corinthians 1. 23-25].

This remark is very similar to the one Aquinas makes in *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, 53: 'However, if one earnestly and devoutly weighs the mysteries of the incarnation, he will find so great a depth of wisdom that it exceeds human knowledge. In the Apostle's words: 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men' (I Corinthians 1. 25). Hence it happens that to him who devoutly considers it, more and more wondrous aspects of this mystery are made manifest.'

Aquinas quotes from the New Testament, which marks that his discussion has primarily a Christian audience in mind. The text offered here contains, in fact, five quotations from the New Testament. All of them are employed to wrap up an argument, and to indicate that that which is developed is indeed a central view in Scripture: the crucified Christ contested by Jews and gentiles; the seeming foolishness of the cross; Christ's suffering as an example for his followers; the expected persecution of Christ and his disciples alike; Christ's vicarious suffering.

The quotation here from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians ('a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot surmount, to the gentiles foolishness, but to us Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God.'), explains why Jews and Muslims formulate their complaints. Their positions are, from Aquinas' standpoint, both philosophical and theological, which means that they will be both scandalized by this assertion that the Word of God has suffered and died, and tend to ridicule it. Jews do not expect their Messiah to be crucified. Jesus was crucified, and therefore could not have been the Messiah. When he nevertheless

pretended he was the Messiah, this claim should be considered blasphemous and offensive. Aquinas does not go into this line of reasoning, however. He seems to concentrate on the asserted irrational or foolish character of believing that the Word of God has suffered and died. More specifically, he focuses not so much on possible Muslim authorities from their Holy Writ, but on the alleged lack of rationality. Aquinas seems unaware of the denial in the Qur'an of Jesus' suffering and death (4, 157/158).<sup>22</sup> It says that he was lifted up to heaven in advance, or replaced by another person. So Aquinas attempts to establish an inner logic of the incarnation, suffering and death of Christ: a certain rationality or plausibility, which leads man to appreciate why what happened, happened. This, in turn, might seduce one into accepting a certain fittingness of the suffering and death of the Word of God.

Aquinas unfolds his argument in three steps, addressing virtue, truth, and the orders of justice and human nature. The suffering and death of Christ set an example of virtue for his followers, the weakness and lowliness of it serves the credibility of his teaching, and his innocent suffering and death for the sins of the world fits into God's justice and the nature of man, with his free will. The key to all three steps is lowliness, voluntarily assumed.

First of all, we must observe that Christ assumed a human nature to restore mankind after the fall, as we have said. Therefore, according to his human nature, Christ should have suffered and done whatever would serve as a remedy for sin. The sin of man consists mostly in cleaving to material goods while neglecting spiritual ones. Therefore it was fitting that the Son of God in his human nature showed, by the things he did and suffered, that men should consider temporal good and bad things as nothing, lest a disordered love for them impede them from being dedicated to spiritual things.

Thus Christ chose parents who were poor, but perfect in virtue, lest anyone glory in mere nobility of flesh and in the wealth of his parents. He led a poor life, to teach us to despise riches. He lived a life without public office or dignity, so as to withdraw men from a disordered desire for these honors. He underwent labor, thirst, hunger and bodily afflictions so that men would not be fixed on pleasure and delights and be drawn away from the good of virtue because of the hardships of this life. In the end he underwent death, so that no one would desert the truth because of fear of death. And lest anyone fear a shameful death for the sake of the truth, he chose the most horrible kind of death, that of the cross. Thus it was fitting that the Son of God made man should suffer death, and by his example provoke men to virtue, as is verified by what Peter said: 'Christ suffered for you, and left an example for you to follow in his steps.' [ I Peter 2. 21]

Then, not only good conduct which avoids sins is necessary for the salvation of man, but also the knowledge of truth so as to avoid errors. Therefore it was necessary for the restoration of the human race that the only-begotten Word of God, who assumed human nature, should ground people in sure knowledge of the truth. The truth, however, which is taught by man, does not always meet with firm belief, because man can both be deceived and deceive. Only through God is knowledge of the truth so confirmed that no doubt remains. So the Son of God made man had to propose to man the teaching of divine truth, showing its divine, not human, origin. He did this employing a multitude of miracles. For one who does things that only God can do, such as raising the dead, making the blind see, and the like, has to be believed in the things he says about God: he who operates in the name of God, consequently also speaks in the name of God.

Those who were present at the time could see his miracles, but those who lived afterwards could believe they were made up. But divine wisdom provided a remedy against this in the weakness of Christ. For if he had lived in the world as one who was

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<sup>22</sup>...See John of Damascus on this Sūra in the contribution of Valkenberg and Davids to this volume (note 58); for Muslim authors see Whittingham's contribution, note 9 and 24.

rich, powerful and established in high dignity, it could be thought that his teaching and miracles were accepted on account of his favoring of men and his human power. And therefore he chose everything that in the world is rejected and considered to be weak, in order to show his work as a work of divine power: a poor mother, a destitute life, uneducated disciples and messengers; and he chose to be rebuked and condemned, even to death, by the magnates of this world. This shows clearly that the acceptance of his miracles and his teaching was not brought about by human, but by divine power.

Thus, also in the things he did or suffered, human weakness and divine power were joined together at the same time. For when he was born he was wrapped in cloth and put into a manger, but praised by the angels and adored by the magi, who were led by a star. He was tempted by the devil, but served by the angels. He lived as a destitute beggar, but raised the dead and gave sight to the blind. He died fixed to the cross and was numbered among the thieves, but at his death the sun darkened, the earth quaked, rocks split, graves opened and the bodies of the dead were raised. Therefore, if anyone sees that from such beginnings such a great fruit comes forth, namely the conversion to Christ of almost the whole earth, and still asks for other signs to believe, he must be considered harder than stone. For when he died even rocks split asunder. Thus the Apostle says to the Corinthians : ‘ The word of the cross is foolishness for those who are dying, but for those who are saved, for us, it is the power of God.’ [ I Corinthians 1. 18]

There is something else which needs to be dealt with here. According to the same reason of providence which led the Son of God made man to want to suffer weakness in himself, he wanted his disciples, whom he established as ministers of human salvation, to be worthless in the eyes of the world. So he did not choose educated and noble people, but illiterate and ignoble ones, namely poor fishermen. When he sent them to take care of the salvation of men, he told them to observe poverty, to endure persecutions and insults and to be willing to undergo death for the truth, so that their preaching might not seem framed for the sake of some earthly interest, and that the salvation of the world might not be attributed to human, instead of divine, wisdom or strength only. Thus although they seemed worthless in the eyes of the world, they did not lack the divine power to operate miracles.

For the restoration of man it was necessary for men to learn not to proudly trust in themselves, but in God. For the perfection of human justice requires that man subject himself totally to God, from whom he hopes to receive every obtainable good, and to whom he owes gratitude for every good. There was no better way to teach the disciples to despise the present goods of this world and endure all sorts of adversity unto death than through the passion and death of Christ. Thus he himself told them: ‘If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too.’ [ John 15. 20]

The poverty Christ chose, leads up to his shameful death, and it teaches man to neglect all things earthly and material. Instead of these things, it is virtue we should strive for, and truth. It shows man how to refrain from sin, and is part of the remedy for it. Thomas underlines the poverty of Christ’s parents, and the poverty of his life. He draws attention to the absence of any public honor or dignity, and the hardships of Christ’s life, leading to a horrible death on the cross. In those who take heed, virtue is born, and Christ’s poverty is the first element that gives plausibility to the reason why the Word of God should suffer and die: to provide man with an impressive example.

Poverty and lowliness, however, do not only serve as an example, they are also the key to understanding the credibility of Christ’s preaching, its probable truth. This preaching has a divine origin, which is attested to by the miracles that Christ performed. However, those who

were not present could be led to believe that these miracles at the time were accepted for improper reasons; did Christ favor those who were present, was he in possession of earthly might and influence? But no, both Christ *and* his disciples lived a lowly life: no better ‘proof’ that what they said and did was not said and done on behalf of, and through, their own power. The miracles Christ performed are signs of the divine origin, of the truth of his teaching. His mother was poor, his life destitute, his disciples uneducated. In his weakness he shows his strength, in his poverty his richness, in his death, life. One must be made of stone to be able to resist the plausibility of these signs. And all of this does not only apply to Christ, but to his disciples as well. The success of their preaching could never be explained by only looking at their talents or knowledge, for they were as weak and poor as Christ was. There is no catch in their preaching, no hidden agenda or interest, and their voluntary poverty and willingness to undergo persecution, and even death, attests to that. Poverty and weakness, suffering and death, all of it means total subjection to God, total obedience to his calling and mission: there is no want of rationality here.

Aquinas’ remarks are quite similar to positions that are as old as the earliest debates between Christians and Jews on the one hand, and the emerging Islam on the other. Stroumsa has shown that one of the central themes in Islam, connected to the position of Muh%ammad , is prophethood. The very authenticity of the prophetic teaching of Muh%ammad was challenged by Christians, and called forth a genre of Muslim texts that enumerates the signs of true prophecy, or better: prophethood. Christianity, Stroumsa says, did not habitually refer to Christ as a prophet, or oppose Christ to Muh%ammad . Instead, Christian theologians developed a genre that is negative in character: it dwells on the characteristics of Jesus and his teaching which make it very unlikely to develop into a major religion without the help of divine providence. Among these characteristics, Jesus’ humble descent, his strict teaching on sexuality, and his opposition to the accumulation of wealth, rank high. In response to this, some Muslim scholars started picturing Muh%ammad in a very Christian way. The eleventh century `Abd al-Jabbār, a Mu`tazilite Qādī, attempts to demonstrate that Muh%ammad’s ‘victories were indeed miraculous, and not at all military; that Muh%ammad came from a humble family and that, consequently, it was not for earthly gain that his followers joined him; that his rejection by his tribe invalidates the accusation of *tašā`ub*; and that Muh%ammad’s message spread among many nations.’<sup>23</sup> The argument concerning the poverty of the disciples is traditional as well. The oldest known Christian-Arabic apologetic treatise already states: ‘Verily they were twelve men, poor, weak, strangers among people, without any possessions, without any authority in the world, without any money to bribe with, and without any acquainted person... etc.’.<sup>24</sup>

Finally we must observe that the order of justice requires that sin should be punished by a penalty. In human courts of justice it appears that cases of injustice are restored to

<sup>23</sup>...S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam. Ibn al Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden, 1999), p. 35. The argument of Muh%ammad ’s poverty can turn into quite something else, when directed against the Jews. Jeremy Cohen quotes Raymundo Martini’s *Capistrum Iudaeorum* (1267, Würzburg and Altenberge, 1990-93), where the author assumes the poverty of Muh%ammad: “If Muh%ammad, for instance, who at the outset was all alone, entirely uneducated, utterly impoverished, hated by his own kinsmen and foreigners alike, so far removed from our borders, and so obvious in his falsehood, could introduce so much corruption into the world on behalf of the devil -...” (*Living Letters of the Law*, p. 348). This poverty of Muh%ammad is opposed to the alleged richness of ‘the Jews’. Apparently Aquinas and Martini differ in their approach to Muh%ammad.

<sup>24</sup>... ‘The earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)’, in *Christian Arab Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, ed. by S.Kh. Samir and J.S. Nielsen (Leiden, 1994), pp. 57-114; pp. 102-3. Cf. ‘A worldly religion’ in *Seeing Islam as others saw it. A survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam*, ed. by Robert G. Hoyland (Princeton, 1997), pp. 541-44.

justice through a judge who, from the one who has received from someone else more than his due, takes away what is too much and gives it to the one who has less. Anyone who sins allows his will more than he should, for in satisfying his will he transgresses the order of reason and of divine law. For him to be brought back to the order of justice, something must be taken from what he wants. This happens when he is punished, either by taking away the goods that he wanted to have, or by imposing evil he does not wish to undergo.

This restoration of justice through punishment, sometimes takes place through the will of the one who is punished, when he imposes the punishment upon himself so as to return to justice. Sometimes, however, it takes place against his will and then he does not himself return to justice but justice is carried out in him. The whole human race was subject to sin. To return to justice a punishment that man would impose upon himself had to come in between in order to satisfy the order of divine justice.

But no mere man is so great that he, by accepting some voluntary punishment, would be able to satisfy God sufficiently, even for his own sin, let alone for the sin of the whole world. For when man sins, he transgresses the law of God. He does, humanly speaking, injury to the God of infinite majesty. The greater the one who is offended, the greater the injury is. For someone who strikes a soldier is considered to commit a greater offence than someone who strikes a farmer, and even more so in the case of a king or a prince. Therefore a sin committed against the law of God is somehow an infinite offence.

On the other hand we must observe that the dignity of the one who offers satisfaction determines its weight. One word praying for pardon, spoken by a king for the satisfaction of an offence, is considered as a greater satisfaction than if someone else went on his knees, showed himself naked, or took upon himself any other kind of humiliation to satisfy the one offended. But no mere man possesses the infinite dignity required to offer a satisfaction fitting for an offence against God. Therefore there had to be a man of infinite dignity, who would undergo the punishment for all and thus satisfy fittingly for the sins of the whole world. To this end the only-begotten Word of God, true God and Son of God, assumed human nature and wanted to sustain death in it, in order to purify the whole human race from sin through his satisfaction. Therefore Peter says: 'Christ died once and for all for our sins, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God.' [I Peter 3. 18]

Therefore it was not fitting, as some say, for God to purify human sins without satisfaction, or even not to permit man to fall into sin. For the first would be contrary to the order of justice, and the second to the order of human nature by which man has free will, and is able to choose good or bad. Not to destroy the order of things, but instead preserving it, is a mark of providence. So God's wisdom was most evident in his preserving the orders of both justice and nature, and still mercifully providing man with a remedy for salvation through the incarnation and death of his Son.

Having addressed virtue and truth, this is the third step Aquinas takes, focusing upon the orders of justice and human nature. It puts forward the third argument for the fittingness of Christ's suffering and death. Aquinas considers them as punishment for the sins committed against God. In order to forgive these sins, punishment should be assumed by someone. It could result in satisfaction. Aquinas borrows this insight from Anselm, who employed the legal and feudal image of offence done to a lord. Order, so it seems to the medieval mind, is a thing of ultimate, divine value, and any breach of it is potentially dangerous. Offence, sin, constitutes such a breach, and its satisfaction is of utmost importance for the benefit of all, since it will restore order. Satisfaction for the sins of man against God, however, can only be

performed by someone who is able to equal the infinity of the offence. And this is only possible for someone whose dignity is infinite as well: the Word of God incarnate, who took suffering and death as punishment, and restored the order between God and human beings. Today this analogy taken from feudal society is largely discredited. To Aquinas, however, it is a useful reference to a political reality with which all his students are familiar. It is, moreover, but one from among at least four models that he discerns (cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, 48); the models that are designed to approach the mystery of (the mode of realizing) the salvific fruits of Christ's suffering and death: merit, satisfaction, sacrifice and redemption.

At the outset of this work, in Section 1, a second question put forward by Muslims was referred to: Could God not have forgiven sins without punishment? Aquinas is now, having explained the model of satisfaction, in a good position to answer. It is in line with the general view he holds on the relationship between God and the world; a view which was intimated by the christological dogma of Chalcedon (451). Chalcedon teaches that Christ's unity is a mystery of faith: in his person a divine and a human nature are united without being confused or separated. Although the term 'nature' is used, both of them cannot be added to one another so that one could simply speak of 'two natures'. One *can* speak of two natures, but only keeping in mind that the one does not belong to the category the other belongs to; the one does not compete with the other, and the other is not diminished or changed by the one. In the same vein, God's relationship with the world is 'pictured'. When God acts, it is preferably not by breaching the created order. The order of justice and the order of nature have to be respected. This explains God's actual way of dealing with human sin. Simple forgiving would affect the order of justice. To deprive man of the possibility of choosing evil instead of good, to deprive him of his free will, would affect the order of (human) nature. God's dealing with the world does not destroy it, but fulfils it.

The third question that needed to be answered was the question of whether God could have created humanity without its faculty for sin. Aquinas answers this question only implicitly. It was not fitting that God should prevent man from sinning. Aquinas does not want to abstract from the factual created state of human nature, which knows of free will and the ability to choose good or evil. The way Aquinas deals with this question once again elucidates his standpoint that it is the mission of Christian theology to try to understand the factual state of affairs in creation and salvation history, instead of speculating about what could have been.

## Conclusion

Dialogue with Jews and Muslims constitutes only a very minor part of Aquinas' writings. There are only two texts in his oeuvre which mention Jews, Christians and Muslims in one breath, and one of them is offered here. It shows us a kind of dialogue which is close to internal apologetics. It provides Christians with some answers when confronted with questions posed by Jews or Muslims.

Aquinas is well aware of the limitations of this exchange, since for the central issues of the Christian faith no rational proof can be given. Apart from attempting to show inconsistency in someone else's argument, one is limited to surveying the fittingness of these issues with one another, hoping to gain a certain plausibility to be derived from internal coherence. Aquinas is also well aware that Christians are related to Jews in ways very different from their relations to Muslims. Even though most of the questions treated in the tract *De Rationibus Fidei* seem to be of Muslim descent, Aquinas' reflections on issues dealing with Jews, whether concerning their position in Christian society or their theological position, are far more important.

A striking element in Aquinas' treatment of questions concerning the incarnation and passion of Christ, is formed by his elaboration of the poverty and humbleness of Christ as well as his disciples. It is pointed out that this type of argument is fairly traditional. Aquinas is not very original in his emphasis on this difference between Jesus and Muhammad. But then again, originality is not among Aquinas' great achievements anyway, nor would he have sought it.

Aquinas does not undertake an explicit opposition of Jesus and Muhammad. Apart from the fact that such an opposition would not honor the distinct position of Jesus in Christianity compared to Muhammad's in Islam, this may reflect the traditional reluctance on the Christian side to provide arguments for the authenticity of Jesus as a prophet, similar to the usual project of their Islamic counterparts. As was mentioned above, the earliest Arab Christians focused on 'the criteria by which an unbiased observer should be able to judge whether the success and propagation of an established religion is, in itself, a proof of its authenticity'<sup>25</sup>. This strategy enables one to argue that the spread of Islam is brought about by causes within the world, whereas no circumstances within the world can account for the spread of Christianity. This propagation is to be considered a pure miracle, according to the Christians, considering the weakness, the humble descent and poverty of Christ, the poverty and illiteracy of the disciples, the severity of Christ's teaching etc. The miraculous spread of Christianity serves as proof for its divine origin.

We should expect Aquinas, as a mendicant friar, to be very much interested in Christ's weakness and poverty. And so he was.<sup>26</sup> But we do not have any other text of Aquinas in which he gives such an elaborate view of the poverty of Jesus' life as precisely this text, developed answering mostly Muslim questions. We must conclude therefore that it was his confrontation with these Muslim questions that provoked it.<sup>27</sup> One of the fruits of Aquinas' dealing with questions formulated in this interreligious dialogue or apologetics, is thus - within the context of his writings - a new profile of the poor Jesus (and the poor disciples) at the origin of the spread of Christianity.

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<sup>25</sup>...Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam*, p. 30

<sup>26</sup>...Jan G.J. van den Eijnden, *Poverty on the way to God. Thomas Aquinas on Evangelical Poverty* (Louvain, 1994).

<sup>27</sup>...Cf. Gilles Emery: "...le contexte de l'islam confère à notre opuscule des traits propres qui contribuent à son originalité au sein de l'oeuvre de Thomas. Tel est le cas, en particulier, du chapitre consacré à la passion du Christ (chap. VII). (...) Thomas y souligne avec insistance la pauvreté des moyens choisis par le Christ (...) C'est peut-être dans ces accents que nous trouvons l'un des fruits religieux les plus riches que la confrontation indirecte avec l'islam a suscités chez Thomas", *Traité 'Les Raisons de la Foi' et 'Les Articles de la Foi et les Sacraments de l'Église'*, pp. 34-35.

