

Enrique Martínez

Universitat Abat Oliba CEU, Barcelona, Hiszpania

The Metaphysical Foundation of Religious Freedom¹

1. Introduction

This demand for freedom in human society chiefly regards the quest for the values proper to the human spirit. It regards, in the first place, the free exercise of religion in society.²

These words from the declaration *Dignitatis humane* of the Second Vatican Council draw our attention to the importance of religious freedom. However, let us try to go beyond the anthropological and political perspective to the metaphysical foundations of religious freedom.

Nevertheless, we could begin by asking ourselves what is the paradigm of freedom for the postmodern man. The dialogue between Faust and Mephistopheles shows us this:

F: Which way is the path to be taken?

M: There is no path! You go where no one has trod or will be able to trod. You will see nothing in the eternally empty distance, you will not hear the steps you take, nor will you find anything firm to rest on.

F: You send me into the void to increase my art and my strength. But let us go deeper, for in nothingness I hope to find all.

¹ “Religion or Ideology”, XXI Symposium the Future of Western Civilization. The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland). November 19, 2021.

² Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humane* n.1.

M: I praise you now, before you separate from me. I see that you know the devil well.³

There is no path! Indeed, this is the paradigm of the "Faustian man", as Francisco Canals called the postmodern man.⁴ However, Faust must end up recognizing the impossibility of exercising divine freedom because only God can achieve what he is seeking. Faust is as distant from infinity as he ever was before his commitment to permanent movement. Therefore, Mephistopheles replies with tragic irony to Faust: "You are what you are".⁵

In that situation, the poor human beings can only betake to the State to guarantee their aspiration to freedom. This is what Spinoza affirms:

Those who have the sovereign power are guardians and interpreters, not only of civil law, but also of the sacred, and only they have the right to decide what is just and what is unjust, what is in conformity with piety or not.⁶

It is then the State: the guardian of the sacred, which grants freedom of thought and religion:

In order to keep the order of law in the best possible way and to ensure the stability of the State, it is best to leave everyone free to think what they want, and to say what they think.⁷

From this perspective, religious freedom can be understood as a manifestation of a divinized State, which acts as a custodian of the deepest aspiration of the Faustian man: absolutely undetermined freedom, including freedom of belief. The consequence is dramatic: This involves rejecting any form of

³ Goethe, *Faust II*, act.1.

⁴ Francisco Canals (1922-2009) is the highest representative of the Thomistic School of Barcelona.

⁵ Cf. Francisco Canals, "Teoría y praxis en la perspectiva de la dignidad del ser personal", p.123.

⁶ Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, preface. Cf. Miguel Ayuso, "El Estado como sujeto inmoral".

⁷ Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, preface.

religiosity that pretends to place itself beyond the rule of political power.⁸

Is then the State's power the foundation of religious freedom? On the contrary, we must flee from the naturalistic explanation, and turn to the metaphysical foundations, accessible to reason. This is what St. Pius X teaches, exhorting us to seek these metaphysical foundations in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas:

Further let Professors remember that they cannot set St. Thomas aside, especially in metaphysical questions, without grave detriment.⁹

Thus, one of the core theses of St. Thomas Aquinas's teaching is that the divine goodness, characterized as giving and liberal love, is the beginning and end of creation and of the divine government of the world, in which man participates as a minister thanks to his freedom. Francisco Canals states the importance of this thesis in this way:

The authentic theo-centrism of St. Thomas invites us to contemplate the divine goodness as it diffuses itself, identified with all-giving, purely liberal love, as the one that sets in motion the creative efficiency itself, and directs a provident government of the universe.¹⁰

2. God's giving, liberal love

Let us begin briefly developing this thesis. The principle on which it is based is that the *esse* is act and perfection, what perfects all:

⁸ No wonder, for example, the suspicion that some rulers in Spain have had and continue to have towards religious signs, such as the Sacred Heart at Cerro de los Angeles, shot and destroyed in times of the Spanish civil war, or the Holy Cross at Valle de los Caídos, which they try to remove in sake of misunderstood "historical memory".

⁹ Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* n.45.

¹⁰ Francisco Canals, *Tomás de Aquino, un pensamiento siempre actual y renovador*, p.320.

Esse is the most perfect of all things, for it is compared to all things as an act. For nothing has actuality but only as soon as it is. Thence being is actuality of all things and also of all forms. In fact, it is not compared to other things as the recipient to what received, but especially as the received to the container.¹¹

This is Aquinas' main metaphysical principle. Because of this perfection, every being is a desirable good, and therefore “diffusive and communicative of itself”.¹² This happens in two ways: As a principle, because every agent works inasmuch as it is in act, and in this way it diffuses its perfection in others. And as an end, for every good is desirable to the imperfect entity, which is attracted by the good in order to perfect itself.

This is especially so regarding God. Indeed, God is a communicative good of himself as a principle and as an end. As a principle, because his infinite goodness tends to communicate itself, since God is pure act. In addition, God communicates his perfection giving being and goodness to what did not exist:

From the love of his goodness, it came about that God wanted to spread and communicate his goodness to others, insofar as it was possible, namely, by way of likeness; thus his goodness did not remain in him alone, but it spills over into other things.¹³

However, it should be noted that God tends to communicate his goodness not because of necessity, poverty or usefulness, but exclusively out of a giving and liberal love:

The first agent, who is exclusively active, does not have to act to acquire some end, but only acts to communicate his perfection, which is his goodness. On the other hand, all creatures strive to reach their perfection, which lies in resembling perfection.¹⁴

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.3, a.1 ad 3.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I q.73, a.3 arg.2.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Super De divinis nominibus*, c.4, lect.9.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I q.44, a.4 c.

And as an end because ¿He? Hacer falta un sujeto is the ultimate end to which all creation is ordered. Thus, God communicates his goodness as an end. The creature's movement towards divine goodness is realized by seeking one's own perfection according to one's natural inclination. In addition, the creature tends to imitate the communication of divine goodness in communicating one's own good to others.

3. Man: a free minister in divine governing

If the divine goodness is the beginning and end of creation, it is also the beginning and end of its governing:

Since it is proper of better things to produce better effects, it is not convenient to the highest goodness of God that he does not lead to perfection those things created by him. For the ultimate perfection of everything consists in the achievement of the end. That is why in his divine goodness not only does he produce things by placing them in existence, but he also brings them to their end. This is to govern them.¹⁵

For the government of creation, God wants freely to count on with the help of creatures themselves:

God is helped by us insofar as we carry out his command, as it is said in 1 Cor 3:9: We are God's cooperators. But this is not because of some lack of God's power, rather it makes use of intermediate causes, so that in things the beauty of order is preserved and so he communicates to creatures the dignity of being causes too.¹⁶

However, not all beings collaborate in the divine government of the world in the same way. Divine goodness communicated to creation is better manifested precisely in a hierarchically ordered cosmos. It is not, therefore, a chaos or the

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 q.103, a.1 c.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 q.23, a.8 ad 2.

fruit of chance, as is defended in post-modernity. Let us check Nietzsche's and Clément Rosset's thought about it:

The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos – in the: sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.¹⁷

The artificialism that has been and will be dealt with in this book is thus essentially a denial of nature and a universal affirmation of chance, a sense that is at the antipodes of all forms of anthropocentric naturalism that have appeared after Aristotle in the history of philosophy.¹⁸

We can identify with St Thomas three criteria for distinguishing degrees of perfection in the cosmos. The first criterion to distinguish this order is: a being is more perfect inasmuch as it is communicative of its perfection:

All creatures participate in the divine goodness by disseminating in others the good they possess; for it is proper of good to communicate itself to others. Therefore, the more the agents partake in divine goodness, the more they aspire to transmit such perfection to others, so far as possible.¹⁹

This greater communicability occurs when the effect is capable of being the cause of others:

It is a higher perfection that one thing, besides being good in itself, is a cause of the goodness in others, than if the thing were only good in itself. And, therefore, in such a way God governs things, that he makes some be the cause of others in such government.²⁰

The second criterion is: a living being will be more perfect insofar as what it emanates is more intimate to itself. In addition,

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* n.109.

¹⁸ Clément Rosset, *L'anti-nature*, p.55.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 q.106, a.4 c.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 q.103, a.6 c.

most intimate and vital emanation is the mental word, in which the subsistent intellectual says what is known.

Finally, the third criterion is: a living being will be more perfect the more it works by itself, and is not acted upon by another. This occurs mainly in the intellectual subsistent, who by his inner saying has a voluntary control of his own acts. According to Saint Augustine:

No one does anything by free will that he has not first said in his heart.²¹

Therefore, the intellectual subsistent is the only one who can best collaborate with God in the government of the world. In fact, his intellectual nature, by which he emanates of the mental word and is the master of his acts, makes him *capax Summi Boni*, unlike irrational creatures.

That is why God governs every rational creature on its own -as a person-, and not as a mere instrument:

The rational creature is subject to divine providence as ruled and guided by itself, not just in view of the species, as is the case in other corruptible creatures; the individual that is ruled according to the species is not ruled by himself; while the rational creature is governed by itself.²²

In this way, rational creatures collaborate with the divine government of the world as intelligent and free ministers. That is why God grants them government over the creatures, according to a certain degree:

The rational creature participates in divine providence not only in terms of being governed, but also in terms of governing, since it governs itself by governing its acts and governs the others also.²³

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, *De Trinitate* IX, 7.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III, c.113.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III, c.113.

The ultimate purpose of this ministerial government is to order the sphere over which each one has power in such a way that the end and perfection that corresponds to it by nature is effectively reached. Thus, creatures imitate divine goodness:

Just as the foundation of a city or a kingdom is conveniently compared to the formation of the world, so correct governing is to be derived from divine governing. It is important to consider that governing consists in directing what is governed to its due end.²⁴

4. God's and man's freedom

Having identified man's place in the universe, as a minister of the divine government of the world in order to communicate divine goodness, we can now turn to the nature of freedom. Communicating the good, both as a principle and as an end, allows us to distinguish two types of freedom: Freedom of specification regarding the purpose, as the object of the will; and freedom to exercise regarding the very act of will on the part of the subject.

Let us start with the freedom of specification. This it does not consist in the indetermination regarding one object or another, but in the voluntary appetite for the end, for which it is then possible to choose:

Among the things that are desirable, the end is the foundation and the beginning of the things that are for the end, since the things that are for the end are only desired because of the end.²⁵

Let us now refer this type of freedom to God. God's freedom of specification consists on being identified with the end, which is his own goodness, and which God wants necessarily and freely:

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De Regno* I, 15.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* q.22, a.5 c.

God, with his will, freely loves himself, even though he necessarily loves himself.²⁶

Moreover, from this immanence of the end, God chooses with free will to create:

In God, free will is given, because he himself has an end for his will to which he naturally tends, namely, his goodness. But the other things he wants are ordered to this end, which he does not want in a necessary way, because his goodness does not require the things that are ordered towards itself or its manifestation, which can conveniently be done in many ways.²⁷

Let us now refer it to man. Man's freedom of specification is based on the natural inclination to the ultimate end, which is happiness:

Free will is opposed to violence or coercion, but there is no violence or coercion in which something moves according to the order of its nature, but rather in which the natural movement is impeded, as when the heavy stuff is prevented from falling; therefore, the will freely desires happiness, even if it does so necessarily.²⁸

In addition, from this natural inclination towards his ultimate end, man chooses freely the goods that are ordered to happiness:

The fact that free will can choose between various things, preserving their order towards his end, belongs to the perfection of freedom.²⁹

Let us now turn to the other type of freedom. On the other hand, freedom to exercise does not consist in the indetermination regarding the realization of one's own act, but in the inclination to

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei* q.10, a.2 ad 5.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* q.24, a.3 c.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei* q.10, a.2 ad 5.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 q.62, a.8 ad 3.

communicate voluntarily one's own perfection with a “giving and liberal love”:

Freedom, when carried out according to the diffusivity of the good in the free personal being, consists in a vital inclination by which the living gives himself.³⁰

Let us refer it back to God. God's freedom to exercise consists in the full self-possession of his will, which is infinitely communicative of himself in the procession of the Holy Spirit, and then in the communication of goodness in Creation:

Not only in the creation in time, but in the eternal and intimate life of God himself, divine effusive love gives itself infinitely and with utter liberality and, in the sense that St. Thomas understands this, with utmost transcendental freedom, in the expiration of the Holy Spirit.³¹

Let us now refer it to man. Man's freedom to exercise consists in the self-possession of his will, which is communicative of oneself in benevolent and even oblativo love:

Freedom as dignity of the personal being [consists] in the perfection of life in its supreme spiritual degree, by which the living emanates within himself, from himself and by his mental word, the vital inclination through which he gives himself.³²

Consequently, man collaborates with God in the government of the world through the giving and liberal exercise of his will, ordering his life and what he is responsible of by choosing the appropriate means according to his nature.

³⁰ Xavier Prevosti, “La libertad divina, ejemplar de toda libertad”, p.216.

³¹ Francisco Canals, *Tomás de Aquino, un pensamiento siempre actual y renovador*, p.307.

³² Francisco Canals, *Tomás de Aquino, un pensamiento siempre actual y renovador*, p.67.

5. Man, a naturally sociable and religious being

Since one tries to reach the perfection that corresponds to its nature, it is convenient to distinguish now different natural inclinations in man:

1) Natural inclination, in common with all substances, as preserving one's own being.

2) Natural inclination common to all animals, which moves them to generate and raise their offspring.

3) His specific natural inclinations as human beings: to know the truth about God and living in society.

From these natural inclinations, the requirements of natural law flow:

Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law.³³

We are mainly concerned here with the last specific inclination of man as a rational nature. Man's natural inclination to live in society is ordered towards attaining the goods necessary for life:

Only in community does man have natural knowledge of what is necessary for living. It is not possible for an individual man to come to know all these things through his own reason. Therefore man needs to live in society, so that each mutually provides and receives help.³⁴

Above all, in favor of a virtuous life:

The purpose of many gathering in society is to live virtuously. Because men gather to live rightly in community,

³³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q.94, a.2 c.

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De Regno* I, c.1.

something impossible to achieve by living each one in isolation. So, the right life is that which is carried out according to virtue; thus the virtuous life constitutes the end of human society.³⁵

This requires an authority that governs the political community, which does so by that ordering term that is the law:

Law is nothing other than an ordination of reason towards the common good, promulgated by whoever oversees the community.³⁶

This government by law regards free people:

When we speak of the convenient end for society, it differs for free persons than from servants. For whoever is free is free for his own sake, whereas he who is a servant is free for the sake of another. When a free society is directed by someone who governs it in view of the common good, we have a right and just regime, as befits free persons.³⁷

In turn, Virtuous life in society is ordered to the knowledge of the truth about God, which is man's other specific natural inclination:

To live virtuously is not the last end of the masses gathered in society, but to reach divine fruition through such virtuous life.³⁸

Such knowledge of God in society is promoted by teaching divine truth and virtuous living as related to God:

Man attains to God not only by inner acts, such as believing, hoping and loving, but also by outer works, by which man shows himself to be a servant of God. For these works aim at divine worship.³⁹

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De Regno* I, c.15.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.90, a.4 c.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De Regno* I, c.2.

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *De Regno* I, c.15.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.99, a.3 c.

6. Religious freedom

Finally, we come to the question of religious freedom. It must be understood in the service of this natural inclination of man, and in the light of the metaphysical principles set forth.

First of all, let us refer to religious freedom of specification. Man is inclined by nature to the knowledge of truth about God, which is his ultimate goal. Hence, it is in the nature of man to choose the most convenient goods for this purpose.

But he can never choose what is evil, which will take him away from that end:

Free will can choose among different things, while preserving the order towards his end, and this constitutes the perfection of freedom. And, on the other hand, to choose something apart from the end – which is what sin consists in – is a defect of freedom.⁴⁰

Civil laws should promote this freedom of the individual and the society for the truth about God and proper worship, and prohibit anything that is contrary to it.

To grant man this freedom of worship is equivalent to giving him the right to go against a most holy obligation and to be unfaithful to it with impunity, as he abandons the good to surrender himself to evil. This, we have already said, is not freedom, but depravity of freedom and slavery of the soul given over to sin.⁴¹

They can, however, tolerate certain evils to avoid a greater evil.

Even though she grants rights only and exclusively in favor of truth and virtue, the Church is not opposed to tolerance on the part of public authorities of certain situations contrary to

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I q.62, a.8 ad 3.

⁴¹ Leo XIII, *Libertas præstantissimum*, n.15.

truth and justice, in order to avoid a greater evil or to attain or retain a higher good.⁴²

Secondly, let us refer to religious freedom to exercise. It is up to man to adhere voluntarily to God and to worship him properly, without any external coercion:

All men must be free from coercion, whether from individuals or from social groups or any other form of human power.⁴³

Nevertheless, the perfection of the religious freedom to exercise consists in that man be communicative of his religiosity with giving and liberal love, which belongs to charity. It is a central teaching of the Gospel:

No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will.⁴⁴

The Metaphysical Foundation of Religious Freedom Summary

Religious freedom is a property of human life in society. In order to find its ultimate foundation, one must go to man's place in the universe, created by God to communicate His goodness and ordered to Himself as an end. Man participates so in the perfection of *esse* that he can govern himself and attain God through knowledge and love. This order is so ingrained in human nature that St. Thomas Aquinas identifies the natural inclination as the most proper to man to know the truth about God. From there, moral demands derive, among which there is religious freedom, understood as the immunity from coercion in society to be able to render due worship to God. Nevertheless, the perfection of the

⁴² Leo XIII, *Libertas præstantissimum*, n.23.

⁴³ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanæ* n.2.

⁴⁴ John 10:18.

religious freedom consists in man being communicative of his religiosity with giving and liberal love.

Keywords: religious freedom, Divine Goodness, creation, metaphysics, ethics, religion, Thomas Aquinas

References:

- Agustine of Hippo, *De Trinitate*, PL 42, París, Migne, 1844-1864.
- Ayuso, M. “El estado como sujeto inmoral”, *Revista de Derecho de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso*, 45 (2015), 289-309.
- Canals, F. “Teoría y praxis en la perspectiva de la dignidad del ser personal”, *Espíritu* 25 (1976) 74, 121-127.
- Tomás de Aquino, un pensamiento siempre actual y renovador*, Barcelona, Scire, 2004.
- Goethe, J.W., *Faust. A Tragedy*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2014.
- Leo XIII, *Libertas præstantissimum*, ASS 20 (1887) 593-613.
- Nietzsche, F. *The Gay Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* ASS 40 (1907) 593-650.
- Prevosti, X. “La libertad divina, ejemplar de toda libertad”, *Espíritu* 68 (2019) 157, 207-221.
- Rosset, C. *L’anti-nature*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France (PUF), 2011.
- Spinoza, B. *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Leiden, Brill, 1989.
- Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei*, Turín – Roma, Marietti, 1965.
- De Regno*, Turín - Roma, Marietti, 1954.
- De Veritate*, Roma, Editori di San Tommaso, 1970-1976.
- Summa contra gentiles*, Turín - Roma, Marietti, 1961.
- Summa Theologiae*, Roma, S.C. De Propaganda Fide, 1888-1906.
- Super De divinis nominibus*, Turín - Roma, Marietti, 1950.
- Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humane* AAS 58 (1966) 929-946.