



## TOPIC 1: Debate on values

### Teaching and learning aids

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#### Thomas of Aquinas (1225-1274)

While in the world of Islam the influences of classical philosophy and science on the Koran and Arabic were stubbornly staved off in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, precisely the opposite happened in Europe. Thomas of Aquinas, the greatest theologian of the Middle Ages, leant heavily on Aristotle, Cicero and Augustine, thus ensuring a firm place for natural rights in western thought.

#### Reason, part of human nature

The philosophy of Thomas of Aquinas - although primarily a theologian - starts not so much from his faith as from the natural power of reason, with whose help all men, whether pagan or Christian, discern the same natural world. (T 1/19)

#### Kingship as analogy to the dominion of God

If we are concerned with caring about a “good life”, maintaining justice and securing peace, then Thomas of Aquinas relies more on strong kingship than on popular assemblies as with Aristotle or Cicero. The king’s power is not of course unlimited, for it is bound up with the law of nature, reason and in the last instance with God’s will. (T 1/20 and T 1/21)

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Kingship is seen by Thomas of Aquinas more as an elected kingship, as a hereditary monarchy. This permits a people to terminate its contract (pactum) with the king and remove him if his reign degenerates into tyranny. (T 1/22, T 1/23)

#### Spiritual and secular government

With respect to the rivalry between spiritual and secular government (Church and State) that was so serious in the west Thomas of Aquinas takes up a balanced position. Only the aim of an action or of a community should determine the suitable person for leadership. Like a helmsman who gives his shipbuilder and seamen the right directions to reach a particular port, the spiritual king (Pope) must take on the leadership so that the Christian community may safely reach eternal bliss. (T 1/24)

This, however, does not mean a general precedence of the Church over the State, for as long as the latter strives towards earthly aims (values) such as welfare, justice and peace, Thomas of Aquinas sees appropriate leadership in kingship. And just as the State derives from man’s nature, it also has law and authority from nature, not from the Church. Thomas of Aquinas supports this with reference to the letter of Paul to the Romans 13, 1 and 2:

*"Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God and the existing authorities are instituted by him; consequently anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution, and those who so resist have themselves to thank for the punishment they will receive."*

*"How independent the state is under the church for Thomas is seen in the fact that even when people are under extreme threat from a tyrant the Pope has no right to depose the king; anything but a matter of course for the 13th century." (MATZ, 1986, p. 130)*

## **The order of precedence of laws, rights or values.**

It would be going too far to discuss here Thomas of Aquinas' teaching on the different types of law:

- lex aeterna      eternal divine reason
- lex naturalis    law of nature
- lex humana      human law (positive law)
- lex divina       divine law

In certain cases, however, such differentiations play a role right up to the present day, particularly in

- Bioethics                      (e.g. stem cell research)
- Economic ethics              (Is the market a natural law?)
- Political ethics                (When is war justified?)
- Rejection of state rules on religious grounds (divine law)

## Summary

Augustine had emphasized the importance of the City of God as the real goal of man, having without doubt in mind the words of Christ: "*My kingdom does not belong to this world.*" (John 18, 36). Thomas of Aquinas does not deny the importance of this goal but he does take men back a bit into the world, which they can organize with the help of God-given reason, so that it is to their good both in this life and in the next. Being bound to a certain community on earth as a precondition for attaining eternal salvation is here far less important than in Islam, which knows no strict separation of spiritual and secular spheres. The Islamic state is the City of God on earth, and beyond it there is only the region of war, of the contract, or the infidels.

Against this there are Christ's words: "*Pay Caesar what is due to Caesar, and pay God what is due to God.*" (Matthew 22,21)