

Thomas Aquinas and Latter-Day Saints

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Thomas Aquinas lived almost one thousand years ago, yet he remains one of the most quoted theologians and philosophers of all time. Roman Catholics not only recognize him as a Saint, but as a Doctor of the Church. Soon after the death of Christ, Christian theologians began to use Platonic ideas to build up a theology for their young church. These Platonic roots lasted up until the time of Aquinas, who began a movement that shifted theology towards Aristotelian ideas. This shift in philosophical foundation not only represents Aquinas's most valuable contribution to philosophy, but the most important shift in theology for centuries. His work has influenced essentially all modern Christian thought. In particular, it is clear that many Latter-Day Saint ideas were formulated based upon philosophical movements spawned by his writings.

Aquinas built his epistemology upon the idea that reason precedes faith. In *Summa Theologica*, he claims that we can know that God exists by reason alone. Faith is required to know God's specific nature, but not his existence. He spends a great deal of his writing using philosophical reasoning and logic rather than interpretation of scripture. This is vastly different from prior philosophical thought. Older thinkers, such as Augustine, taught that faith comes before any understanding or reason. We only have knowledge after we have faith, never before. These ideas were founded in mysticism, faith was often seen almost supernaturally. Aristotle was far less mystical than Plato, and Aquinas, using Aristotle's ideas, contributed to a lessening of mysticism in the Christian church. Aristotle is indeed known as the father of formal logic, Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God are examples of Aristotelian logic. Aquinas was one of the first major Christian thinkers to use a more scientific approach to understand God.

Latter-Day Saints use this same approach, their scripture famously reprimanding a man for simply asking God for revelation, God says to him “You must study it out in your mind.” *The key to the science of theology*, an early Latter-Day Saint text, uses a great quantity of rational arguments to explain why Latter-Day Saint theology is more reasonable than classic Christianity. Latter-Day Saints claim that God speaks through the mind and the heart. This idea is clearly rooted in philosophical thought tracing back to Aquinas.

Natural law theology holds that moral laws do not necessarily need to be taught by God but can be found by examining the natural world, often human nature in particular. This ethical system can be rather distant from early Christian ideas, which were largely based on divine command theory. These ideas taught that moral laws constitute nothing more than the will of God, and that their ultimate grounding is simply His divine Nature. Natural law theology adds an intermediate step to grounding ethics, it claims that God did not necessarily make the laws, but that he made human nature, and human nature determines the laws. Aquinas was a supporter of natural law theology and helped it reach wider acceptance in Christianity. Aquinas likely chose to embrace natural law theology in order to reconcile Christianity with Aristotelian ethics, which taught that ethics can be derived from human nature. While natural law theology is not taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, it is a step closer to their beliefs. Many Latter-Day Saints will claim that some eternal laws exist independently of God. This radical idea is totally incompatible with divine command theory, but can be seen as a continuation or extension of natural law theology.

Aristotle taught that a person is necessarily composed of a body and a form. Aquinas built his ontology for humans upon this same idea. Aquinas said that a complete person is a body and a spirit conjoined. While this idea may seem unimportant at first glance, it has major effects

on other Christian doctrine. Because Aquinas believed a person was incomplete without a body, he was compelled to believe in a literal physical resurrection. Physical resurrection has long been debated in Christianity and many are still undecided. Aquinas had no choice but to pick a side, he believed that heaven would be a physical place where people lived in the presence of God. Latter-Day Saint theology claims that not only every person will have a physical body in heaven, but that even God has a physical body.

Original sin has been a contentious issue throughout Christian history, and Aquinas's modifications of the doctrine represent a step closer to Latter-Day saint thought. Augustine was long seen as the authority on grace and sin. Today, he is even called the Doctor of Grace. He taught that human nature was wholly corrupt by the fall of Adam, and that without grace, people are unable to do any good. This idea was popular in Christianity for many years, however it troubled Aquinas. He built much of his theology on Aristotle, and worked hard to align Christianity with Aristotelian thought. Aristotle thought rather highly of human nature, and certainly would disagree with the claim that people are unable to do any independent good. Aquinas thus claimed that original sin wounded human nature, but did not wholly corrupt it. An important implication of Aquinas's modifications is that now, people have a greater responsibility to choose for themselves. People were no longer helpless, free will became a greater focus in Christianity. Latter-Day Saint theology heavily emphasizes free will as a primary metaphysical component of reality.

Few Latter-Day Saints have acknowledged Aquinas as influential to their theology, in fact many of them probably do not know anything about him. However, it is clear that much of the philosophical claims of Latter-Day Saint doctrine have their roots in Aquinas. He pulled Christianity in a new direction, and Latter-Day Saints have gone even further along the path. It is

clear that he would disagree vehemently with much Latter-Day Saint doctrine, their beliefs are very radical even when viewed in this context. But many of their doctrines were developed by extending his own ideas. In many cases, Latter-Day Saint doctrine is a continuation and expansion of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.