

Orientis Aura
Perspectives in Religious Studies

On Epistemology to Understand Thomas Aquinas' Immutable God

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Synopsis

Modern people understand immutable God on subjective view such that they would wonder whether God cannot understand human feelings. Since Jürgen Moltmann proposes suffering God, this paper conducts dialogue between Moltmann's view and Aquinas' view. The arguments involve God and human being relationship and their mutual understanding. Epistemology is the key point for discussion.

Key words: Thomas Aquinas, Summa, immutable God, suffering God.

1 Introduction

Thomas Aquinas advocated impassable God which could give the impression that God is indifferent and cannot share our feeling of pain and suffering. This impression does not match the understanding found in modern theology: ‘Referring to God’s love and his historical acts of compassion, ... God is willing to suffer with his people’.¹ In fact, this understanding is according to psychological theories that ‘if God cannot suffer and experience love, He will not be able to experience our feelings and this God does not have love’.² Actually, Aquinas articulated that ‘creature proceeds from God in diversity of nature, God is outside the order of the whole creation, nor does any relation to the creature arise from His nature’.³ It is not sure whether it is sensible to rely on human understanding or knowledge of love to judge the ‘impassable nature’ of God. Since Jürgen Moltmann proposes the concept of suffering God, this paper attempts to conduct dialogue between Moltmann and Aquinas with respect to parts of Moltmann’s view and employing epistemology to consider their views.

2 Essence of Love

What is love? Love is about actions which involve a subject. What is the difference between God’s love and human love? We can visualise it through Greek words about love, namely holly love (ἀγάπη), desire (ἐρωτας) and friendship (φίλοι).⁴ Obviously the understanding of love from daily experience is not the same as holly love. For Aquinas, he described holly love as follows:

¹ FONG, Chun Ming, ‘The Suffering God: the Conflict between Aquinas and Modern Theology’, *LOGOS & PNEUMA Chinese Journal of Theology* 30 (2009), p. 199.

² Fong, ‘The Suffering God’, p. 213.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*, Fathers of the English Dominican Province (trs.); Benziger Bros. edition, 1947, Q.28, 1, p. 342.

⁴ Φίλοι denotes friends or friendship. It can be a prefix in English which means loving.

The Father loves not only the Son, but also Himself and us, by the Holy Ghost; because, as above explained, to love, taken in a notional sense, not only imports the production of a divine person, but also the person produced, by way of love, which has relation to the object loved. Hence, as the Father speaks Himself and every creature by His begotten Word, inasmuch as the Word “begotten” adequately represents the Father and every creature; so He loves Himself and every creature by the Holy Ghost, inasmuch as the Holy Ghost proceeds as the love of the primal goodness whereby the Father loves Himself and every creature. Thus, it is evident that relation to the creature is implied both in the Word and in the proceeding Love, as it were in a secondary way, inasmuch as the divine truth and goodness are a principle of understanding and loving all creatures.⁵

Aquinas further elaborated that ‘since in God “to love” is taken in two ways, essentially and notionally, when it is taken essentially, it means that the Father and the Son love each other not by the Holy Ghost, but by their essence.’⁶ Holy love is God’s ontological love which spreads to creatures through the Holy Ghost. In fact, God’s creation is a kind of love action. Since love consists of good will to the beloved (a being), God shares his goodness with creatures during the creation process.⁷ The modern theologian Moltmann explains love in another way that love is power of good flowing out from God which takes part in other beings. He opines that the expression ‘God is love’ refers to God in process of self-differentiation and self-identification eternally in order to self-communicate himself to the world.⁸ These two explanations of love illustrate that God is the subject in the holy love to creatures.

However, the nature of human beings (creatures) is different from God so that action of human love is not the same as that of God’s love. In human beings, the beloved triggers the feeling of being in love that the

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*, Q.37, 2, p. 428.

⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*, Q.37, 2, p. 427.

⁷ M. J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability*, Margaret Kohl (tr.); Fribourg: Catholic University of America Press, 2009, p. 210.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, pp. 57-58.

lover finds goodness of the beloved and wishes to unite with the beloved. Aquinas described this feeling of being in love as follows:

The union of lover and beloved is twofold. The first is real union; for instance, when the beloved is present with the lover. The second is union of affection: and this union must be considered in relation to the preceding apprehension; since movement of the appetite follows apprehension. Now love being twofold, viz. love of concupiscence and love of friendship; each of these arises from a kind of apprehension of the oneness of the thing loved with the lover. For when we love a thing, by desiring it, we apprehend it as belonging to our well-being. In like manner when a man loves another with the love of friendship, he wills good to him, just as he wills good to himself: wherefore he apprehends him as his other self, in so far, to wit, as he wills good to him as to himself. ... The first of these unions is caused "effectively" by love; because love moves man to desire and seek the presence of the beloved, as of something suitable and belonging to him. The second union is caused "formally" by love; because love itself is this union or bond.⁹

According to Aquinas' view, lover is the subject while beloved is the object. The subject that takes advantage of the object is similar to human being who takes tool for earning a living. This view leads to the question that whether the object has a position in love relation. This paper believes that Aquinas articulated the positions of God and human being in love relationship that God is giving while human being is receiving. Therefore, lover in the love relationship is receiving the God's present of love in which pursuing the advantages of the bellowed.

In modern society, both lover and beloved are subjects that they 'know' and enjoy each other at the same time. Lover (subject) stands at his/her own position to understand the other subject (beloved) while the beloved needs to know the lover before accepting his/her love. In this way, there is a common point for both the lover and beloved in human beings. That is, the stance and knowing of both lover and beloved are close and they share similar feelings. Consequently, they have love actions which manifest desires and friendship.

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*, Q.28(1/2), 1, p. 1603.

Since human love is the love between two subjects, they both give and take each other advantages. It is worth noting that knowing the goodness of each other is the key element of love. That is, knowledge of each other changes lover and beloved as well as their relationship. Thus, will God be changed when he loves people? What will be the position of God, subject or object, when he is in love with human beings?

3 Relations and Knowing between Subject and Object

It is necessary to understand the category of relations in the interpretation of God-man/woman relationship. In fact, Aquinas realised that ‘relation’ is the foundation in building up his theological model.¹⁰ Since relations involve a subject and an object, it is understood from the perspectives of subject and object. The Catholic scholar M. J. Dodds consolidates the views expressed in Q.13 and Q.7 etc. in *Summa Theologic* and concludes that there are three relations, namely logical, real and mixed relations as tabulated below:¹¹

Relation	A	B	Example
Logical	Idea	Idea	subject and predicate
Real	Reality/ action	Reality/ action	Great and small
Mixed	Idea	Reality/ action	Human knowledge and thing itself

Since Aquinas proposed mixed relation between God and human being, this paper will focus on the discussion of mixed relation. In logical relation, both parties are ideas only and there does not exist mutual order or habitual between them. While in real relation, the parties belong to

¹⁰ Mikail Whitfield, ‘Aquinas on Relations: A Topic Which Aquinas Himself Perceives as Foundational to Theology’ in *European Journal for the Study of Thomas Aquinas* 38(2020), p. 16.

¹¹ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, pp. 165-166.

some reality and they are related.¹² For mixed relation, it means one party relates to another through logical relation while another party considers that they are in real relation.

One of the examples of mixed relation is human knowledge and thing itself. We find that our knowledge is real because our knowing is obtained from observations of an object. However, an object is a being exists outside our knowledge which does not have real relation with our knowledge. Human knowledge is based on observation while the existence of a thing does not have relation with our knowledge. Thus, human knowledge and an object is in logical relation only. Therefore, human knowledge and an object is a mixed relation.¹³ Aquinas described God-human being relation as follows:

Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him.¹⁴

God shares his goodness with creatures during the creation. That said, the nature of creatures is different from God after creation. Thus, God and creatures cannot be in real relation. For the creatures, their relation to God is real because they rely on God for survival. Yet in God its relation to creatures is of reason only.¹⁵ As such, there is a mixed relation between God and human being.

The above exploration illustrates that a subject's knowledge of the object or other subject sets their relationship. If we argue that God can feel our sufferings, this means that human being is the subject who regards that 'empathy' is the common reality between God and human being and thus

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*, Q.13, 7, p. 155.

¹³ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, p. 166.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*, Q.13, 7, p. 155.

¹⁵ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, p. 167.

God and human being are in real relation. If God is the subject, God and human being relation is merely logical because God's nature is different from human being. Thus, empathy is not a correct expression of God and human being relation. Nonetheless, we understand God's feeling of our suffering through God's actions which let us know God knows our situation and He accompanies with us during our difficult time. What does God know?

3.1 God's Knowing

God creates the world with his own rules and everything is under his control. All creatures hope 'that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.' (Romans 8:21). God knows the ends of all creatures when He judges them.¹⁶ Since God will judge all creatures, it is believed that life histories of all creatures are recorded for the evidence of judgments.

Does God arrange the position of every dust particle in every second? Does He arrange the life history of every small fish? One possibility is that He does accurately arrange everything while another possibility is that He allows all creatures live in his rules of nature. If we regard that God accurately arranges every action or movement of all creatures, all creatures cannot commit crime. The fact is that we commit crime. If God accurately arranges our actions, then God arranges our sins. Therefore, this paper assumes that all creatures have certain degree of freedom but act under the nature rules of God.

Since activities of all creatures recorded for final judgment, God will definitely know all details such as the positions of dust particles and the life history of a small fish. That said, it is not sure whether God needs to know these details in every second. Genesis recorded God's creation in which male and female were being made that 'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them' (Genesis 1:27). In

¹⁶ Cf 1 Peter 4:5-7.

addition, God 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life' which made the created human being live. This description in Genesis indicates God's special care of human being. Thus, God specifically care our lives in comparison to dust particles.

The poet said, 'Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.' (Psalms 139:16) This is the poet's confession. However, does God actually knows our future decision and behaviours? God certainly knows our endings but does He know our actions in future? We know that we are accountable in committing a crime and will face God's judgment. Obviously, we can decide our actions in response to messages received or thoughts that appeared in our mind.

That said, do we know exactly our response to a particular stimulus? We may not be able to predict our responses but God must know our responses to something happened on us. Does God know what messages will be delivered to us and our corresponding responses? Since human beings can decide their own actions, this paper regards that God allows flexibility for our actions. Since we are accountable to our behaviours, God will not order or instruct our actions but he knows our responses and endings.

Does God arrange us to receive messages or thoughts? He can but will not deliberately arrange for us to expose ourselves to tempting messages which will provoke our mind to commit crime. As discussed above, activities of all things are subject to God's rules of nature but there is certain degree of randomness in their activities. Therefore, some events also randomly happened. Based on this assumption, God may know our latest situation after something happened. Does this knowing bring 'new' knowledge to God? If affirmative, the impassible nature of God is not convincible. Actually, God's impassible nature is reflected on his eternity. Aquinas differentiated eternity from time: 'the idea of time consists in the numbering of before and after in movement; so likewise in the apprehension of the uniformity of what is outside of movement, consists

the idea of eternity.¹⁷ Conversely, God's nature of eternity means that events happened will not have influence on God but He acts according to his wills. In this connection, this paper regards that God may know the latest situation of a person after something happened. This knowing reflects that God allows randomness in recording our life activities while this time differences cannot be considered as God's 'new' knowledge. Thus, God still have total control of our situation.

What does God act during our suffering? Is He present with suffering people? We believe that God decides his acts and the timing in his sovereignty. That said, how do we 'know' He knows our situation and will take action for suffering people?

3.2 *Human Knowing*

Human being as a subject studies the form and existence of an object so that to gain knowledge of this object. However, the suffering of human being does not like an ordinary object which is static and accessible for studying. Instead, suffering is caused by some unknown reasons or randomly happened. In such circumstances, people will think about the almighty God when they suffered innocently which raised a difficult question: why do we suffer with the care of this almighty and loving God? God and suffering are then tied together.¹⁸ This question is based on the assumption that God is indifferent to help suffering people which is contradicting to our understanding of God's love. As discussed in the above section, God knows our suffering but why did He not taking action to save suffering people? If God does act, it is his revelation or telling people his will and plan. Moltmann classifies recent study on God's revelation to two categories: transcendental subjectivity of God and transcendental subjectivity of man.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*, Q.10, 1, p. 95. According to Einstein's Relativity Theory, time will be elongated when the speed of the object approaching the speed of light. This phenomenon seemed to agree with Aquinas' definition of time which relating to movements. Although it is difficult for us to understand eternity, Aquinas differentiated eternity from time help our understanding of it and we accept God's eternity through faith.

¹⁸ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, pp. 48-49.

Wilhelm Herrmann opines that we are not possible to know God unless God reveals himself. Herrmann's view is that God's revelation cannot be objectively explained but human self to experience it. God's works on human self becomes his revelations. These revelations are not detectable nor deducible but to be experienced by human self.¹⁹ Since human experience is subjective, does human being proactively to explore and experience God? Karl Barth explains self and experience in this way: 'Man asks about his "self" only because and if God is pleased to given him knowledge of his "Self", only because and if God's Word is spoken to him. ... [God's word became] "reflection of faith" on the heights of some alleged "experience" (as if there were such a thing as an "experience" of it!).'²⁰ In this way, Barth replace God's transcendental subjectivity with human transcendental subjectivity. Barth articulates that God existence cannot be verified through the existence of the cosmos nor the existence of human beings. He proves himself and his revelation is God's own verification. No one can prove God's existence except God himself.²¹

That said, there is another view that ties the proof of God existence with human existence. Rudolf Bultmann regards that '[w]e cannot speak about our existence when we cannot speak about God; and we cannot speak about God when we cannot speak about our existence. We could only do the one along with the other. ... If it is asked how it can be possible to speak of God, then the answer must be: only in speaking of us.'²² In this way, the proof of God existence is hidden in human self, i.e., God's revelation is understood by human transcendental subjectivity. Although Moltmann finds that hiding God in human transcendental subjectivity is originated from Augustine's tradition, science and historical Renaissance advocated the narration of God from human transcendental subjectivity perspective. The is a phenomenon of secularisation.²³

¹⁹ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Gottes Offenbarung an uns*, 1908, pp. 76 as translated and cited in Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 52.

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Theology of Church*, L. P. Smith (tr.); London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962, pp. 258 as cited in Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 53

²¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 54.

²² Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, 1933, pp. 33 as translated and cited in Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 60.

²³ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 63.

Moltmann then visualises God's revelation as God's promise and our hope such that we can accept suffering in reality and looking for God promised future.²⁴ Moltmann elaborates God's promise further that God's actions are due to his pathos. He reminds that when we consider God's pathos, we need not to consider the absolute nature of God but to understand God through his passion and historical nature.²⁵ He refers to Jewish tradition which regards that God is indwelling in them (*Shekhinah*). The RSV version of Psalm 18:35b states that 'Thy right hand supported me, and thy help made me great' and Rabbis interprets it as 'Thou showest me thy greatness through thy humiliation of thyself.' God's humiliation is understood as his accommodation to human weakness and he is willing to indwell in Israel and being persecuted or even in prison together. Indwelling is not merely one of the characteristics of God but also the result of self-differentiation. How does Israel overcome this self-differentiation? It is to pray and acknowledge 'the one God' and this unity is glory and coming.²⁶ The coming unity brings hope to people. Therefore, human empathy is correspondence to God's pathos and such empathy is originated from God's love through self-differentiation which is the self-communication from God.

In comparison with Aquinas' saying, 'The Father loves ... us, by the Holy Ghost', Moltmann's God self-differentiation is understood as the work of Holy Spirit.²⁷ His proposal of God suffering obviously pointing to the hope of the coming God. His argument is that the Holy Spirit indwelling with us and suffered together. That said, human being does not know Holy Spirit is in suffering, if it is the case, because God and human being are of different nature. Human being may find him/herself suffered under some circumstances yet God may be not. This paper is of the view

²⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 86.

²⁵ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 26.

²⁶ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, pp. 27-29. God is willing to self-differentiation because of his love. See section 2.

²⁷ Moltmann regards that '[i]n the power of the Spirit, God is himself present in his creation – present in his reconciliation and his redemption of that creation. ... his will towards reconciliation and the redemption of the world through the suffering patience of his hope.' Cf Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985, pp. 15-16.

that human being needs to 'know' that God knows we are suffering so that suffering people are comforted. God is our listener and dependence.

Jesus said, 'But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.' (John 14:26) The reminder from Holy Spirit is God's self-communication to the world. Therefore, believer is not the subject who finds God present but the Holy Spirit let believers know it. Human being is an object in knowing God's love and his actions. The necessary step to accept Holy Spirit's reminder is that believers need to believe God existence and willing to follow him. Thus, knowing of God is a religious experience and trust in him. Consequently, the poet said, 'In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.' Poet affirmed God's omnipotent and omniscient which is knowing by faith, not knowing by observing an object.

4 Conclusion

Although God 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life' that human being can manage the world, human being is still a creature under various limitations. How does a creature know its creator? Having consider the difference between God and human being, Aquinas pointed out that God-man/woman relation is not a real relation and human being is an object to receive God's instruction. If we understand from the transcendental subjectivity of God, we can recognise God only if God is willing to disclose himself. On the contrary, if we understand from the transcendental subjectivity of human being, he/she needs to discern which one is God's action. Since Aquinas articulated the different nature between God and human being and people do not find God's saving actions, there is suspicion that God is far away from believers and does not know they are suffering. Thus, God is indifferent. Yet Aquinas differentiates God's eternity from time that God will not be affected by happened events. It is his sovereignty to decide at which time to take actions.

In the concept of God's absolute sovereignty, Moltmann refers to God's historical actions and affirms God is present with suffering people. The concept of God's indwelling in suffering people comfort us and therefore we hope for God's salvation. Moltmann's affirmation of God present is by faith which releases people from time constraint during waiting for God and let people to meet God in eternity.

Is God impassible? For God, all events have been recorded and knows the endings of everyone in the final judgment. Although this paper predicts that God allows event happened randomly, these random events will just change the time of happening and God will not be surprised with what has happened. Since there is no new knowledge to God, God has not been changed.