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The Background of the Formation of Aquinas' Catholic Social Ethics Thought

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Abstract

Aquinas' Catholic Social Ethics Thought originated in the period of feudal society transformation in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. In order to consolidate its social dominance, Roman Catholicism has taken many measures to strengthen the religious system, which provides an opportunity for Aquinas to understand society. Latin Translation Movement provides important ideological resources for Aquinas' Social Ethics Thought. The establishment of medieval universities provided a platform for his research. His superior family environment shaped his unique perspective of observing society. Aquinas maintained the authority of the church by using the new ideas and the social relations he had, and became a famous and successful person in the field of Catholic society.

Key words: Aquinas, Catholicism, Social Ethics, Background

Social Ethics is an ethical system based on specific social groups, which regulates the interest relationship in real life by weighing the rights and obligations of various groups, so as to achieve fairness and justice. Social groups are the basic units and subjects of social ethics, which are composed of individuals with the same interest relationship. Social ethics reflects the ethical and moral relationship between certain social groups or groups, which needs to be maintained by a common value goal, so that each individual in each group can share the established interests. Therefore, Social Justice becomes the highest value of the social ethics system. By regulating the ethical relations among social groups with social justice as the core principle, it is helpful to promote the harmonious, stable and orderly development of society. Social ethics mainly includes two basic aspects: social economy and social politics. As far as individuals are concerned, social ethics reflects the individual's moral cultivation and practice, and plays a subtle role in dealing with the economic interests of individuals and individuals and groups. As far as the group is concerned, social ethics reflects the collective consciousness of rights, and it often shows the prominent role of politics in dealing with the interests between the group and the group and the group and the individual, and takes the law as its expression form.

Catholic social ethics is a theological ethics theory with the Catholic concept of love as its core and the realization of Catholic social justice as its ultimate goal. This theory pays attention to the investigation of social reality and emphasizes the perfect unity of sentient beings and God through the practice of God's will. As early as in Europe in the western Middle Ages, the reflection on social ethical issues had begun to emerge. The belief system with Catholic doctrine as the core value became the mainstream culture of the society at that time, and Roman Catholicism realized its unique position of transition from regional church to social unity centered on the Pope through theocracy, which had a wide influence at that time. Under the influence of Catholicism, the economic situation of medieval Europe once changed, and the relationship between church and state often became very tense due to the entanglements of secular interests. A large number of people with insight began to reflect on the effective way to solve social problems. As the founder of Catholic social

thought, Thomas Aquinas tried his best to resolve the contradictions in people's hearts from theology, and formed his social ethical thought on the basis of systematic study of various theories.

I. Thomas Aquinas

When people talk about Thomas Aquinas, they tend to think of him as a theologian and philosopher, and the image of him remains in a serious academic atmosphere, often ignoring the fact that Aquinas was also a "Sociable" intellectual. Although he was mistaken as a "dumb cow" by his classmates in his early years, Aquinas' social style is still a common social etiquette with some personal characteristics. Compared with the society at that time, Aquinas's life was not as casual as ordinary people. Born in late 1224 or early 1225, Thomas Aquinas led a life of wealth and elegance from an early age. His father, Landolpho, and his mother, Thodora, were members of prominent families in Roccasecca, a small town near Naples, Italy. Aquinas was born with an air of nobility, and although the youngest of his 12 siblings, he had to undergo the same strict upbringing as the others. Aquinas's social style came from the strict demands of his family on the one hand, and from the nurture on the other. To say that he is good at socializing refers to the unique character formed by Aquinas during his innate education and nurture. This character can be understood as the shaping of his own personality, which determines his way of dealing with the world.

First of all, Aquinas is not bad at socializing, but he communicates selectively. At the age of five, Aquinas was sent by his parents to the nearby Monte Casino convent, where his parents intended to groom him for the priory. However, Aquinas was not interested in this preconceived vision of his life, and he studied at the monastery as his parents wanted him to, while finding his own pleasure. There, Aquinas learned the basics of literature, poetry, and etiquette, and habitually discussed God with his teachers, thus forming an indissoluble bond with theology. From 1239 to 1244, Aquinas was sent to the Benedictine Convent of Naples and the University of Naples, where he studied the natural sciences and was

exposed to the teachings of Aristotle. The quiet and regular life of his childhood in the Convent of Casino left an indelible impression on Aquinas's mind. Despite the rich and varied environment of life at the University of Naples, Aquinas was most interested in associating with his fellow monks.¹ From this it can be seen that Aquinas had a spirit of concentration since childhood, which was accompanied by a strong sense of consciousness and liked to communicate with like-minded friends. In the process of communication, Aquinas constantly found himself and gradually grew into a humble, polite and courteous young man.

Secondly, Aquinas possessed a strong character, which was developed through the constant search for himself. Aquinas studied in Naples at a time when various social trends were on the rise and the official theology of the Catholic Church, which called itself orthodox, was being challenged as never before. It was during his studies that Aquinas learned about the Dominican Order, an episode that would change the course of his life. The Dominican Order opposed ideas contrary to the orthodox faith, followed the beggary way of the early Catholics, and lived a hard and simple life. At the same time, they paid attention to the cultivation of personal moral sentiments, academic hot spots and theoretical frontier, and had a strong monastic atmosphere.² Many devout Catholics were attracted to the order, and Aquinas was one of them. Because the Dominican way of preaching to others through silent prayer was in line with Aquinas's interests, Aquinas was willing to accept the Dominican education and applied for membership.³ However, this choice of Aquinas did not get the understanding and support of his family, but was strongly opposed. After the family learned about this, they fought hard to block Aquinas and put her under house arrest. Despite the difficulties, Aquinas never gave up his ideals. During his house arrest, he studied the Bible assiduously until he memorized it all. Finally, he moved his family, got rid of their bondage, and became a Dominican apprentice.

¹ Sumin Liu, *Aquinas*, Xian: Shanxi Normal University Publishing General Co., LTD., 2017, p. 4.

² John Inglis, *Aquinas*, translated by Zhongmin Liu, Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2019, pp. 3-4.

³ Keqin Zhou and Li Zhen, et al., *Guide Manual of Saint Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica*, Taiwan: Chinese Dominican Order, Biyue Institute, 2008, pp.11-15.

In the face of difficulties, Aquinas pushed forward, and found the deprived self in the action, forming his strong character.

Thirdly, Aquinas is good at giving full play to his strengths and has the courage to realize himself. On the one hand, Aquinas's strengths are good at learning, on the other hand, he can play the knowledge he has learned incisively and vividly. From 1245 to 1248, Aquinas was sent to Paris to study, and then to Cologne with his tutor Albert. Aquinas returned to the University of Paris in 1252 and completed his studies in 1256, receiving a master's degree in theology from the University of Paris, where he remained as a teacher. In 1259, Aquinas returned to Italy, where he was involved in the teaching of theology. In 1269, Aquinas was again hired to teach at the University of Paris, where he was involved in the advancement of theological scholarship. With the spirit of assiduous study, Aquinas successfully completed his bachelor's and master's studies in just a few years and finally stayed at the university to teach, which proves that his learning ability is very strong, and his ability to be hired to teach in many colleges and universities also shows that he can flexibly apply what he has learned. For example, during his studies, Aquinas often discussed controversial academic issues privately with his classmates, in the form of debating the pros and cons of the issues. It can be seen that Aquinas had a strong desire for knowledge, and the purpose of learning was in the form of communication. For example, when Aquinas taught at the University of Paris, he often taught in the form of lecture for lower grade students, while he taught in the form of seminar for higher grade students.⁴ For another example, in the Great Controversy of Paris, in the face of the severe challenge of the Franciscans, Aquinas always maintained a calm way to discuss problems.⁵ These are enough to prove that Aquinas was not a stuffy person, but a scholar who paid attention to social etiquette and social influence. In addition, Aquinas' self-actualization is also reflected in his academic achievements. His extensive works can be divided into five categories: Biblical commentaries, Aristotelian commentaries, integrations, apologetics and proofs. Among them, the *Summa Theologica*,

⁴ Sumin Liu, *Aquinas*, Xian: Shanxi Normal University Publishing General Co., LTD., 2017, pp. 8-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

the *Summa Against Paganism*, and *On Truth* are all classics handed down from time to time. Aquinas achieved the goal of exchange of ideas through his writings and was admired by the world. It can be seen that Aquinas' worldwide reputation comes not only from the Catholic Church, but also from the secular society. *Summa Theologica* is Aquina' powerful contribution to the society and has become an irreplaceable historical label.⁶

Finally, Aquinas was self-aware and dared to open himself up to others. From 1272, Aquinas returned to Naples, Italy, to continue work on the third part of his *Summa Theologica*, but perceived the limitations of his abilities under mysterious circumstances, and on December 6, 1273, he recorded truthfully that he could not continue writing his *Summa Theologica*. This suggests that Aquinas was capable of self-reflection, reflecting on his past work in order to enhance his self-knowledge. At the same time, his ability to record his own circumstances shows that he has a rigorous and candid academic style, and he can bravely admit his shortcomings, which can be regarded as frank and wise, showing his open and broad mind. In the end, Aquinas died of illness on 7 March 1274 while on his way to the Council of Lyon.

Throughout his life, Thomas Aquinas was a loyal, simple, and kind scholar who devoted his life to contributing to society. The loyalty is that he did not forget the original intention of joining the Dominican Order, which is consistent with the Dominican Order's emphasis on human moral life, which can be seen from the second part of the *Summa Theologica*. This part is of decisive value to the Dominicans. Aquinas showed his loyalty to the Dominicans through his attention to the moral life.⁷ As a member of the Dominican Order, Aquinas had the responsibility for the group, and he fulfilled his mission by realizing the common ideal with practical actions. In addition, Aquinas was also a simple, pure and kind scholar. He did not accept the arrangement of high office and rich salary according to the established life plan, but chose a hard road of theoretical

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Dezhi Duan, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2013, iii-iv.

⁷ John Inglis, *Aquinas*, trans. Zhongmin Liu, Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2019, p.20.

exploration. At the same time, as a member of a community that closely linked knowledge and religion, Aquinas was raised to be an intellectual in the service of the public, not just an intellectual living in an ivory tower.⁸ All these show that Aquinas lived a life of service to society, and he had a strong sense of social responsibility. Society is an important platform for Aquinas to find himself, discover himself and realize himself, and Aquinas also grew up and matured in the society, and eventually became a famous and successful person. His social style is also highlighted by his scholar character.

II. Background

Thomas Aquinas lived in the transitional period of Western European feudal society from prosperity to decline.⁹ In the two centuries before Aquinas was born, Western European society had been under the strict feudal autocratic rule, and the natural economy was dominant. Although there were occasional wars, the traditional small-scale peasant economy had always maintained a relatively stable life between slaves and landlords, and the subordination relationship between slave owners and slaves was very strong. With the development of The Times, the traditional small-scale peasant economy could no longer meet the survival requirements of the majority of serfs and the material and cultural needs of the ever-expanding landlords. Since the 11th century, with the rise of cities and the emergence of a large number of craftsmen and merchants on the European continent, serfdom gradually declined. At the beginning of the 12th century, many people living on agriculture moved into the cities, which led to the rapid development of the commodity economy. The new civic class attracted the attention of slave-owning aristocrats and the church because of the huge profits they could earn from commercial activities. From the end of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th century, as the exploitation of feudal forces reached its peak, social conflicts emerged one after another, and local unrest occurred from time to

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹ Dongbo Zhang and Jin Ming, "A Preliminary Study of Thomas Aquinas' Political Thought," in *Journal of Zhangzhou Normal College*, 1996(1).

time. It should be noted that the people at the bottom of society were often oppressed by both secular kingship and ecclesiastical theocracy, and the church often competed with the princes and nobles for economic interests. However, the unique social role of the church is highly controversial. On the one hand, the preaching of the universal way of heaven to save people, on the other hand, the plundering of the property of peasants and citizens, is a problem that is difficult to explain, both doctrine and in the eyes of the lay people.

In Europe in the 13th century, the Church was regarded as one of the biggest landowners. The church implemented a strict hierarchy system, had high political power and social status, and managed and controlled the society through both religious and secular means. However, due to its poor financial management, rebellions were often triggered. The merchants had to resort to violence to fight for the right to survive.¹⁰ At the same time, disagreements often arose within the church because the confiscated property could not be reasonably distributed, which led to class divisions and struggles among monks. For example, with the continuous accumulation of wealth, the economic strength of the church became increasingly prominent and became the main operating body of social capital. The originally clean monasteries were used as important places for business transactions, and money lending became the basic means to develop the monastic economy. Driven by the interests, some clergymen expanded their selfish desires, became corrupt, and led a Bohemian and stimulating life.¹¹ This led to criticism from all walks of life, the sanctity of the Church was questioned, people began to believe that God can bring them happiness, and more and more people questioned the fairness and justice of society.

In addition, new social classes sprang up to overthrow the feudal autocracy of the Roman Catholic Church. On the one hand, the artisans organized themselves through guilds; On the other hand, they constructed their own theories to interpret the development of society. Despite the

¹⁰ Thompson, *The Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages (Volume2)*, trans. Danru Geng, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1997, pp.262-346.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

supreme authority of Catholic theology at that time, it was still criticized and challenged.¹² For example, in southern Europe in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, various Christian groups appeared, preaching doctrines that were diametrically opposed to those of the Catholic Church, causing the Pope's wrath. In the face of internal and external troubles, the Roman Catholic Church decided to strengthen its dominance by strengthening the papacy. In order to re-establish the authoritative image of the church, the church began to learn from others and make up for its own shortcomings. At this time, the Latin translation movement, which began in the 12th century, provided a valuable opportunity for the fragile church.¹³ People with insight in the church promoted the development of the Latin academic cause by translating the ancient Greek philosophical classics, thus perfecting the Catholic theological thought system and laying the foundation for consolidating the Church's authoritative position in society. At the same time, the Church began to set up universities to support the development of academic undertakings, all of which were powerful measures to restore the image of the Roman Catholic Church in the 13th century. Born in the 1320s, Thomas Aquinas came of age at a time of increasing papacy, the Latin translation movement and the rise of universities.¹⁴

The formation and development of Thomas Aquinas' Catholic social ethics thought is related to his life experiences. First of all, the strengthening of the papacy promoted the rapid development of the mendicant order, which provided an opportunity for Aquinas to understand the society. The corruption of the Church in the Middle Ages forced the church to make reforms. On the one hand, top-down measures were adopted to improve the system and strengthen the duties of the clergy. On the other hand, devout lay Catholics were also worried about the development of the church, so they adopted the monasticism mimicking the early Catholics to strengthen their faith. On the first hand, the top-

¹² Xukun Zhang, *A History of Economic Thought*, Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2017, p.11.

¹³ Latin Translation Movement: A translation movement that introduced ancient Greece, especially from the 1620s to the 1370s, to Aristotle and Islamic philosophy, to the Latin world.

¹⁴ Tianyue Wu, *Fifteen Lectures on Ancient Medieval Philosophy*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2023, pp.517-522.

down reform of the church has always faced the challenge of the drawbacks brought by the monastery economy. For example, the clergy should not only maintain a stable income of the church, but also resist corruption and change, which is a long-term and difficult task. However, some clergy did not have enough determination, so the Church continued to lose credibility. In the second respect, it was very effective. The rise of the monastic order was based on pure faith, in Catholic terms on the call of God. The most influential mendicant orders of the 13th century were the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Both emphasized ethics and theological training to rid the church of corruption and reinvent itself. If top-down reform is a passive normative exercise driven by circumstances, Dominicans and Franciscans are active practitioners of the faith. The latter were easier to accept and more attractive because they did not have to adhere to a rigid hierarchy. Instead, they focused on social practice, traveling and lecturing, and were flexible enough to attract many members. It was because of this flexible and down-to-earth character that the Dominicans and Franciscans gained the support of the Holy See and developed their academic careers. Thomas Aquinas was attracted to the more lively teaching and monastic style of the Dominicans; At the same time, Dominicans would pay attention to people's moral practice and emotional care, which coincided with Aquinas' innate interest. Therefore, Aquinas chose to join the Dominicans.

Joining the Dominican Order would make Aquinas feel for the first time exactly how important society is to a person. There were three reasons: First, because the Dominican Order itself was a social organization, Aquinas was able to practice with a group of like-minded friends after a lot of hard work, which was a personal blessing for Aquinas; Second, the Dominicans paid attention to social practice and made a living by begging and lecturing during the tour, which was an important way for Aquinas to know and understand the society. During the tour, Aquinas deeply realized the sufferings of the people and the strong demands of the people at the bottom for social fairness and justice; Third, the goals of Aquinas were the same as those of Dominicans, both paying attention to people's moral life, which provided the prerequisite for the emergence of the social ethical thoughts of Aquinas. It should be noted

that in the process of his growth, Aquinas' knowledge of society was gradually improved. Although the Casino Convent, where Aquinas was a child, was also a monastic community with social attributes, Aquinas was not aware of this social attribute, because he was not interested in the convent, but put his mind on "What is God?".¹⁵ Later, during his study in the University of Naples, Aquinas began to realize the problem of human relations, because he had chosen the people to associate with in the university by recalling the life of the Casino monastery; It was not until he became a member of the Dominican Order that Aquinas began to take an interest in people and society. It can be seen that Aquinas' understanding of society was gradually enhanced with his life experience, and the object of his concern was expanded from personal preferences to social problems.

Secondly, the steady advance of the Latin translation movement provided Aquinas with important ideological resources.¹⁶ The Latin translation movement, which began in southern Europe in the 12th century, culminated in Italy in the 13th century, with many translations being used by the Church. For example, Catholic scholars Gerard of Cremona (1114-1187) and William of Moerbeke (1215-1286) translated parts of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* from Arabic and *Politics* from Greek into Latin versions, respectively.¹⁷ Subsequently, Aristotle's ideas spread widely in the Latin world, and there was a wave of Aristotelian studies both inside and outside the Papacy. While studying at university, Aquinas studied the works of Aristotle under her mentor Albert, and was deeply attracted to the Aristotelian thought. After systematic study, Aquinas gained a deeper understanding of Aristotle's thought and wrote commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁸ Aristotle elaborated in his book *Politics* that man is a political animal, and Aquinas combined with the relevant content of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to find that

¹⁵ Sumin Liu, *Aquinas*, Xian: Shanxi Normal University Publishing General Co., LTD., 2017, p. 4.

¹⁶ Tianyue Wu, *Fifteen Lectures on Ancient Medieval Philosophy*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2023, p.520.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ruicheng Huang, Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House, 2023.

man is not only a political animal, but also a social animal. As a result, Aquinas' interest shifted from the initial "What is God" to the "What is man" inquiry. However, in the early days of its popularity, the official attitude of the Church was conservative, because there were elements of non-religious belief in the theory. Theologians at that time questioned it. On the one hand, they doubted whether the philosophy was really in line with the Catholic belief concept, and on the other hand, they were constantly looking for solutions to this problem. Thomas Aquinas, who was interested in both "God" and "man", studied Aristotle's ethical thought on the basis of the Bible from two aspects of theology and philosophy, and finally formed his unique human thought system, which made a powerful contribution to the Church. Aquinas' social ethics thought was mainly derived from his Catholic interpretation of Aristotle's philosophy. He regarded society as a system of purpose, in which all levels serve each other, the lower serves the higher, the higher guides the lower, the power of the ruler comes from God, and stressed that the moral purpose of political rule is to promote the happiness of mankind.¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas inherited and developed Aristotle's thought that man is a political animal. He believed that society should be a just society, and the realization of social justice should focus on the observance of the common good.²⁰ Different from Aristotle, Aquinas emphasized the important role of natural law in society, while Aristotle emphasized the status and role of civil law. Although slightly different, the two are closely related. Aquinas' views on man and society, expressed in his *Summa Theologica* and in some of his political doctrines, are undoubtedly a valuable spiritual asset to the Catholic Church, and his doctrines have also influenced the Church's idea of participating in the affairs of secular society. In short, the Latin translation movement provided a valuable resource for Aquinas' Catholic social ethics. Through the spread of Arabic culture and Greek culture, Aquinas integrated Aristotelian philosophy and Catholic doctrine, and shaped a harmonious ethical system based on natural law,

¹⁹ G.H. Sabine, *History of Political Science: States and World Society*, trans. Zhenglai Deng, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2015, pp. 387-392.

²⁰ Dr. B. Ketter, "The Development of the Concept 'Iustitia' From Thomas Aquinas through the Social Encyclicals," in *Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*, trans. and ed. David Boileau, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1994, pp. 85-101.

emphasizing social harmony and moral perfection, which provided practical ethical guidance for Catholic society.²¹

Thirdly, the establishment of the medieval university provided a platform for Aquinas' research. The first universities were guild institutions initiated by the Catholics, which were later recognized by the Holy See through the tireless efforts of the Dominicans and established in the core cities of Western Europe. As a member of the Dominicans, Aquinas had the opportunity to complete his studies at the University of Naples and the University of Paris, respectively, and pursued a research career as he wished. The academic training at the university was crucial to the shaping of Aquinas' thinking. In college, Aquinas learned grammar, rhetoric, logic, astronomy, music, arithmetic, geometry, and came into contact with Aristotle's philosophical thoughts, which laid a solid foundation for his later academic research. One of the important roles of universities in the Middle Ages was to serve the church. However, with the gradual independence of universities, coupled with the turmoil of social situation, the tendency of ideological liberalization became more and more serious, and universities became the birthplace of "Heretical" ideas, challenging the authority of the Roman Church.²² In response to the challenge, Aquinas was sent to Paris to debate. He respected reason and devoted himself to combining Catholic doctrine with philosophy. He effectively responded to the theory of skepticism and provided a set of God-philosophy thought system for Catholic society to prove faith by reason.²³ His profound academic foundation can be found in the *Summa Against Paganism*, which was completed in 1264. From 1269 to 1272, Aquinas was again sent to the University of Paris for academic contention. Unlike before, this time he faced the Franciscan Order. With his unparalleled knowledge and ability, Aquinas represented the Dominican Order in fierce debate with his opponents, known as the "Great Controversy of Paris" in history, and his ideas on people were included in

²¹ James S. Bhagwan, "The Social Ethics of Thomas Aquinas and the Accommodation Model: Seminar on Christian Social Ethics," in *Seminar on Christian Social Ethics*, 2011(10), pp. 1-7.

²² Lin Zhao, *Christianity and Western Culture*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2013, pp. 163-178.

²³ Shelley, *A History of the Christian Church*, trans. Ping Liu, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2012, pp.202-204.

the second part of the *Summa Theologica*.²⁴ Judging from the background of the two important works, Aquinas' academic achievements benefited from the important platform of the university. Through studying in the university, Aquinas not only gained knowledge, but also exercised the ability of academic research. On the one hand, he received the education of Catholic theological thought, on the other hand, he also made many teachers, classmates and friends, which laid the social foundation for the development of his social ethical thought.

Finally, the superior family environment shaped Aquinas' unique perspective of social observation. From an early age, Aquinas led a life of food and clothing. His father and brother served in the Roman army, and both served in public office after their retirement. Military and public service were of great importance in society at the time, and Aquinas' family enjoyed great honor in Roccasecca. Compared with other citizens, Aquinas did not have to worry about making a living. On the contrary, he was able to get in touch with the aristocratic culture of high society. On the one hand, Aquinas was expected by his parents to become the abbe. He studied in the Casino Abbey and received a good education; On the other hand, under the influence of his father and his brother, Aquinas maintained a keen insight into politics, and although he was not interested in the administrative post of dean, he was familiar with the law, which was revealed in his later studies and formed an indispensable element of his political thought. In this regard, American scholar John Finnis once pointed out that Aquinas' family and political background had an impact on his thought. Despite the turbulent political environment at that time, Aquinas always looked for a way to maintain social stability and justice with a calm attitude and stressed the importance of law in resolving disputes.²⁵ In addition, it was precisely because of Aquinas' aristocratic class attributes that he had a different perspective on society, which was not fully confirmed until the publication of his great work *Summa Theologica*, because through his works, it can be seen that Aquinas was a

²⁴ Sumin Liu, *Aquinas*, Xian: Shanxi Normal University Publishing General Co., LTD., 2017, p.11.

²⁵ John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 1-14.

hard worker in serving the church because the church was one of the largest landowners at that time. So Aquinas' doctrine was aimed at maintaining feudal exploitative relations and feudal rule, both clerical and secular.²⁶ For example, Aquinas believed that the church was entirely a political community, that the assembly of the church could be regarded as a kind of political assembly, and that power should belong to the monarch personally, not be shared by the people.²⁷ This shows that Aquinas always maintained the feudal monarchical autocratic system at that time, and the Pope, who integrated secular power and ultra-secular power, was the real object of his protection. From the perspective of his family background, Aquinas' views on society were always rooted in the official ideology of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, Aquinas' social views were consistent with the Catholic value system. Since Aquinas received Catholic theological education since childhood, his social thoughts were naturally related to Catholic belief.

III. Conclusion

It should be noted that Aquinas' social thought carries a distinct ethical character. This thought has always been included in Catholic ethical theology, because the society he discussed is the society in the Catholic belief world, in which there are two basic relationships: the secular relationship between man and man and the religious relationship between man and God. Both secular and religious relations can be perfected and happiness achieved in the Church: "Common Good". Aquinas argued that individual good and common good are ethical relations, not ontological categories in the philosophical sense.²⁸ From his view, it can be seen that Aquinas not only followed the traditional Catholic theology, but also combined the ancient Greek philosophical thought, but

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Political Works of Aquinas*, trans. Qinghuai Ma, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1982, p. iv.

²⁷ Alexander V. Marey, "From People to Community: A Description of the Social Order by Thomas Aquinas," in *Russian Sociological Review* 15, 2016(4), pp.162-175.

²⁸ L.J. Elders, "Common Good as Goal and Governing Principle of Social Life: Interpretations and Meaning," in *Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*, trans. and ed. David Boileauin, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1994, pp.103-118.

more often used philosophy to serve the theological theory. It was reasonable for Aquinas to defend the belief of the Roman Catholic Church in such a way in that period of social turmoil, because the theory of the unity of church culture at that time was based on the ethical view of theology, and all the secular economic, political and other social theories were governed by the ethical theology. Which had the function of reconciling the secular relationship between man and man and the religious relationship between man and God.²⁹ Therefore, Aquinas' social thought is a kind of Catholic social thought with ethical nature, that is, Catholic social ethical thought.

In short, Aquinas' Catholic social ethics came into being during the feudal society transformation period in Western Europe. The reason and background lies in the fact that Roman Catholicism took many measures to strengthen the papacy in order to consolidate its social status. During such a sensitive period, Aquinas seized the opportunity to study and work successively in Dominican Society, the University of Naples, the University of Paris and other places. Through the use of new ideas and its social relations to maintain the feudal autocratic rule of the church, and eventually became a famous and successful person in the field of Catholic society.

²⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, *A History of Christian Social Thought*, trans. Shengyu Dai and Zhao Zhenchong, Hong Kong: Christian Auxiliary Press, 1960, p.170.