

Daily Meditation 03-25-24

Aquinas on Spirit as Feminine, Creativity, & God as 'Artist of Artists'

Good morning.

This morning we are continuing our meditations on Thomas Aquinas as a proto-feminist, and other things. Today's focus is on his love of the Via Creativa.

Creativity comes up so often in his work, and his reflections on this topic are extremely profound. As I point out at the beginning of today's meditation, he inspired, when it comes to creativity, Meister Eckhart, about whom it has been said, he has a whole philosophy of art.

And Mechtild of Magdeburg: She was very much a student of Aquinas, being that she was a contemporary of Aquinas. But she had a Dominican as a spiritual director, who urged her to write her book, to publish her journal that she kept her whole life. So, obviously that Dominican was influenced by Aquinas, and his emphasis on getting the word out, and publishing your work.

And Julian of Norwich: Aquinas's works were well known in Norwich, because of the very strong Dominican community there. And they certainly pushed Aquinas's work, including his emphasis on creativity.

And of course, Dante: one of Aquinas's students in the University of Paris was a an elder, really, to Dante. And Dante very much includes Aquinas's teachings in his work, in his cosmology.

And I do want to acknowledge my dependence on Aquinas. I used him in the titles of a number of my books, for example, "Sheer Joy." It's he who said, "sheer joy is God's, and this demands companionship." So that is his whole theory, and why there is a universe at all, or there is creation at all, is that God only showed Joy. And celebration and joy are at the heart of it. And of course, that's Thomas Berry's teaching also: that the whole purpose of the universe can be summarized in one word, Celebration.

In my large book on evil, I call it "Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh -- Transforming Evil in Soul and Society," that phrase, "sins of the spirit, blessings of the flesh" comes directly from Aquinas, who says that sins of the spirit are far more serious than sins of the flesh. "Sins of the spirit take you away from God," he says; "sins of the flesh take you toward God," or communion, in the quest for communion.

Of course, sins of the spirit include things like arrogance, and hatred, and envy, and avarice, greed, cold heartedness and so forth. That these are the sins of the spirit, as Aquinas says, these are much more serious than sins of the flesh. And yet how much of Christian preaching, for centuries, zeroes in on sins of the flesh, the lesser issue, and not the great issues of the sins of the spirits, so much.

And, of course, my book on "Naming the Unnameable -- 89 Wonderful and Useful Names for God ... Including the Unnameable God," this book is very much triggered by Aquinas's very deep teaching on the apophatic divinity. And at the end of the book, as an appendix, I offer Aquinas's amazing teaching, found in his commentary on Denis the Areopagite, his book on the names of God. I reproduce his commentary there, about how he repeats the Names of God in the Bible. Denis has I think 50 of those or so, but then he says, "The Divine One is all of the beings attributed to God as Cause, are a name for God." So every being is a name for God, in the whole universe, 2 trillion galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars, every being is a name for God.

Well, that is really big! To have a list of names for God in any being. And, again, Aquinas and Denis are just naming names in the Bible itself: God is good, God is wise, God is eternal. The cause of the ages, bestower of life, reason, justice, the Ancient of Days, water, fire, air, dew, cloud (and with a reference to each of these biblical names), stone, rock, and all other beings attributed to God as Cause, says Aquinas. And then he says, "And the Divine One is none of these beings, insofar as God surpasses all things." So we have the Via Positiva, the cataphatic means for divinity, and the Via Negativa, the apophatic means for divinity.

So Aquinas's commitment to art and creativity is so strong in today's meditation. I just love these statements of his, that God is an artist, the universe is God's work of art, all natural things are produced by divine art, and can rightly be called God's work of art. God is the Artist of artists, all artists love what they give birth to. And he gives the example of parents and children, poets and poems, craftspeople and their handiwork, etc.

How can God hate a single thing, since God is the artist of everything? And that God saw the universe was good, means that just as all artists take satisfaction in their art, and delight in it, so too does God.

Now I want to point out, that in our workshop that we're doing this summer, in Arvieto, a town of artists that Aquinas visited on several occasions, we're going to employ Art as Meditation, as part of our workshop for the week with Aquinas. I'll teach, seminar style in the morning. In the afternoon, we'll have our class on movement, putting Aquinas to

movement, the teachings of the morning into movement in the afternoon. Or people can choose to put him into imaging and drawing his ideas, again in the afternoon. Or, there's another Art as Meditation, where people can put him into Haiku, putting Aquinas into Haiku, or into, Chi Gong practice.

Powerful teachings, about art, creativity, and its Omnipresence in all of us, and especially in God.

So I emphasize this because this comes from Aquinas too: the whole Art as Meditation tradition, that I've been pushing as a primary device for pedagogy and teaching spirituality. I've seen so many results from doing this over the years, over 45 years, that it's very important that we put Aquinas to movement, to Haiku, to imaging, to Chi Gong, that our mystics cannot be taught just through the left hemisphere of the brain, just through concepts and talk and ideas. We have to put them through our imaginations and our intuitions as well.

That's why Art as Meditation is so powerful, and why psychologists like Gordon Stein have declared that "this is the way of the prophets." This, meaning Art, is the way of the prophets. That's the meditation practice of prophets. And Aquinas certainly was that kind of meditator. Yes, he was into the silence and contemplation too, but also the Art as Meditation. And this why study is such an important Art as Meditation as well.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.