

Thomas Aquinas and (Our) Moral Debate

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Any didactic piece of writing faces the challenge of justifying its existence. It must say or show, in one register or another, that it offers something worth learning. The challenge is particularly acute for didactic writing that wants to intervene in a repetitive debate. When every bit of evidence has been used and over-used, when all the argumentative combinations have been rehearsed, when fixed parties have already recruited the undecided—what room remains for teaching?

From the start, Richard Norris is diffident about his purpose in the sadly incomplete “Some Notes on the Current Debate Regarding Homosexuality.” He means to offer help in “clarifying the issues” of that repetitive debate (A.1.3). He writes about it or into it “simply as a Christian (who happens to be a historian)” (A.1.4). Both his title and his form confirm this diffidence. These are after all only “Some Notes”—only notes, only some of those that might be jotted down. They are numbered in groups as if to indicate that they had been gathered tentatively from a scatter of fragments and that there might well be gaps. The text cautions its readers through its title and form: “You might use some of these fragments to gain a little clarity on our controversies.”

I take this diffidence as sincere, but I also remember that any particular offer of didactic clarity diagnoses some particular obscurity. Writing up these teacherly notes, gathering them together, Norris must suppose that the “current debate regarding homosexuality and the place of homosexuals in the church” repeatedly fails to achieve clarity for specific questions. He must know something about the causes for our present confusion. I sometimes suspect that he is confident of knowing more. In many passages Norris rebukes the actual conduct of the debate and proposes to conduct it better.

Since Norris explicitly identifies himself as a historian, it is easy to suppose that his rebuke is historical: the debate repeats itself because the contending parties keep making a mistake about the past. On that supposition, Norris’s purpose would reprise the project of Derrick Sherwin Bailey’s *Homosexuality and the Western Christian*

Tradition.¹ Bailey wrote that pioneering book to block the inferences from “tradition” that abound in church arguments around homosexuality. Many of the inferences are scriptural. So Bailey narrates the origin and textual transmission of traditional misreadings of the story of Sodom. But other purported inferences concern the moral categories for describing same-sex acts. The combination of misreadings and conceptual mistakes renders the library of Christian texts unhelpful to contemporary debate. For Bailey, Christian tradition about homosexuality “can no longer be regarded as an adequate guide by the theologian, the legislator, the sociologist, and the magistrate.”²

Though Norris identifies himself as a historian, I do not think that he shares either Bailey’s conclusion or Bailey’s project. The purpose of the “Notes” is not principally historical. A comparison with Bailey suggests how far Norris writes here as something other than “a Christian (who happens to be a historian).” Norris’s essay exposes various sorts of misunderstandings. Some of them are indeed about the uses of inherited texts. His remarks on invocations of the Christian scriptures, for example, show a historian’s sensibility for the various conditions under which ancient texts were composed, reproduced, and received (B.4 and all of its sub-sections). But for the most part Norris is not concerned to provide a historically embedded reading of the moral arguments he clarifies, much less to narrate their transmission from past to present. He treats instead the *forms* of arguments extracted from inherited texts so far as they are present to us through debate. He clarifies the current debate by exposing its confusions and equivocations, its fallacies and sophisms. In contrast with Bailey, Norris proceeds in the manner of an “analytic” philosopher who assumes a continuity of reasoning that brings arguments from various historical epochs under the scrutiny of curiously timeless standards.

I do not know what literary model Norris had in mind, but an intricately numbered series of corrections to the logic of a current debate will remind many readers of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. In the

¹ Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1955). Bailey’s book is best read in connection with the privately circulated pamphlet that it both supplements and contests—and for which he served as redactor: Church of England Moral Welfare Council, *The Problem of Homosexuality: An Interim Report* (London: produced for the Council by the Church Information Board, 1954).

² Bailey, *Homosexuality*, 173.

Preface to that manifesto, Wittgenstein writes: "The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language."³ If Norris is not afflicted with Wittgenstein's hubris at having "dissolved" problems, he does share with Wittgenstein a confidence in the decisive effect of exposing logical misunderstandings. When he responds to church debate with logical clarification, Norris assumes that the central problem in the debates is (or ought to be) logical rather than historical, psychological, or "genealogical" (in Nietzsche's sense—or Foucault's). He assumes, in other words, that logical analysis is likely to be more helpful than detailed historical exegesis, well-crafted appeal to emotion, or the unmasking of historically concealed structures of power. I worry that the assumption is naive. I am also concerned that it concedes the authority of certain historical figures to those who abuse them for present purposes—and so abandons one possible cure for our self-absorption.

In church debate about homosexuality, one of the most frequently cited historical authorities is Thomas Aquinas. Norris is right, I think, to suggest that "St. Thomas" usually refers in these citations rather less to the thirteenth-century Dominican friar, whose teaching can be recovered only through surviving texts, and rather more to the ideal type of moral argument from nature. In the debate, Thomas's texts are not so much historically situated acts of teaching as they are instances of an argumentative form that supposedly spans history. Many schools of Thomists reduce Thomas in this way to an argumentative emblem. So do the schools of English-speaking philosophy for which the main thing is a free-standing argument, not the historical texts from which it has supposedly been extracted. I do not believe that Norris would endorse this doctrinaire or "analytic" reduction of Aquinas. He knows how much gets left out when an argument is plucked from a text and the text then is thrown to the side. But I am puzzled by the curiously unhistorical reading of Thomas that Norris permits here. I wonder about the lack of historical sensibility in Norris's treatment of Thomas especially by contrast with his approach to the Scriptures.

In the last century and a half, the same cultural forces, the same "sciences" that produced historico-critical readings of the Scriptures

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922; London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1922).

have also found Thomas. There are now Thomistic paleographers and codicologists, specialists in source redaction and rhetorical genre, students of social setting and institutional appropriation. If this scholarship has sometimes atomized the text, reducing it to mute bits, it has at other times rightly emphasized the importance of reading in context. For Thomas, as for the Scriptures, responsible citation must attend to the context of a whole work and even to the succession of works in the corpus. To understand what Thomas says in the *Summa* about luxurious sins against nature, a reader had better approach the topic along the careful pedagogical sequence that leads up to it. She had then best keep on reading until the book itself breaks off. The *Summa*'s Questions, like scriptural verses, are not meant to be cited in isolation. Nor does the *Summa* sum up Thomas's authorship. If Thomas treats the morality of same-sex acts almost as rarely as the Christian Scriptures, there are still other passages beyond those quoted by Norris from the *Summa*. A reader can trace the development through them of vocabulary, sources, and arguments. She can watch his teaching vary with genre or didactic context.

With Thomas, as with the Scriptures, there is also a continuing history of dispute over what individual passages mean, especially for current moral debate. Later readers found many unresolved difficulties in the *Summa*'s survey of sexual sins against nature. One of them was what Cardinal Cajetan called the "arduous doubt" about how exactly sodomy could be a grave sin for women, since it seemed to involve neither the spilling of seed nor the misuse of procreative power.⁴ Many other commentators wondered whether there could be "complete sodomy" between two women since there was no carnal copulation. Almost two centuries after Cajetan, the Discalced Carmelite commentators known as the "Salamancaans" (*Salmanticenses*) were still arguing the point.⁵ A historically-minded reader could rewrite Norris's conclusion about the Scriptures for Thomas's texts: "Thomas condemns homosexuality" means concretely "There are some half dozen passages in Thomas's corpus that have commonly been taken to argue a condemnation, on different grounds and authorities, of

⁴ Cajetan's remark appears in the Leonine Edition of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2–2 q.154 a.12, "Commentaria Cardinalis Caietani," sections 20–21, as in *Opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII. P. M. edita* (Rome: 1882–), 10:25.

⁵ *Collegii Salmanticensis Fratres Discalceatorum Cursus theologiae moralis* 6.7.5.1 (Venice: Nicolaus Pezzana, 1724), 6:162b §77.

genital contacts between men . . . and also perhaps between women” (compare 3).

Norris does *not* write that sort of historical conclusion for Thomas. He does *not* apply to Thomas the historical sensibilities he brings to scriptural interpretation and transmission. He seems instead to fall in with our debate’s unhistorical use of Thomas as an emblem for a certain form of argument from nature. In consequence, Norris makes what seem to me certain historical mistakes in reading Thomas. For example, Thomas is never “clear that the wrongness in question attaches to behavior (and not to ‘orientation’ or ‘condition’)” (C.2). If Thomas does not think of same-sex orientation or condition, he also does not reduce wrongness to behavior. On Thomas’s account, there can be same-sex genital behaviors that would not be moral acts at all because they would lack necessary components of cognition or volition. There can also be sins of *luxuria* (or sensual excess) that do not express themselves in any observable behavior. The Questions Norris paraphrases from the *Summa* are not concerned with “behavior,” much less with “addiction” (C.2). Indeed, neither clinical term could be translated convincingly into Thomas’s Latin. His Questions treat the sin of *luxuria* on the supposition that any sin is a complex of cognitions and volitions, sometimes followed by bodily acts.

In the end, I am less interested in quarreling with Norris over exegetical details than in understanding his unhistorical reading of Thomas. Does he construe Thomas in this way because he wants to engage the current debate and so follows it in reducing Thomas to a form of argument? Or does Norris assume that the best moral arguments can be translated across history? If so, is this because they are philosophical or because they are moral? I am also struck that Norris doesn’t permit for Thomas the same revisionist impulse that he acknowledges in the reception of the Scriptures. Particular passages of the Scriptures are frequently re-read or even reversed in view of higher scriptural principles. “In Christian circles,” Norris writes, “revisionism is traditional” (B.4.7). So too in Christian circles studying Thomas. It is not difficult to imagine a revised Thomistic account of human sex that would respond to some of Norris’s criticisms of what he takes to be Thomas’s argument about same-sex relations. Thomas rigorously excludes from his discussion of sins against nature any of the rhetoric of stigma so often deployed against them. He further locates them under a middling class of sins of the flesh, which are much less severe than the colder, more deliberate sins. Both of these textual

features suggest that Thomas does not give these sins the exceptional importance our debate accords them. A revisionist reader could then notice that Thomas is sometimes willing to override nature with grace—as he does, for example, with the idea of the “mean” for pagan and Christian virtues. Or she could recall that his commitment to an honest account of nature leaves open the possibility of further discoveries, since our knowledge of nature is neither complete nor infallible. Did Thomas approve same-sex genital acts? No, he did not. Could one mobilize other principles in his writings to revise his conclusions about them? Yes, one can.

Thomas’s most important contribution to our churchly debate about homosexuality may lie in another direction—and so address Norris’s assumption about what is most helpful to repetitive debate about a moral question. Some of Thomas’s favorite literary forms are imitations of public theological dispute. They register the always controverted situation of theological discourse. But Thomas’s grandest literary achievement is to find larger-scale didactic genres—like the *Summa* itself—that lift particular disputes into an intellectual teleology that tends toward contemplation of the divine. For Thomas, opposing arguments find their human sense by ascending to beatitude.

Our church debate over homosexuality circles endlessly, painfully, for many reasons. One of these is that the debate is so rarely lifted up into the larger theological pedagogies that would give it purpose. I suspect that many of us do not want the debate to find a pedagogical purpose. We would rather continue to debate—not least because we need to distract ourselves from seeing clearly the motives behind the fight over homosexuality. Norris describes some of these motives as “social custom” (A.1.4) or “cultural attitudes” (B.5.4.3)—including the “established abhorrence of males who are not ‘real men’” (B.5.4.1). He then writes, quite poignantly: “In the face of attitudes of these sorts, rational moral argument of any kind seems almost an irrelevance, and an ecclesiastical judgment regarding homosexual practice, whether based on ‘the Bible’ or not, whether favorable or unfavorable to homosexuality, is rather like the tinkle of a clavichord bravely accompanying the blast of a brass band” (B.5.4.3).

Norris immediately rebukes the conduct of debate on such terms: “It must therefore be asserted and grasped firmly that such cultural attitudes, whether they reinforce a given judgment on homosexual behavior or call it into question, do not represent, and cannot function as, relevant grounds for argument in the current dispute” (B.5.5). His

rebuke contains more wish than description. The debate does in fact take those grounds as “relevant,” and it regularly supports them with (mis)readings of the Scriptures and (fallacious) inferences from nature or tradition. The brass band wears ecclesiastical vestments more often than not. These attitudes belong in many ways to the culture called Christendom—and to the teaching of not a few churches. So what is the force of rebuking the prominence of those attitudes in church debate—unless perhaps it is to invite anyone listening to an alternate discourse of church, a contrary theology, a sacramental cure for the ugliness still in Christendom? What is the purpose of proposing a more proper form of moral reasoning unless you can wean listeners from the attitudes that prevent them from learning from it? The challenge for moral teaching is not to find the right arguments, but to render them persuasive in the face of cultural attitudes that disdain them.

Norris’s “Notes” and Thomas’s *Summa* are both incomplete. We can regret this as the coincidence of untimely deaths. We can learn from it as a reminder of how much more would actually be required to teach the logic of moral debate to readers who always bring some loud blasting band with them.

