

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS AND THE INDIAN VEDANTISTS ON MYSTICISM, SALVATION AND HEAVENLY EXISTENCE

Gopal Stavig*

The purpose of this essay is to compare the Christian philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) with the religious doctrines of the Indian Vedantists. For each separate topic, the opening statement is made by Thomas Aquinas, followed by the teachings of the traditional Vedantists Shankara (688/788-720/820), Ramanuja (1017-1137) and Jiva Goswami (d. 1566), and the modern Neo-Vedantists Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950).¹

1. Mystical Contemplation

Thomas Aquinas: Contemplative life is concerned with the love and desire for God, which moves the human intellect towards Him. The greatest happiness is experienced in a deep contemplation of God, which is the goal of human existence. A spiritual vision of the divine essence accompanied by the knowledge and love of God is the supreme good. The closer a person is to the first cause, the more he/she participates in its influence and the more supernatural truths are revealed to him/her. In this world few people receive knowledge of God resulting from a direct vision. Religious contemplation is concerned with the love of God and benefits the intellect which is superior to the five senses. Being directed to the excellence of inner life, it is more meritorious than the active life. Contemplation is long lasting as it focuses on unchanging things and has no contraries that oppose it. Due to the excellence of the object that is being contemplated, it is in the form of most joyous reflection. These

*Dr. Gopal Stavig serves at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood.

¹This article is a continuation of Gopal Stavig's, "A Western Saints (Thomas Aquinas) Dialogue With Some Indian Theologians", *Journal of Dharma*, 25 (2000), pp.60-85, which compared the ideas of Thomas Aquinas with the leading Indian theologians concerning God's essential and operational attributes, the proofs for the existence of God, and the divine creative activity. See also, G. Stavig, "Thomas Aquinas on the Nonduality of God", *Vedanta Kesari*, 88 (2001), pp. 71-73, 112-14.

benefits unlike those of the active life cannot be taken away from a person. Contemplative people are more self-sufficient than the active people, requiring a minimal amount of external support. Spiritual contemplation is an end in-itself than to which all other actions are ordered. It is loved for its own sake and is not directed to some other goal. Spiritual contemplation is directed to divine not human things. It is most desirable since it is instrumental in bringing a person closer to God. Contemplation is the most sublime, because it is desired only by virtuous people and is proper to humans and not animals. The highest perfection is attained by being united to things above the human level not below it.²

Shankara: Religious devotion involves directing the current of the mind to flow constantly towards Brahman (God). The mental faculties of thinking, feeling and willing are each absorbed in divine consciousness, like the attraction of iron-filing to a magnet or river to an ocean. Supersensuous transcendental consciousness is open to all, but realized by only a few. Spiritual intuition (*anubhava*) is a direct immediate revelation of the higher reality in a state of self-enlightenment. An awakened soul passes into the ultimate state of illumination where the mind is completely absorbed in Brahman which is pure consciousness, and unlimited bliss is attained. Self-revealing, spiritual intuition carries the highest degree of certitude that verifies the statements of the religious scriptures.³

Jiva Goswami: The highest state of God realization, is attained by love and devotion (*bhakti*) to the Lord and not from knowledge of the scriptures (*jñāna*) or from good works (*karma*). Scriptural knowledge and meritorious works are efficacious only if they are accompanied by

²Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, tr. Daniel Sullivan, in *Great Books of the Western World* (Vol. 20), ed. Mortimer Adler (Chicago: William Benton, Inc., 1952), ST, II-II, 180: 4-5, 7-8; 181-4; 182:1-2; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Hereafter CG), tr. Vernon Bourke (5 Vols; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1975), CG, III, 37-38.

³S. Radhakrishna, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 Vols., (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), II, pp. 510-14; Ram Lal Singh, *An Inquiry, Concerning Reason in Kant and Samkara*, (Allahabad: Chugh Publications, 1978), pp. 152-56; Gopal Stavig, "The Supreme Atman of Shankara's Advaita and the Absolute Essence in the Philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi," *Journal of Dharma*, 23 (1998), pp.322-24; Gopal Stavig, "Shankara, Kant and Schopenhauer," *Darshana International* 39 (1999), pp. 24-25.

devotion. When love of the Lord is consummated, it is easy to control the passions, destroy egotism, attain liberation and experience God consciousness. *Bhakti yoga* is the easiest and quickest path to God and is suitable for all people at all times. Religious ceremonies and ritual are performed only for the purpose of arousing love and devotion, which brings about the realization of the inner nature of the Lord.⁴ The basic characteristics of pure devotion are that it: involves a yearning for God and a desire to be favorable to Him; is not attained by logical reasoning; fills the mind with joy because of its intrinsic divine bliss; functions independent of the desire for all other objects being an end in-itself; manifests in a pure virtuous mind destroying all vices; and it leads to the loving service of God.⁵

Swami Vivekananda: Devotion to the Lord (*bhakti*), which is a manifestation of bliss, involves intense selfless love of God, and is not reducible to any earthly benefit. It is love for love's sake, an end in-itself, which brings eternal satisfaction. All thoughts, words and deeds are surrendered to the Lord and the least forgetfulness of God makes the devotee feel intensely unhappy. Filled with spiritual bliss, the devotee finds pleasure only in the company of God, who is his only refuge. To see, feel and enjoy the Lord is the easiest and the most natural path to the Divine. Direct super conscious contemplation (*samādhi*) which is the goal of religion, is an immediate perception, a constant remembrance of God in the soul. Transcending the limitations of the five senses and the power of reasoning the soul is united with God.⁶

Swami Abhedananda: Spiritual realization is the direct and immediate awareness of a person's true inner nature, beyond intellectual understanding and sense perception. Holiness is the result of direct

⁴Sudhindra Chakravarti, *Philosophical Foundation of Bengal Vaishnavism*, (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1969), pp. 73, 172-76; Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 Vols., (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1988) iv, pp.415-18.

⁵Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Philosophy*, 3 Vols., (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), II, pp. 362-63; Chakravarti (1969), pp. 185-86.

⁶Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (hereafter CW), ed., Advaita Ashrama, 9 Vols., (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1962), III, 31-36, vi, 150-54; VII, pp. 82-84.

consciousness of our own spirituality, an internal communion with the heavenly realm. First attain to spiritual realization and then philosophical ideas will fall into place and all doubts will be removed. Spiritual love which is latent in each soul, leads to pure happiness, and to the end to all sorrows, selfish attachments and worldly cravings. Selfless love of God seeks no material return, is accompanied by non-attachment to worldly pleasures, is fearless, accepts all life events as being under the control of the divine will, purifies and humbles a person, and leads to the ecstatic super-conscious state of existence.⁷

Sri Aurobindo: The illumined mind functions by vision and not by reasoning. The reasoning process operates slowly in a piecemeal fashion, but a vision yields sudden and direct insight. Reasoning creates a representative image of truth, while the higher mind catches the substance of the truth. In the intuitive process, when the consciousness of the subject and object meets, the yogi feels and vibrates with the knowledge of that ensues from this encounter.⁸ "Intuition has a fourfold power. A power of revelatory truth-seeing, a power of inspiration or truth-hearing, a power of truth-touch or immediate seizing of significance ... a power of true and automatic discrimination of the orderly and exact relation of truth to truth."⁹

Thomas Aquinas: It is wise to pray to the deceased saints, particularly if a person is attracted to them, since the effect of prayer depends in part on a person's level of devotion. The prayer of the saints "are always granted, since they will only what God wills ... and what God wills is always fulfilled."¹⁰ Pray asking for things that are conducive to

⁷Swami Abhedananda, *Human Affection and Divine Love*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1978A), pp. 24-37; Swami Abhedananda, *Yoga Psychology*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1960), pp. 137-38, 247.

⁸Basant Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p.200.

⁹Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, (New York: Greystone Press, 1949), p.843.

¹⁰Aquinas (1952), ST, Sup III, 72:2.

bring salvation, since the kingdom of God is to be sought first and temporal goods secondly.¹¹

Swami Vivekananda: One should pray to the saints and angels who have the power to help an individual in their spiritual quest. In the highest devotion to God there can be no petition for material prosperity.¹²

Thomas Aquinas: Religious images are physical objects used as signs of the spiritual reality, which help to unite a person with God. First worship God through external images, then internally through the intellect and finally contemplate the essence of God. "The worship of religion is paid to images, not as considered in themselves, nor as things, but as images leading us to God incarnate. Now movement to an image as image does not stop at the image, but goes on to the thing it represents."¹³ Corporeal and sensible religious images are physical objects that are signs of the higher spiritual reality, used for the purpose of uniting the soul with God. Most humans can apply themselves to material images but not to spiritual things without a veil."¹⁴

Swami Vivekananda: All religions utilize external physical images to represent the Divine. It is necessary to have concrete symbols to worship the abstract, since we cannot think of a thing without a mental image in the mind. Religious images help to keep the mind fixed on God. "All these are material images, and so long as you cannot conceive of the abstract as abstract, of the ideal as the ideal, you will have to resort to these forms, these material images."¹⁵ Physical images are like the words of the scriptures, which are vehicles through which God communicates himself and is worshiped. The subjective state is reached through the objective. Some people prefer mental images in their mind and others require physical images of the divine. Ritual is concretized philosophy

¹¹*Ibid.*, ST, Sup III, 72: St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, ed. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 22 Vols., (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1922), ST, II-II, 83: 4-5, 11.

¹²CW, I, PP. 379-80; IV, p. 38.

¹³Aquinas (1922), ST, II-II, 81.3.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, ST, II-II, 175.3.; Aquinas (1952), ST, III, 61:1.

¹⁵CW, II, p. 40.

that helps a person realize abstract ideas through a material symbol. By the law of association religious images call up ideas of holiness, purity, truth and omnipresence in the mind of the spiritual aspirant. Therefore, worship of images can produce the highest lives of spirituality, morality and love. Through images one can realize their own divine nature and grasp the higher spiritual truths. Always worship God in the image or picture, not God as the image or picture. Worship of religious images for procuring material benefits is a form of idolatry that produces karmic fruits, but does not bring about the love of God or liberation.¹⁶

Swami Abhedananda: Religious images are symbols utilized as aid in the development of devotion to and concentration on God. A religious picture, a statue, or a symbol like the Hindu Om or the Christian Cross, are each representations of the Supreme Being. In order to concentrate the mind on abstract ideals, concrete forms and symbols are used. All religious words, art and music are symbols of a corresponding idea or thought. It is impossible to worship or pray to an unknown God except through the use of these symbols. "All religions and all philosophies are but the symbols of the divine principle, the embodiment of abstract thoughts clothed with the garment of poetic language."¹⁷ God is infinitely greater than the worshiper's grandest conception of him. In order to concentrate or meditate on the Lord the person will have to begin with an imperfect concrete or mental symbol like a picture, image, word or any other religious emblem. Through image and symbolic worship the devotees can raise their mind up to a higher level.¹⁸

Thomas Aquinas: Religious devotion is "the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God ... devotion is an act of the will whereby a man offers himself for the service of God who is the last end."¹⁹ Devotion involves the surrender of the will to God which yields

¹⁶CW, I, PP. 16-18, 72; II, pp. 39-40; IV, pp. 36, 45-47.

¹⁷Swami Abhedananda, *Path of Realization*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1946), p. 94.

¹⁸Abhedananda (1946), p. 92-97; Swami Abhedananda, *Philosophy and Religion*, (Calcutta: Ramkrishan Vedanda Math, 1951), pp. 40-44.

¹⁹Aquinas (1922), ST, II-II, 82:1.

joy. The sanctified and purified will, dedicates itself to God and devotes itself to his service.²⁰

Ramanuja: The goal of direct contact with the divine is complete resignation to the will of God. Self-surrender (*prapatti*) opens the devotee up to God's mercy and power, which reveals itself to the religious aspirant. Self-surrender requires that the aspirant lives in conformity with God's wishes and develops firm faith in God's protection, a feeling of absolute dependence and an attitude of self-resignation.²¹

Swami Abhedananda: Surrender oneself to God's universal will. A person should welcome whole heartedly everything that comes to him/her, pleasant or unpleasant, realizing that it is the Lord's will. Absolute self-surrender removes all fear.²²

Thomas Aquinas: To be fruitful, the contemplative life requires that the person practice intellectual and moral virtues like truthfulness. The purpose of moral activity is to effectively direct a person to his/her final end which is the contemplation of the eternal truths. Moral virtues and good works are predispositions for the contemplative life, which help to control the passions that direct the mind to sensible things. Religious virtues are necessary since they are an aid in attaining salvation which is the final goal of life. God is good, so to some extent we become like him by performing virtuous deeds.²³

Shankara: Meditators must maintain high moral standards and follow the scriptural injunctions. Good deeds and moral behaviour purify the heart and help an individual to free themselves of past sins. Morality is the law of the higher self, which is necessary for attaining the supreme good. Moral actions aid a person in realizing God, and bad actions are what retard the progress toward this goal. It is not possible for a realized

²⁰*Ibid.*, ST, II-II, 82:1.

²¹Krishna Bharadwaj, *The Philosophy of Ramanuja*, (New Delhi: Sir Shankara Lal Charitable Trust Society, 1958), pp. 198-204.

²²Abhedananda (1978A), pp. 32-33.

²³Aquinas (1952), ST, II-II, 180.2; I, 103:4.

soul to sin or perform any evil acts, since they have transcended all selfish attachments.²⁴

Sri Aurobindo: The ultimate end of good works and the moral life is God-realization, becoming a spiritual being. Virtue is that which helps us express our divinity and awakens the religious spirit in a person, and evil is that which retards the progress toward perfection, truth and happiness. Duties may be performed as obedience to the Divine Will or for expressing our innate divinity. Morality is the law of our essential spiritual nature. It is not based on material and utilitarian consequences, but on the inner spiritual evolutionary growth of the individual consciousness.²⁵

Thomas Aquinas: Ultimate happiness is not found in any created thing, but only in contemplating God, the supreme universal good, the end of all things. "The higher our mind is elevated to the contemplation of spiritual beings, the more it is withdrawn from sensible things ... the mind which sees the divine substance must be completely cut off from the bodily senses, either by death or by ecstasy."²⁶ An inordinate love of a temporal good like wealth or sensual pleasure may lead to the renunciation or loss of a spiritual good.²⁷

Shankara: The experience of Brahman is the only object that can give a person permanent joy and peace. There is unlimited happiness in the transcendental realm compared to the limited happiness of mundane pleasures. Renunciation of all desires of enjoying the fruits of one's actions is a necessary prerequisite for realizing Brahman.²⁸

Swami Vivekananda: All great souls reject sense pleasures and enjoyment, since God cannot be realized through a comfortable and easy life. Renounce the lower joys for the higher. To realize the truth a yogi

²⁴Shankara, *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, ed., Swami Prabhavananda (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1947), pp. 41, 53, 60-61; Radhakrishnan (1992), II, pp. 462-63, 613-14, 620; Stavig (1999), p. 26.

²⁵Ram Sharma, "Moral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo", *Darshana*, 9 (1969), pp. 19-25.

²⁶CG, III, 47.

²⁷Aquinas (1945), ST, I-II, 78:1.

²⁸Shankara (1947), pp. 52-54, 60-61; Radhakrishnan (1992), II, pp. 612-14.

must go beyond the limits of the five senses and rise above external and internal nature.²⁹

Swami Abhedananda: Seeking sense pleasures, the persons become slave to them. To fulfill the desire one may have to use violent and dishonest methods, in order to acquire the sought after object. Sensual happiness is short-lived and it depends more on the mental and physical condition of the enjoyer than on the object itself. Utilizing the faculty of right discrimination, a religious devotee should be readily able to renounce whatever does not aid him/her in realizing the truth.³⁰

Thomas Aquinas: The intellect precedes volition because a person cannot will what they do not understand. First, the good is known through the intellect, then it is willed. Understanding of the supernatural end is essential in order that a person should direct himself/herself rightly to God. Wisdom is the directing of reason toward the eternal and incorporeal supersensible reality which the good, true and beautiful. Moral virtue entails making a choice and therefore requires prudence and understanding. The object and substance of wisdom constitutes the superior reason, which differs from empirical knowledge which is an inferior form of reason. Supernatural wisdom is not an intellectual view of reality, but a participation in God, a communion between the process of knowing and the Divine. It is realized through love of God by directing all acts to the supreme good.³¹

Shankara: Higher knowledge (*parā vidyā*) helps the seeker to attain illumined knowledge of the truth and direct realization of Brahman. God is realized by discriminating between the real and the unreal, between spirit and matter. It is the wisdom gained through meditation. Lower empirical and intellectual knowledge (*aparā vidyā*) which deals with the natural world, eventually leads a person to the higher wisdom.³²

²⁹CW, II, pp. 36-37; IV, pp. 242-43.

³⁰Swami Abhedananda, *Spiritual Unfoldment*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1955A), pp. 16-18, 24-25.

³¹CG, II, 25-26; Aquinas (1945), ST, I, 82:3; I-II, 58:4.

³²Radhakrishnan (1992), II, pp. 518-20.

Swami Vivekananda: There is no willing without knowing, since we cannot desire something unless we first know the object. There is a higher knowledge by which Brahman is known, which differs from the lower secular knowledge. Direct perception of God which is beyond the circle of the senses and the intellect, does not contradict reason or human experience and is verifiable by spiritual experience. Spiritual realization is not attained through intellectual doctrines, but is the outcome of mystical experience. It is a process of being and becoming, not of known and knowing. See God and then all religious doubts will cease. True religion is based on the direct perception of spiritual facts, while reason is of secondary value, being useful to compare one fact with another.³³

Swami Abhedananda: *Jñāna Yoga* is the philosophical path of wisdom, the path of discriminative knowledge. Right discrimination and proper analysis are indispensable for acquiring the knowledge of the higher reality. A knower of Brahman is liberated by the spiritual knowledge of the Atman (the Transcendental Self), which involves discrimination between the lower and the higher Self.³⁴

2. Salvation and Liberation

Thomas Aquinas: The vision of God is partially attainable in this life and perfectly attainable in the next life when a person has a direct intellectual vision of God as he is in Himself. A created likeness is not the vision of God's essence. What is seen is a figure representing God, since He cannot be known through the five senses. "Our soul, as long as we live in this life, has its being in corporeal matter; hence it knows naturally only that what has a form in matter, or what can be known by such form ... the divine essence cannot be known through the nature of material things."³⁵

Shankara: A knower of Brahman is liberated while living in a physical body (*jīvanmukti*), enjoying the constant bliss of the Atman.

³³CW, I, pp. 13, 181-83, 232-33, 415-16; II, pp. 61, 162-63.

³⁴Swami Abhedananda, *How to be a Yogi*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1955B), pp. 120-25.

³⁵Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Anton Pegis (2 vols., New York: Random House, 1945). ST, I, 12:11; See also, Aquinas (1952), ST, II-II, 180-5.

Human life for the enlightened sages continues after liberation, analogous to the potter's wheel that continues to revolve even after the vessel has been completed. After the residual karmas are exhausted, the body of liberated person dies and attains the ultimate state, never to return to the world. The soul realizes its true nature becoming what it already is in reality.³⁶

Ramanuja: Liberation on earth is only a partial state, since complete emancipation requires total dissociation from the sense organs and the physical body. Ultimate liberation (*videhamukti*) is attained in the afterlife state when the liberated soul becomes free from the limitations of the physical body and enjoys the perpetual bliss of communion with the Lord.³⁷

Thomas Aquinas: According to Mt. 25:46 evil people "shall go into everlasting punishment." Following the principle of divine justice, a temporal merit produces an eternal reward in heaven and temporal sin produces an everlasting punishment. This is because a person who sins mortally against God deserves an infinite punishment.³⁸ In spite of these statements, Thomas Aquinas wrote the following passages which could be used to defend the doctrine of universal salvation and liberation. "It is not fitting that the supreme goodness of God should produce things without giving them their perfection. Now a thing's ultimate perfection consists in the attainment of its end. Therefore, it pertains to the Divine goodness to lead things to their end."³⁹ "That which is the highest good, is from the highest point of view, the end of all things ... all things are ordered to one good as their end, and this is God ... God is obviously the end of all things ... the supreme agent moves all secondary agents, so must all the ends of secondary agents be ordered to the end of the supreme agent ... all things are ordered to God as an end."⁴⁰ "The ultimate end of things is to become

³⁶ Shankara, *Brahma Sutra Bhasya*, tr. Swami Gambhirananda, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1996), Section, 4:1.15; Radhakrishnan (1992), II, p. 645.

³⁷ Ramanuja, *The Vedanta Sutras*, ed. George Thibaut (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966), Section 1.1.4., pp. 186-89.

³⁸ Aquinas (1952), ST, Sup III, 99:1-2.

³⁹ Ibid., ST, I, 103:1.

⁴⁰ CG, III, 17.

like God ... So, all things tend through their movements and actions toward the divine likeness, as toward their ultimate end."⁴¹ "All creatures ... are ordered to God as their ultimate end, and achieve this end to the extent that they participate somewhat in His likeness ... So, each thing intends, as its ultimate end, to be united with God as closely as is possible."⁴² "All things are subject to His providence ... The end towards which created things are directed by God is twofold: one end is life eternal, consisting in the vision of God."⁴³ "All things are ordered to divine goodness as an end ... God makes all things for an end which is Himself."⁴⁴

Shankara: Since the Atman is a person's true essential nature, all people will eventually be liberated (*sarvamukti*) and realize their own true Self (Atman). No one is barred from this enlightenment, since all people sooner or later would listen to the call of the infinite God who resides within their heart. The process of reincarnation provides multiple lives to reach the goal.⁴⁵

Swami Abhedananda: The punishments resulting from the law of *karma* are temporal and proportional to the magnitude of the act. There is no eternal punishment since all human actions produce limited effects that are eventually worn out. In time all people will be saved through the natural process of evolution, and will become perfect.⁴⁶

Sri Aurobindo: Human existence "is the scene of the evolutionary unfolding of the being which moves towards the revelation of a supreme spiritual light and power and joy and oneness." There is "a progressive development of our consciousness towards a supreme recovery of unity

⁴¹CG, III, 19.

⁴²CG, III, 25.

⁴³Aquinas (1945), ST, I, 23:1.

⁴⁴CG, III, 64.

⁴⁵Shankara (1996), Section 1:3.19; Radhakrishnan (1992), pp. 636-37, 642.

⁴⁶Swami Abhedananda, *Life Beyond Death*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1984), pp. 109-10; Swami Abhedananda, *Attitude of Vedanta Towards Religion*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1990), p. 29.

with God."⁴⁷ The directing and creative force behind evolution is the transcendental God manifesting in the world of becoming. Human existence entails the evolutionary unfolding of a person's innate potentialities, progressing towards the attainment of a supreme spiritual power, joy and unity. Personal evolution is accelerated by divine grace. There is an urge in all souls to perfect themselves by the power of the spirit. Evolution is teleological based on spiritual evolution of consciousness that takes us to the heavenly realm, transforming the lower into the higher and ending in the realization of God for all people.⁴⁸

Thomas Aquinas: In every object of desire, it is really God that is desired. "All things desire God as their end in desiring any particular good ... for nothing is good and desirable except inasmuch as it participates in the likeness of God."⁴⁹ All actions are performed to achieve a limited good, which in turn is limited participation in divine goodness. Finite entities cannot fully satisfy any intellectual desire. The intellect desires more than to know created substance and seeks the understanding of infinite substance. A seeker is not satisfied with knowing the substance of the effect, but desires to know the substance of the cause which is God. The desire to know the truth does not ultimately rest until it reaches God.⁵⁰

Swami Vivekananda: All existence is struggling unconsciously to reach the divine realm, each following their own course leading to God at the centre. Everyone is working toward the same spiritual goal, consciously or unconsciously and all people eventually will be liberated and none will be lost. All humanity is motivated by a struggle for infinite power and pleasure, but most people mistakenly try to reach it through the sense.⁵¹

⁴⁷Sri Aurobindo (1949), pp. 606, 674.

⁴⁸Rama S. Srivastava, *Sri Aurobindo and The Theories of Evolution*, (Varanasi; Chowkhamab Sanskrit Series Office, 1968), pp. 305-06, 326-27.

⁴⁹Aquinas (1945), ST, I, 44:4; R.V. De Smet "Sankara and Aquinas on Liberation," *Indian Philosophical Annual*, 5 (1969), pp. 241-45.

⁵⁰CG, III, 50.

⁵¹CW, II, pp. 62, 383.

Sri Aurobindo: These lower principles are expressions in varying degrees of the higher reality. The process of evolution is necessary to reach ultimate reality. There is an inborn urge in all worldly souls to perfect themselves by the power of spirit.⁵²

Thomas Aquinas: All creatures are images of exemplary forms in the Divine mind, but only humans are made in the likeness of God. "In man there is some likeness to God, copied from God as an exemplar; yet this likeness is not one of equality, for such an exemplar infinitely excels its copy".⁵³ Wherever the image of God exists there is also an imperfect likeness, something copied from something else. The human mind which is a mirror that reflects the likeness of God in a closer way than lower creatures do. The image of God is impressed on the mind, like the image of a king on a coin or a reflection on glass. Rational creatures are image of the Trinity possessing its characteristics to varying degrees. Life's goal is to assimilate oneself to God, to become as similar to God as possible, by participating in His intellect, goodness and love. Jesus Christ took on the image of man, so that humans could become like God. Everything is good in so far as it manifests the image of God by participating in the likeness of God which is its final end. The more enhanced the likeness of God, the more we participate in His being and the higher is our ontological status.⁵⁴ God loves all things, for in so far as they exist they are good and willed by God. "Nothing can be evil in its very essence ... every being, as such is good, and that evil can exist only in good as its subject ... every evil is caused by good ... evil can be only an accidental cause, and thus it cannot be the first cause, for the accidental cause is subsequent to an essential cause."⁵⁵ All creatures including human beings preexist in a timeless eternity, in God, the first cause of all things. "Although creatures have not existed from eternity, except in God, yet because they have been in Him from eternity, God has known them eternally in their proper natures."⁵⁶

⁵²S.K. Maitra, *The Meeting of the East and the West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy*. (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1968), p. 419.

⁵³Aquinas (1945), ST, I, 93:1.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, (1945), ST, I, 93.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, (1945), ST, I, 93. See also: ST, I, 20.2.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, (1945), ST, I, 20:2.

All people exist more truly as an intelligible being in the mind of God, than as a corporeal being in a human body. "Natural things have a truer being absolutely in the divine mind than in themselves, because in that mind they have an uncreated being, but in themselves a created being ... a house has nobler being in the architect's mind than in matter."⁵⁷

Shankara: Atman is the prototype (*bimba*) which shines on the surface of *avidyā/māyā* or the intellect (*buddhi*), producing the reflected (*pratibimba*) individual self (*jivā*) and the world. The image of God is the perfect reflection of the Atman the Transcendental Self, on the empirical self in the relative world. An injury to a reflection does not injure the original, unlike a part-whole relationship.⁵⁸

Ramanuja: Souls are images of God, in the sense that they are parts and modes of Brahman the infinite God. In essence the soul is one with God, being eternal, omniscient and blissful; but as a mode it is different. Human bodies are each a part of God's universal body. God is present in the internal spirit (*antaryāmin*) within the heart. Spiritual progress involves the realization that we are modes of Brahman always under His control. In time the soul realizes its likeness to God and is no longer bound by universal ignorance (*avidyā*) and its own karmic limitations.⁵⁹

Swami Vivekananda: The universe is a projection of God, the universal Intelligence. Our soul is part of God, who is the eye of the eye and the mind of the mind. All existence to varying degrees, is an expression of the triad, namely, existence, consciousness and bliss. At the beginning of the creation, the spiritual man (image of God) is involved in seed form within all living beings. Each person is divine by nature, but the purity and holiness of the real person are clouded and veiled by the delusory power of *mayā*. "Each soul is pure and perfect, omnipotent and omniscient ... But, it can manifest itself externally only according to the mind it has got. The mind is, as it were, the reflecting mirror of the

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, (1945), ST, I, 18:4. See also, ST, I, 4:2.

⁵⁸Radhakrishnan (1992), II, p. 607.

⁵⁹Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), pp. 350-51, 354; Julius Lipner, *The Faces of Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 39-40, 44-46, 85-88.

soul.”⁶⁰ Perfection is a person’s true nature, since holy qualities are already latent in the soul only they are prevented from manifesting. Potential divinity originally exists in subtle form and is eventually actualized, unfolding as an effect which reveals its natural perfection (likeness of God). Through a long process of evolution the divine man that is involved within a person gradually uncoils itself and manifests on the empirical level of existence. Remove the obstacles, and by its own nature the higher manifestation will express itself. The clear and purified mind reflects more of the soul’s perfection, since the mind is the reflecting mirror of the soul. Eventually the point is reached when the person is liberated.⁶¹

Swami Abhedananda: The cosmic mind contains the ideas and concepts of all existence things. The logos is the prototype of the perfect man in the Divine mind. All existence proceeds from the Soul of our soul, the Life of our life, the omnipotent source of existence. “The perfect type of man, which existed in the Divine mind, is eternal and a part of the universal Logos. All human beings, therefore, are more or less imperfect expressions of that ideal man or Logos or the first begotten son of the Divine mind.”⁶²

All people are attempting to express as perfectly as possible the ideal man that was created by God. A person’s soul, and not the imperfect physical body, is created in the image of God. Just as an image is a reflection of the original, so also the soul and ego are an image, reflection or shadow of the one God, the infinite source of all spiritual powers. Due to the limitations of space, time and causation, sacred qualities and power manifest only partially and imperfectly on the material plane of existence. These qualities are latent in the soul of all people, but are expressed only when the barriers are removed. All people, consciously or unconsciously are attempting to manifest that perfect man. Gaining experience in the empirical world, the soul being the image of God, longs for higher

⁶⁰CW, VI, p. 21.

⁶¹CW, I, p. 292; II, pp. 207-11; III, pp. 284, 407; VI, pp. 21-22, 52; ix, p. 535.

⁶²Swami Abhedananda, *Divine Heritage of Man*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1947), p. 182.

manifestation of divinity and eventually realizes its potential divinity (likeness to God).⁶³

3. Heavenly Existence

Thomas Aquinas: Since humans are created to attain a supernatural end, the ultimate goal of life is the perpetual vision of God, the Absolute good experienced in a state of perfect happiness. Through the beatific vision which is attained by the Lord's grace in the next life, the soul partakes of the highest joy and becomes like God. "Whatever is desirable in whatsoever beatitude, whether true or false, all preexists in a more eminent way in the divine beatitude."⁶⁴ The joyful experience of God frees the individual from the burden of sin, ignorance and pain. In the heavenly realm, all desires are completely fulfilled, it being the ultimate state of joy, possession, honour and self-preservation. Seeing the Divine substance, through the vision of the essence of God, the intellect contemplates the genera and species of all things and the plan of the cosmos. Transcending time the intellect comprehends all things at once and not in succession. The soul cannot fall from glory, since the beatific vision of the Divine Being cannot be lost. This is the most covetable state and should be desired intrinsically for its own sake. It is unending since the Divine substance and the beatified intellectual substance are immutable and because no power can oppose God's omnipotence.⁶⁵

Ramanuja: All emancipated souls are under the complete control of the Lord. They are in harmony with God and share in His bliss being part of him. Since they are totally associated with God, they participate in His happiness. The liberated soul is similar to God except, it is not able to create, preserve or destroy the world.⁶⁶

Jiva Goswami: In the highest heaven one experiences the bliss of being a worshipper of God and of living, moving and having their being in

⁶³ Abhedananda (1947), pp. 181-87, 202-15; Swami Abhedananda, *The Mystery of Death* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1978B), pp. 113-15; (1960), pp. 369-74.

⁶⁴ Aquinas (1945), St. I, 26.4.

⁶⁵ CG, III, 59-63; Aquinas (1952), ST, I-II, 3:8; 5.4.

⁶⁶ Ramanuja (1966), Sections 4.4.17-22; Dasgupta (1988), IV, pp. 98-99.

the Supreme Being. They see God in themselves and in all other souls. Liberation means: removal of all the bondage of the natural world; realization of one's true self; attainment of an eternal spiritual state beyond the physical and the subtle realms, free from doubt and unhappiness; direct intuition of the deity; and perpetual worship and service God.⁶⁷

Swami Vivekananda: After attaining liberation, the soul lives eternally in the highest heaven (*brahmaloka*) possessing many powers, but not the world creating power. The liberated state is characterized by omniscience and bliss without any internal or external dissatisfaction. One is free from the laws of nature and is no longer subject to the process of evolution. This is the state of the highest soul "who has become perfectly unselfish, perfectly purified, who has given up all desires, and who does not want to do anything except worship and love God."⁶⁸

Thomas Aquinas: The blessed with their intellect elevated will see God in proportion to the degree of the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*) which they receive. This light is possessed in varying degrees by different people depending on their capacity of reception, since no one can know God perfectly as He really is. Nevertheless, each soul will see Him so perfectly that its bliss is complete and full. After the day of judgment, it is possible that all souls in heaven may become omniscient and know all that God knows.⁶⁹

Shankara: For Shankara the liberated state consists in total identity of the individual self with Brahman. The liberated self becomes one with the supreme Being. But he also speaks of a process of gradual liberation (*kramamukti*). First, there is the vision of God, then participation in God and finally absolute identity with God. After living with the Ishvara until

⁶⁷Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), p. 389; Jadunatha Sinha, *Jivagoswami's Religion of Devotion and Love*, (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan, 1983), pp. 24, 139.

⁶⁸CW, I, p. 398.

⁶⁹CG, III, 58-59, Aquinas (1952), Sup III, 92:1, 3; Aquinas (1945), St. I, 62:9.

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the end of the cosmic cycle, the soul attains to union with God by merging with the transpersonal non-dual Brahman.⁷⁰

Jiva Goswami: There are five levels of liberation, each of which is an eternal state not subject to rebirth on earth. In none of these five states does a person experience the full plenitude of bliss and power in its entirety. 1) At the first level the soul resides in an eternal spiritual abode of God. The bondage of the natural world is removed in this spiritual state beyond the physical and the subtle worlds. God and his attendants are worshiped both externally and internally. Through worship and devotion the devotee acquires a resemblance to God (*sālokya*). 2) At the next level, some but not all the sovereignty of God is enjoyed by the soul, while residing in his spiritual abode. For example the person can move at will from one realm to another, but does not possess many of God's supernatural powers. 3) Individuals partially assume the form of Lord, a likeness to the Divine, but not an identity with God (*sārūpya*). 4) The blessed live near the Lord and experience the external vision of God (*sāmīpya*). 5) In the most intimate state the soul enters into the spiritual body or union with God experiencing His internal nature. Absorbed in the bliss of God the person experiences, lives, moves and have their being in the Divine essence. The liberated soul sees and hears through Brahman (*sāyūjya*). Dualists do not desire this state since their individual personality will vanish.⁷¹

Swami Vivekananda: There are many lower heavens where people fulfill all kinds of materialistic desires. These planes of existence only increases the number of desires and does not lead to the highest beatitudes. The lower heaven is composed of fine subtle matter and energy (*tanmātras*). In the next sphere mass and energy resemble electricity and are almost inseparable. Above this is the *brahmaloka*, the highest heaven, where there is neither mass nor energy as we know them. There, mass and energy merge into the mind-stuff which is the primal energy. There, the individual soul contemplates the entire universe as the universal Cosmic

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, Sections 4:3.8-11; 4.4.17, 21-22; Radhakrishnan, *Philosophy*, II, pp. 643-48; Stavig (1998), p. 325.

⁷¹Sinha (1983), pp. 209-16.

Mind (*mahat*). The liberated state is one of bliss without any internal or external dissatisfaction.⁷²

In summary there is fair amount of agreement between the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Indian Vedantic philosophers. Hopefully, these findings will be of use in the future to theoreticians interested in constructing a universal religious philosophy that encompasses all religions of the world.

⁷²CW, I, p. 398; II, 269; IV, p. 40; V, pp. 102-03.