

## **ST. THOMAS AQUINAS (1227-74)**

Thomas Aquinas was born in Sicily in a noble family. He was attracted to the Dominican order of priests of the Catholic Church. He lived during a time when the church developed into a large spiritual organisation. Feudalism almost started to decline and nationalism started to develop. Aristotelianism, Scholasticism and nationalism were the key features of the times. The church needed someone who will amalgamate the teachings of the church with the rising nationalism and intellectual endeavor. Thomas Aquinas did exactly that. He was able to provide a sensible combination of the various aspirations of the people of his times without compromising their positions. He was influenced not only by Christian teaching, but also by Aristotle, stoics and Cicero. "Summa Theologica" was his famous work. The methods followed by Thomas Aquinas was very similar to that of Greek thinkers. He posed a basic question and explained it. Presented it with various options and described the problems with each answer. The solution was always based on the Christian philosophy and values. Finally, he would reach at his own conclusion to the problems.

St. Thomas Aquinas is known for his Theory of Law and Justice. He was the greatest European philosopher of the middle ages. He was a great leader of the Church also. He was a declared Saint. He was born in noble family in Sicily. Thomas Aquinas was very close to Kings and Popes. Thus he was very close to both spiritual authority as well as secular authority. During his times, the Pope had power over spiritual aspects as well as administration of the country.

The Political Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas was a combination of

### **1. Scholasticism**

### **2. Philosophy of Aristotle**

### **3. Universalism**

Scholasticism is the intellectual tradition of 13th century Europe. It had two characteristics. Firstly, it held that the Church is

infallible and unquestionable. Secondly, it tried to combine Faith and Reason. It wanted to combine both Theology and Science. According to Scholasticism, all branches of Science must be in tune with Theology. The Roman Empire must be ruled according to the wishes of the Pope. If there is a conflict between the Holy Roman Empire and Pope, the Pope should win. Universalism is the Christian concept that all human souls will be saved. Salvation is for all. All the three streams of Scholasticism, Aristotelianism and Universalism converged in Aquinas. Therefore, Aquinas is called Christianized Aristotle or Sainted Aristotle of the middle ages.

**St. Thomas as representative of Middle Ages:** The intellectual tradition of middle ages can be summarised as Scholasticism. It was a grand combination of Philosophy and Theology. Aquinas was a follower of Scholasticism. However, he gave prominence to Theology than Philosophy. He gave importance to religion, which according to him was above every other concept. Therefore, Aquinas said that in case of a conflict between the church and the state, the church should win. According to Aquinas, Monarchy is the best form of government. However, the monarch is bound by the laws of land as well as the divine law. He is not above divine law. These were fundamental characteristics of the middle ages.

**Concept of Nature:** Aquinas was of the opinion that there is a higher nature beyond this worldly nature. He differed from Aristotle in this respect. For Aristotle, this world was final and definite. According to Aquinas, this world is only superficial and only a passing stage of the life of man.

**Nature of man:** Aquinas followed the Aristotelian principle that man is a social animal. Man cannot live without a society around him. Therefore, the state is something natural to man. It is embedded in his nature. It is not something artificial. He did not follow the idea that state is the result of fall of man because of his sins.

**Nature of Society:** The ultimate objective of the state is good life through co existence and mutual help and service. His idea was

similar to the Aristotelian concept of the purpose of State. The purpose of the State is promotion of good life and happiness. But there was a fundamental difference between Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas in this respect. Aristotle based his idea on a society which is purely secular in nature. But according to Thomas Aquinas, the society is one in which both the secular and spiritual authorities co existed side by side. That was the need of the times of Aquinas.

**Nature of State:** Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that man is a social animal. Man became perfect in the state. The world is not created because of Man's sin. It was not created when Man was sent out of the Garden of Eden. The state is not the product of human sin. But it is a positive product. It is the embodiment of Reason. The state is necessary to provide the conditions of good life. While saying this, Aquinas also says that the Church also is necessary to secure the eternal good. He says that the Church is the highest human institution. It is not the rival of the state. But, the Church is the completion and perfection of the State. The ultimate purpose of the State is to help people to lead a happy and good life. The state makes them moral in that way. It makes men virtuous. The state was not a necessary evil the purpose of the State is not just maintenance of law and order. It is something beyond that. It is a great social organisation which covers all aspects of life. However, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, the Church is superior to the State.

**Classification of Government:** Aquinas did not consider any form of government as truly and absolutely good. It depends on the functions it perform. It is the question of the level of virtue and goodness promoted by the rule. In the classification of governments, Aquinas followed Aristotle. He believed in the normal forms of Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy and their perverted forms.

**Functions of Governments:** According to Aquinas, a good government is the one which promotes goodness, happiness and virtue of the people. It must provide the people with good administration, promote justice, provide good amenities for the citizen and protect the people. The ultimate objective of government

is the promotion of moral welfare of the people. The following is an enlistment of the functions of a good government as according to St. Thomas Aquinas:

1. Promote unity.
2. Promote common goodness instead of individual goodness.
3. To remove hindrances to good life of the citizens.
4. Look after the poor.
5. Promote right living and virtuous life
6. Promote peace and happiness and the conditions for the same.
7. Protection and defense of the citizens.
8. Maintenance of civic amenities like roads and bridges.
9. Maintain a just tax regime
10. Introduce and maintain a sound system of coinage, weightage and measures.
11. To reward and promote those who do good.

**Concept of Sovereignty:** Aquinas's concept of sovereignty is worth special mention because he gave importance to the people. He said that from a political angle of view, the source of sovereignty is the people from the theological point of view, the source of sovereignty is nothing but God. According to him, sovereignty is indivisible. It is the source of positive law. A sovereign cannot give a bad law.

**Concept of supremacy of the Church:** According to St. Thomas Aquinas, the state and the church should work in co operation with each other. However, the church is supreme over the state. The church has authority in spiritual matters also while the state has authority only in worldly matters. In the event of a conflict between the church and the state, the former must prevail. The church can even excommunicate a prince. The state must work under the guidance of the church. However, this authority is quite indirect rather than direct. The interference of the church in the matters of the state should be the

minimum. The ruler is subject to the authority of the State only to a limited extent.

**Concept of Ethics:** Aquinas borrowed a lot from Aristotle in this respect also. But there was a fundamental difference between the two. For Aristotle, ethics concerned with worldly life. But for Aquinas ethics is concerned with salvation and the ultimate spiritual happiness which can be achieved through a good worldly life.

**Concept of Faith and Reason:** According to Aquinas, faith and reason are equally important. Both these powers emanate from God. Therefore they are divine. But out of the two faith is more important. This concept of amalgamation of both these antagonistic concepts into one is a great achievement of St. Thomas Aquinas.

**Aquinas on Law:** According to Aquinas, there are four kinds of laws. They are:-

1. Eternal Law
2. Natural Law
3. Divine Law and
4. Human Law.

Eternal Law is the Mind of God. It is the reason existing in the mind of God. The whole universe is governed according to it. Eternal Law regulates the heavenly and earthly spheres. It controls animate and inanimate worlds.

Natural Law is the reflection of the divine law in the world. It is reflected in human beings. Because of Natural Law, men want to live in a society with others. Divine Law consists of direct revelation by God through saints or through Bible. Human law is made from Natural Law. It is made according to Natural Law. It is subordinate to Natural Law.

Human Law is not in conflict with Natural Law. Human Law is based on human reason. It is made for the common good. Human Law is published for the knowledge of all people.

**Concept of Monarchy:** According to Thomas Aquinas, Monarchy is the best form of government. Only monarchy could promote unity. It is natural that the superior must rule over the inferior. It is also good for the inferior to be ruled by the superior. This is the reason why Aquinas supported slavery to some extent. The ultimate function of Monarch is bringing virtuous life and happiness to the people. It is his duty to provide the people with peace and order and all material well being for the attainment of a happy life. The Monarch is under the supreme guidance of the natural law. In case of a conflict between the Monarch and Papacy, it should be the later which must win.

**Concept of Slavery:** Aquinas supported slavery on the ground that the superior must rule over the inferior. But there is a fundamental difference between Aristotle and Aquinas in the case of support for slavery. Aquinas supported slavery on certain religious grounds also. According to him, it is a remedy to wash off sins. By saying so, Aquinas took a careful position not to disturb the then social set up.

**Estimate of St. Thomas Aquinas:** Thomas Aquinas was a true representative of the Middle Ages. Within the intellectual confinement of the Church, he could remain a liberal thinker. His contribution to political thought and the then society was multifaceted. Aquinas is best known for his classification of Laws. The contribution of St. Thomas Aquinas can be summarised as follows:

**1. Idea of Democracy:** Aquinas said that the ultimate authority of the sovereign comes from the people, viewed from a political angle. Knowingly or unknowingly, St. Thomas Aquinas was paving the seeds of Democracy.

**2. Idea of Welfare State:** According to Aquinas, the functions of the state were good and virtuous life. It was expected to provide the citizens with all amenities, which would help them to lead a happy life.

**3. Revival of Aristotelianism:** With St. Thomas Aquinas, the principles of Aristotle began to be re read in the west. It was re discovery. It was a new beginning long lost during the dark ages perpetrated by the church. By doing so, Aquinas was correcting a mistake of the ages. Political philosophy could move forward there forth.

**4. Revival of Scholasticism:** The best part of Scholasticism was that it was a combination of faith and reason. It brought reason at par with faith. It became easy of the later thinkers to drop faith in favour of reason in their thinking towards a secular and egalitarian society and state. Aquinas built the foundation for that.

**5. Ideas of Constitutional Government:** Aquinas revived the concept of a state and government based on a definite constitution. Ideas of a constitution were long lost with Aristotle. Aquinas revived the concept without antagonising the powerful church entities.

**6. Classification of Laws:** The classification of the Laws was the classical example of the diplomatic moves by Aquinas to bring up human and natural law at a time when Papacy was at its powerful best. He did that in a systematic manner.

**7. Basis of State:** Unlike the belief of the Church, Aquinas said that the state is not the result of the fall of man. He did not follow the principles of contractual origin also. He said that it is a natural institution for the welfare of the people.

**8. Reconciliation of the church and the State:** This is the most significant contribution of St. Thomas Aquinas. He could strike a balance between the Church and the State in a manner characteristic of his philosophy. By doing so, he did not antagonize the people of the Church. He in fact lifted the concept of a secular and constitutional state.

=====