

On Entering the Religious Life

A Dilemma, A Catholic Response, A Zen Response

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Are duties of filial piety to be overridden in favor of those of religion?

—THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae q.101.4¹

Following an evening talk, Ejō [a monk] asked: 'Must we fulfill our obligations to our parents?'

—DŌGEN, *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, II.19²

AS CHRISTOPHER GOWANS defines it, "a moral dilemma is a situation in which an agent S morally ought to do A and morally ought to do B but cannot do both, either because B is just-not-doing-A or because some contingent feature of the world prevents doing both."³ The questions above point us to one potential version of a moral dilemma: the prospect of a conflict of obligations dictated by the religious life versus the natural obligations children owe to their parents. (So expressed, the form of this moral dilemma can also be identified as a "conflict of obligations" problem.) Both Dōgen and Thomas Aquinas present resolutions to this dilemma. I offer here a comparative analysis of their viewpoints because I believe they are notable in their similarity of approach as well as in the ultimate difference in their answers.

¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (London: Blackfriars, 1964). Citations of the *Summa* employed in this article are based on the method used in the Blackfriars translation. Thus 2a2ae q.101.4 Rely Four refers to question 101, article 4, Reply Four of the *secunda secundae* (i.e., second half of Part II) of the *Summa*. A "Reply" is Aquinas' reply to one of the "Opinions" that Aquinas presents; this is to be distin-

In answer to Ejō's query, Dōgen replies:

Filial piety is most important, but there is a difference between laymen and monks. Laymen, relying on such works as *The Classic of Filial Piety*, take care of their parents during their lifetimes and hold services for them after their deaths. Monks, on the other hand, have severed their ties with the world and live in the religious realm. Thus their obligations are not limited to parents alone, but, feeling these obligations to all beings, they fill the world with good deeds. If they were merely to limit their obligations to their parents, they would be turning against the religious way. True filial piety consists in following Buddhism in everyday practice and in each moment of study under a Zen Master Zen monks must understand the deep obligation they bear their parents in the above terms. Does selecting just one day for doing good and holding services for just one person really reflect the spirit of Buddhism? (II.19)

The opening sentence of Dōgen's answer bears a strong resemblance to the opening sentence found in Reply 4 to the question from the *Sum-*

guished from Aquinas' own "Answer" (*responsio*) to the question. Whenever possible, I have tried to conform my translation to the Blackfriars translation. However, my own interpretive perspective has led me to differ with this and other translations on certain points. Thus I must take full responsibility for all translations from Latin to English in the article.

² Cf. Reihō Masunaga, *A Primer of Soto Zen: A Translation of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1971), II.19. I have adopted the citation method employed by Masunaga. Thus II.19 refers to chapter two, section 19 of the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*.

In order to avoid a cumbersome proliferation of footnotes, I have decided to include all citations of the *Summa* and the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* within the text of the article itself. Citations of these texts usually appear directly after a quotation or paraphrase, but in instances where I make explicit reference to a passage in the course of a sentence (e.g., "whereas in 2a2ae q.101 Reply Four we read that . . .") I have let this suffice as a citation in order to avoid tiresome redundancy. All other passages quoted and paraphrased are cited in the notes.

³ Christopher Gowans, "Introduction: The Debate on Moral Dilemmas," in Christopher Gowans, ed., *Moral Dilemmas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 3.

ma listed above: “Different judgements apply to one still living the life of the layperson and one already professed in the religious life.” To the potential moral dilemma of whether or not one’s service to the religious life could conflict with the practice of filial piety, therefore, both Dōgen and Aquinas identify an initial distinction between laypersons and people in the religious life, for which different answers apply.

According to Dōgen, when one severs worldly ties, one’s concern for the natural resources of the world, including those of one’s family, must be viewed in the context of one’s status as a monk. Obligations of individuals in this state are not obligations to parents, but obligations incurred by taking the religious life. Other passages in the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* seem to suggest that a monk must cast aside obligations to family, as we see in the following: “Students, there is an important point to watch when you cast aside world concerns. You must give up the world you have known, your family, your body, and your mind” (I.21). In a similar fashion, Aquinas begins the last paragraph of 2a2ae q.101.4 Reply Four with this statement on the matter: “Because he is counted as dead to the world, one already professed in the religious life should not for the sake of his parents’ support leave the cloister where he is buried together with Christ and become involved again in secular affairs.”

But neither Dōgen nor Aquinas absolutely forbade a monk’s participation in secular affairs. Suppose, Dōgen remarks to his monks, someone asks you for a letter assisting him regarding some mundane affair. Dōgen observes that “if considered carefully in terms of the time and occasion,” and one’s motive is to bring benefits to others, it is in accordance with following the True Way (I.19). And as Aquinas states in another section of the *Summa*, monks are focused on striving toward and giving themselves to God, but “if the need of their neighbor demands it, they should involve themselves in their affairs out of charity,” given the permission of their superiors (2a2ae q.187.2, Answer). Applied to the matter of obligations to parents, Aquinas states: “Still, within the limits of obedience to superiors, he is bound to expend every effort towards improving his parent’s state” (2a2ae q.101.4 Reply 4).

This qualifier is consistent with an earlier assertion in the Answer of 2a2ae q.101.4: “Whenever we are not held back from homage to God by the filial duties owed to parents, these remain an act of the virtue of filial piety.” Those leading the religious life can, and must, exercise fili-

al piety and its attendant obligations within the limits of their state. But according to Aquinas, children can provide not only material, but also spiritual, support. As he asserts in 2a2ae 189.6 Reply One:

The commandment to honor one's parents extends not only to material but to spiritual help and to showing proper respect. Hence even those in the religious life can fulfil the precept of honoring one's parents by praying for them, by giving them respect and help in accordance with their state as religious. Those who live in the world also honor their parents, but in a different way, according to their state.

Just as Aquinas provides the means by which a monk can and should exercise filial piety, Dōgen's response to Ejō's question about filial obligations explains how the Buddhist monk exercises filial piety. Note the ingenuity of his response: the monk's obligations extend beyond parents to all sentient beings. Rather than preempting filial piety in the name of Buddhism, Dōgen insists that the meeting of these obligations is the exercise of *true* filial piety.

As Hajime Nakamura notes, in the Japanese "way of thinking" the family is "the dominant unit of social organization with a limited social nexus. Filial piety, therefore, while perhaps present to some extent in any culture, occupies a prominent place in the Japanese social consciousness."⁴ For the average Japanese person, then, the sense of obligation to one's family is quite strong. Thus the impact of Ejō's question is very serious. Dōgen does not make a frontal assault on family obligations; evidently he is well aware he would have little hope for success, given the premiere position the family enjoys in the Japanese ethos. Rather, he brings forth a broader Buddhist moral vision by introducing the notion of "true filial piety."

Dōgen's answer, in effect, suggests a resolution of a dilemma implicit in Ejō's question, the potential conflict between obligations of filial piety and obligations incurred by leading the religious life. In his view, the meeting of the obligations of the monk is none other than meeting the obligations of true filial piety. Furthermore, for the monk the obligations of true filial piety ought to take precedence over the natural obli-

⁴ Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1975), pp. 413 and 439.

gations of filial piety which are of such great concern to the laity. Generally speaking, therefore, Dōgen seems to be suggesting that in the case of the type of moral dilemma described above, there is a hierarchy of obligations operative in the resolution of the problem for those who are leading the religious life. A passage in Aquinas' answer offers a striking parallel to what we have seen of Dōgen's perspective so far. Aquinas contends that "due circumstances" must be taken into account when one addresses this question, and

if one should fail to attend to any of these the act will no longer be virtuous but sinful. Consequently attendance to the duties and homage owed to parents is marked by the measure called for. This measure does not press a person to be more intent upon concern for parents than upon honoring god; rather, following the words of Ambrose, 'piety in serving God takes precedence over the demands of our own flesh and blood.' It follows that if homage towards our parents should draw us away from the service of God, to persist would not be an act of filial piety. Hence Jerome's words, 'Rally to the banner of the cross and step over even a prostrate father or mother. Cruelty of this sort is the highest form of filial piety.' In such circumstances, then, obligations of filial piety are to be set aside for the sake of the duties of religion (2a2ae q.101.4 Answer).

Akin to Dōgen's response to his own question, in this passage Aquinas seems to suggest that a hierarchy of obligations is operative in resolving the dilemma. Furthermore, just as Dōgen spoke of meeting the obligations of the religious life as exercising true filial piety, Aquinas speaks of the meeting of the obligations to religion as "the highest form of filial piety." These obligations, we see, take precedence over the demands of flesh and blood, i.e., the obligations of "common" filial piety. At this point, however, we should recall a point made earlier: both Aquinas and Dōgen believe that the answer to this conflict of obligations problem is different for people in the religious life than for laypersons. So far, we have provided a partial analysis of how Dōgen answered this question for Buddhist monks. The parallel thinking noted in Aquinas above, however, is a more general response to the question, and is not merely directed to Christian monks. As we see, Aquinas

nas qualifies his response to the moral dilemma we have described not only based on the distinction between the religious and the lay person, but also on the entire circumstances of the given situation. So, it should now be added, does Dōgen, as a further review of his thinking will reveal.

In fact, neither Dōgen nor Aquinas offers a rigid hierarchy of obligations that covers all potential cases of conflict. Even in the one version under consideration—the conflict of obligations between filial piety and the religious life—no absolute hierarchical relationship exists for either Dōgen or Aquinas. In any given situation of conflict, only a knowledge of due circumstances can enable the proper resolution to the problem.

Thus we should guard ourselves from reifying what we have learned so far about Dōgen and Aquinas' responses to this form of moral dilemma. An efficacious way to understand further their thinking on this topic would be to pursue how this hierarchical schema of obligations would function in actual test cases of conflict. Fortunately for us, a passage from Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* provides just such a test case, to which we shall soon turn. But setting the proper conditions for the test will first require some additional insight into the thought of Aquinas pertaining to this matter.

Before proceeding, a few major points deserve restatement and summarization. Recall that we have been concerned with the moral dilemma resulting from the conflict of obligations to parents versus those incurred by leading the religious life. So far, we have noted that Dōgen and Aquinas seem to see a hierarchy of obligations as operative in the resolution of this dilemma; furthermore, the duties of filial piety are, generally speaking, to be superseded by a higher set of obligations to the religious life, which can be transformed in our understanding to being obligations of a "higher" (Aquinas) or "true" (Dōgen) filial piety. Yet this obligation hierarchy is no absolute calculus. In any particular case, due circumstances must be taken into account—which certainly includes, though by no means is limited to, whether or not the person in question is a monk or a layperson.

Now, with the benefit of Aquinas, let us now set out one possible set of circumstances. In the course of his reply to the question posed at the beginning of this article (are duties of filial piety to be overridden in favor of those of religion?), Aquinas addresses the issue in the context

of a person who seeks to "enter the religious life." Given a person of this status, the form of the moral dilemma must now be stated in this form: a conflict of obligations owed to parents versus those incurred by entering the religious life. The question becomes, in Aquinas' words, "[whether or not] it is right to let care of parents give way to a fuller dedication to religion" (2a2ae q.101.4 Reply Three).

Articulating Aquinas' answer to this question requires reference not only to 2a2ae q.101.4, but also 2a2ae q.189.6, which addresses the same issue. In the former, he states: "If laypersons have parents who are unable to sustain themselves without them, they must not abandon them in order to enter a religious order; that would be breaking the commandment on honoring parents." That this is not just a moral obligation, but is dictated by ecclesiastic law, Aquinas acknowledges in the latter section: "Therefore if parents are in such need that they cannot be properly supported except by the help of parents, it is not lawful for the children to neglect the support of their parents and enter the religious life."

Aquinas, however, holds this approach as correct only in the instance of grave necessity, for "if parents can manage without him, it is permitted for such a person to leave them and enter the religious life; children are obliged to the support of parents only in cases of existing need" (2a2ae q.101.4, Reply Four). Furthermore, a child past the age of puberty is not bound by parental will regarding state of life. Finally, a child is allowed to enter into the religious life when others are available to support parents, as we learn in the following observation: "Hence we read in Matthew and Luke that the Lord had reprimanded the disciple who was unwilling to follow him immediately because of his father's burial, since 'there were others who would see to this,' as Chrysostom says" (2a2ae q.189.6, Answer).

Later compilations of canon law (largely indebted to Aquinas on this subject) have spoken of the obstacles which prevent one from entering the religious life, and this is a helpful way to interpret what we have learned so far about Aquinas. From his viewpoint, the right to enter the religious life is suspended for as long as the situation of the grave necessity of a parent lasts, provided that a person 1) actually has the capability of giving assistance; 2) can only do so outside of the religious life; and 3) cannot turn to a brother or sister to provide the necessary assistance. (A fourth criterion found in later canon law might be added

here: A child, in assisting parents, would incur more danger to himself/herself than the danger faced by the parents in need. Though not explicitly stated by Aquinas, it would seem to be a logical extension of his thinking on the matter.)⁵ These criteria apply, we should recall, to those who are of sufficient age not to be bound by parental will on the matter. An aspirant finding himself/herself in this situation is said to be in a state of impediment.

Let us now review the relevant points. Aquinas envisions a situation whereby there is a potential conflict of obligation for the aspirant to the religious life. He then articulates the conditions whereby such an individual would be "impeded" from entering the religious life, as encapsulated by the paragraph above. Under these circumstances, therefore, the resolution of the problem is clear: the obligations of filial piety take precedence.

Sufficient groundwork has been accomplished to enable us to resume our comparative analysis. We can now introduce the test case from the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* promised earlier:

On another occasion a monk said: 'I am an only child, and my aged mother is still alive. She lives on what I am able to send her. We are deeply attached to each other, and my filial loyalties are strong. So, by compromising slightly with the world and its people, I can provide food and clothing for my mother through the support of others. If I were to renounce the world and live alone, my mother would have difficulty living even for one day. Thus, while participating in the ordinary world, I am distressed that I cannot enter wholeheartedly into Buddhism. If there is a principle that would make it possible to abandon the world and enter Buddhism, would you explain it to me?' (III.14).

Before we proceed further, we should note that the petitioner is identified as "a monk." Thus he presumably is, to some limited extent, "leading the religious life." But his case is still instructive, because he is an aspirant who wishes to know if, under the stated circumstances, he could "enter wholeheartedly into Buddhism." Just as Aquinas envi-

⁵ Cf. *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique* (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ane, 1953), s.v. "Empechments d'Enter en Religion."

sions a situation where an individual seeks to abandon the world and enter the Christian religious life, so does this man seek to know if he could “abandon the world and enter Buddhism.” As with Aquinas, the issue in question is whether or not such an act is permissible given one’s filial obligations to parents. Besides, Dōgen himself answers the question in terms of a son “leaving home to become a monk,” as we shall soon see. So we would do better to simply think of the aspirant as a man who wishes, as we saw Aquinas express it, “to let care of parents give way to a fuller dedication to religion.”

Now imagine, for a moment, that the man is not petitioning Dōgen, but Aquinas, about wholeheartedly entering into the religious life. (Imagine also that the word “Buddhism” in the above passage is actually “Christianity.”) What would be Aquinas’ judgement? Let us review the facts of the case in light of the criteria for a state of impediment listed above. Obviously the man is of sufficient age to make a decision to enter the religious life without parental consent. The case is one of grave necessity, since the man’s mother, without his support, would have difficulty living for even one day. The son has demonstrated his ability to assist his mother, and doing so would not endanger his life to any significant degree. He knows he could not continue to support his mother were he to wholeheartedly renounce the world and enter into the religious life. Unfortunately, being an only child, he cannot turn the task of supporting her over to a brother or sister. Furthermore, his own acknowledgement of his strong filial loyalties suggests that he himself recognizes the natural obligations one has to parents.

As we see, each criterion for the state of impediment is present in this case. Therefore, it would seem Aquinas’ judgement would be rather easy to predict. He would rule that, as long as the circumstances remain unaltered, the man will be in a state of impediment. Were there a change in the circumstances—e.g., if he could find some means to provide for his mother other than forsaking the religious life and doing it himself—then the state of impediment would be removed, and the man would no longer be prohibited from abandoning the world and entering the religious life.

So much for Aquinas. Now let us see how Dōgen himself responded to this situation. He begins his response to the man’s question as follows: “If, after serious consideration, you still have the earnest desire to enter into Buddhism fully and can work out some means to assure

the comfort and livelihood of your mother, then it would be a good thing to enter Buddhism, both for your mother and yourself" (III.14). We can well imagine that Dōgen's initial reaction easily could have been that of Aquinas: if the man changes the circumstances by providing for his mother, then he will be able to wholeheartedly enter the religious life. Perhaps, one might surmise, Dōgen sees the man as being in what Aquinas would call a state of impediment. This would be a sensible interpretation based on what we've seen so far—but then Dōgen later goes on to say:

This is a difficult problem, not for others to decide. If you renounce this life and enter Buddhism, your aged mother might starve to death. But would not the merit of having permitted a son to enter Buddhism establish a good cause for gaining the Way in the future? If you cast aside the filial love and duty you have not discarded over numerous *kalpas* and many lives in this life when you have been born in the body of a man and have had the rare opportunity to encounter Buddhism, this would be the mark of one who is truly grateful. How can this not accord with the Buddha's will? It is said that if one son leaves his home to become a monk, seven generations of parents will gain the Way. How can you afford to waste an opportunity for eternal peace because of concern for the body in this present fleeting life? Think this over well for yourselves (III.14).

Taken in its entirety, Dōgen's answer may strike us at first glance as somewhat ambiguous. What is the man being instructed to do?

Understanding Dōgen's answer requires us first of all to understand what *Dōgen* sees as "the due circumstances." Dōgen agrees with Aquinas that in order to provide a resolution for this moral dilemma, one must take into account one's filial obligations, and one's capability to fulfill them. Aquinas, in return, would agree with Dōgen's observation about the merit that would accrue from a son entering the religious life for both himself, his parents, and others. As 2a2ae 189.6 observes, the religious life enables one to extend spiritual help to one's parents, and furthermore contributes especially to the good of humankind. But Dōgen makes an additional point: "How can you afford to waste an opportunity for eternal peace because of a concern for the body in this

present fleeting life?" From Dōgen's perspective, there is a crucial point about the due circumstances of this case which must not be overlooked, a point Dōgen expresses distinctly in another passage of the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*: "Impermanence is a fact before our eyes" (II.14). Dōgen continually introduces the doctrine of impermanence in the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, stressing how this "fact" highlights the urgency of following the Way. So Dōgen points out to the man that he has the opportunity to enter more fully into Buddhism and "cast aside the filial love and duty you have not discarded over numerous *kalpas*."

For Dōgen, then, impermanence is one of the facts of the case at hand, a relevant—indeed important—circumstance one must take into account in arriving at a decision. Dōgen does, in the end, exhort the man to abandon the world and enter Buddhism. In this case, therefore, it does seem he is suggesting the man's filial duties ought to be set aside in favor of incurring and fulfilling the obligations of the religious life.

But if this is how Dōgen thinks this conflict of obligations problem should be resolved in this situation, why does he *begin* his answer by stressing that "This is a difficult problem, not for others to decide," and end his answer with the remark: "Think this over well for yourselves"? Why does he not simply tell the man what's what, and then pressure him to act accordingly?

To answer this question, we must note Dōgen's employment of *upaya*, "skill in means." *Upaya* refers to the advancing of the student's understanding via the pedagogical method most suited to the present stage of advancement and capacity for growth of the individual, as the master perceives it. For Dōgen, right action in this or any other situation is not ultimately a matter of rule-following, but is a function of the individual's actualization of the Buddha-nature, varying according to the due circumstances of each concrete situation and the capacity of the individual to act. The man has posed a practical conflict that requires resolution here and now, and Dōgen does not flinch from the challenge. So initially he tells the man he must assess whether he has (or can obtain) the necessary desire, and if so then to provide for his mother's needs before entering Buddhism. Evidently Dōgen sees this answer as an appropriate one, given his assessment of the man's state of religious attainment.

But after providing a resolution to the man's problem, he then offers some instruction which he hopes will spur him towards a higher under-

standing. If indeed the man truly understood the circumstances in their entirety, especially the fact of impermanence, he would realize the immediate importance of his entering Buddhism without delay, and act accordingly. This action would be none other than acting from the Buddha-nature, one of the "free and pure activities in accordance with circumstances and occasions," as Hee-Jin Kim aptly states.⁶ From the perspective of this greater level of understanding, undertaking the obligations of the religious life ought to take precedence over those of filial piety.

We ought also to note in Dōgen's answer an implicit acknowledgement of the value-force of obligations to one's parents. Again we see a tension between the Japanese stress on a limited social nexus and a broader Buddhist moral vision, and again we see Dōgen seeking to persuade the listener not by denying filial piety, but by transforming religious obligations in light of this idea. What, after all, is the clinching argument? "It is said that if one son leaves his home to become a monk, seven generations of parents will gain the way." Dōgen is invoking here an idea we considered earlier: a "higher" or "true" filial piety. Once again, he suggests one can understand the obligations one incurs in the religious life as being none other than the obligations of true filial piety. From this high level understanding, the obligations of true filial piety take precedence.

To recount, then, the judgements in this case: Aquinas would believe the man is in a state of impediment, and thus cannot enter the religious life. Dōgen takes the view that the problem is a difficult one, but the man could still enter the religious life. Perhaps it would be accurate to say that in this case, Aquinas would rule that the man is *prohibited* from carrying out the obligations a dedication to the religious life would incur, and *required* to attend to his filial duties toward his mother. Dōgen, on the other hand, would *allow*, and even encourage, the man to carry out his obligations to the religious life over those of filial piety, given a sufficient level of understanding in the man's Buddhist practice; if the man's level of attainment were of a lower order, however, Dōgen would *concede* the validity of granting precedence to the obligations of filial piety.

⁶ Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen Kigen—Mystical Realist* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1975), 288.

In sum, we have seen, to some extent, how Dōgen and Aquinas would respond to a certain kind of conflict of obligations problem. Both would seek to resolve the problem via the application of a hierarchy of obligations to this scenario—a common means of resolving this form of moral dilemma—but insist that a proper resolution requires reference to the due circumstances as well. Part of the difference in the answers Dōgen and Aquinas would offer in any given case would partly depend on their perception of what exactly the relevant due circumstances were. Any exhaustive treatment of the differences in their answers would, of course, require a consideration of many other matters: finer points of doctrine, social mores, and so forth. But at least in the case reviewed above, we gain some insight into how they would go about the matter. They are both, I would add, resolutions which are at once pragmatic and exhortative. They are pragmatic because they seek to provide a plan of action for the religious seeker which takes into account the realities and capabilities of the parties involved. They are exhortative because they seek to stress the importance and superiority of the religious life, and encourage the pursuit of it to the fullest extent possible.