St. Thomas Aquinas's Thoughts on Filial Piety in Comparison With Confucianism

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Abstract
This study strives to compare and contrast St. Thomas Aquinas's idea of "filial piety" (pietas) with the Confucian idea of filial piety (孝). Even though these traditions came from very different places, I find and talk about surprising similarities in how they deal with family responsibilities. I also look into Aquinas's view on filial piety as a part of justice, its main parts, and the complicated relationship between family duties and worshiping God. The paper looks at whether and how Jesus Christ's relationship with the Father can be used as a model for how children should treat their parents. The analysis in this study is still in its early stages, but it seems to suggest that Aquinas's framework could help find new ways to bring together the historical differences between Catholic doctrine and ancestor worship in Confucianism.
Key words: Thomas Aquinas, filial piety, Catholicism, Confucianism, ancestor worship, religious dialogue

1. Introduction

One of the primary questions that this study attempts address is what makes filial piety so central to human experience that it appears across cultures separated by continents and centuries. It is common knowledge that in East Asian societies, Confucian filial piety (孝) represents something profound. It encapsulates sacred gratitude and children's fundamental duty toward parents (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025: https://www.britannica.com/topic/xiao-Confucianism). Yet both Eastern and Western traditions, despite their different emphases, seem to recognize something universal about family bonds. Christianity gravitates toward the husband-wife relationship and universal brotherhood. Confucianism, by contrast, places the parent-child relationship at its moral center, advocating "loving the close" with carefully calibrated degrees of affection.

Could the focus on blood ties in Confucianism compromise more general ideas of justice and moral truth? This is still an unanswered question that needs more research. Unquestionably, though, filial piety has developed into the most important moral standard in Confucianism—a core virtue that permeates society from the family and shapes not only individual ethics but entire political structures.

Fascinating layers emerge from the historical evolution of filial piety in Confucian thought. Confucius made "respect" the cornerstone of its moral code. By claiming that respect ultimately equates to "love," Zengzi changed this and established love as the true foundation of filial piety. It was given cosmic significance in the Classic of Filial Piety: "the way of heaven, the duty of earth, the conduct of humans." Zhu Xi positioned benevolence as the essence of filial piety, while later scholars such as Dong Zhongshu used five-element theory to explain its "heavenly principle." In contrast, Wang Yangming guided its practical application with its inherent knowledge (Zeng, 2024).

But is filial piety more than just a concept? It seems to have developed its own "way" (Way of Filial Piety), complete with canonical texts and evolving into ancestor worship—essentially a belief system. Some scholars argue that no culture outside Confucianism possesses an equivalent concept (Zed, 2016). For two millennia, East Asian religious and philosophical systems have been profoundly shaped by this

Confucian understanding, making filial piety a moral standard, value system, and cultural ideal across the region.

When Western missionaries arrived in East Asia, however, they encountered what would become perhaps the most persistent source of conflict: the nature of filial piety and ancestor worship. For missionaries, fundamental questions emerged. What exactly was the character of ancestor veneration? What happened to parents and grandparents after death? For East Asians—including those converting to Catholicism—equally pressing concerns arose. Did belief in God contradict traditional values? Would it mean abandoning ancestors? Was such abandonment inherently unfilial?

This paper attempts to address these historical tensions through a comparative theological analysis, though it remains uncertain whether such an approach can adequately capture the lived complexities of intercultural encounter. My methodology involves examining Aquinas's concept of pietas alongside key Confucian texts and interpretations. I look for potential convergences rather than assuming irreconcilable differences; on the other hand, once substantial differences are identified, they are clearly stated. This is not meant to be an exhaustive historical study of missionary conflicts or a comprehensive analysis of either tradition. Instead, I am trying something more modest: exploring whether one medieval theologian's framework might offer insights for contemporary dialogue between these traditions. Whether this comparative approach can move beyond academic exercise to contribute meaningfully to intercultural understanding remains an open question—but it seems worth attempting, given how these issues continue to affect communities across East Asia.

Here is where Thomas Aquinas becomes unexpectedly relevant. Though he didn't focus explicitly on filial piety, his treatment of family ethics, the concept of "pietas," parent-child relationships, and especially Christ's relationship with God the Father reveals sophisticated thinking about filial obligations. Could his theological framework provide a bridge for understanding Eastern filial piety? We answer this question affirmatively. Aquinas' theological framework has the potential to resolve some of the historical disagreements between Eastern and Western traditions that arose during the missionary period if we analyze it carefully. These questions seem worth pursuing, particularly as our globalized world continues to grapple with how different moral traditions might coexist and even enrich one another.

2. St. Thomas Aquinas's Understanding of Filial Piety

When examining Aquinas's approach to family obligations, one immediately encounters a puzzle. How does a 13th-century European theologian's concept of "pietas" relate to the intricate filial relationships that define East Asian societies? That Aquinas's ideas should exhibit this relation seems counterintuitive. The answer, perhaps surprisingly, lies in his *Summa Theologica*, particularly "Question 101. Piety" in the Second Part of the Second Part (Aquinas, 1981: 5497-5506). Aquinas develops what can only be described as a remarkably nuanced view of filial piety. This can be discerned as we scrutinize his text closer. Right on first reading we see that he embeds the term within Christian moral theology. Upon closer inspection, however, we notice that his insights transcend purely religious boundaries. For him, filial piety represents love made concrete—love that recognizes hierarchical relationships, especially between parents and children (Guo, [n.d.]: https://www.ruf.rice.edu/~asia/24ParagonsFilialPiety.html). Naturally, this is far more than mere sentiment. Aquinas is a theological writer with a strong moral sense. Hence, his analysis positions filial piety distinctly within the moral landscape, connected to but separate from general charitable acts. What is particularly striking is how he grounds this discussion. Rather than treating family obligations as peripheral concerns, Aquinas places them within fundamental questions of justice and human relationships.

Justice as the Foundation

Here is where Aquinas's approach becomes genuinely interesting on more than just one level. He situates filial piety (pietas) squarely within the framework of **justice (iustitia)**. In *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Question 101, Article 3, he makes a crucial observation:

"Religion offers worship to God, piety to one's parents and country. Now the worship of God is contained in the order to our neighbor... Therefore after religion, in the order of the virtues, comes piety."

But why this particular ordering? His reasoning in II-II, Question 101, Article 1, reveals a carefully constructed hierarchy:

"Man becomes a debtor to other men in various ways, according to their various excellence and the various benefits received from them. On both counts God holds first place, for He is supremely excellent, and is for us the first principle of being and government. In the second place, the principles of our being and government are our parents and our country..."

This creates an intriguing moral architecture. God occupies the supreme position, certainly, but parents and country follow immediately after. Furthermore, we notice that parents and country are portrayed not as distant concerns but as fundamental obligations arising from our very existence. This is significant because what emerges here is Aquinas's conviction that filial piety encompasses far more than family sentiment. As we have seen above, Aquinas's understanding of filial piety extends to one's country and, ultimately, toward God (Cassidy, 2025). In his views, these aspects are interconnected. In fact, Aquinas views children's reverence for parents as a fundamental virtue. On the other hand, we notice that this virtue remains situated within natural law and humanity's inherent pursuit of happiness. It is, so to speak, an indispensable part of a wider orchestra of the divine creative work. This suggests something profound: filial duties are not arbitrary cultural constructions but arise from divine law and natural order itself (Cline, 2015).

The Components of True Piety

But what exactly does filial piety require? Aquinas's analysis here becomes quite practical. In II-II, Question 101, Article 2 (*Summa Theologiae*), he identifies **reverence** as the core element:

"It belongs to piety to pay duty and worship to one's parents and one's country. The worship due to our parents includes both reverence and service." (Aquinas, [n.d.]: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3121.htm)

The emphasis on **service** follows naturally: "We worship our parents, from whom we have received our being, by giving them reverence and service." (Aquinas, [n.d.]: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3121.htm)

Curiously, though, Aquinas doesn't explicitly list obedience as integral to filial piety. This seems rather significant. In II-II, Question 104, Article 4, he addresses the relationship between filial piety and obedience, but treats them as distinct:

"In those things which pertain to the disposition of our own person or actions, the subject is bound to obey his superior according to the reason of his superiority..." (Aquinas, [n.d.]: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3121.htm)

Gratitude, meanwhile, receives separate treatment in II-II, Questions 106-107. It is noteworthy that Acquinas considers it a distinct virtue – still related to filial piety, of course, but clearly distinguished. He writes: "Therefore gratitude or thankfulness is a special virtue distinct from all others." (Aquinas, [n.d.]: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3121.htm)

Our analysis implies that this careful articulation suggests something important about Aquinas's understanding. Modern scholars note that his view aligns with contemporary interpretations suggesting filial piety shouldn't be reduced to blind

obedience (Yang, 2019: 98-100). Instead, it might be better understood as respect for the traditions parents represent, contributing to one's moral development. If our analysis is correct, then Aquinas might be closer to the Eastern tradition then most other later Western thinkers on this topic. Yang (2019) rightly argues that Confucian well-being is rooted in the cultivation of filial piety (xiao) and ritual (li). The emphasis here is that true flourishing arises not just from virtuous actions but from internalizing harmonious, spontaneous responses shaped by attentive practice of familial and social rituals. This Confucian model offers a relational, virtue-based alternative to Western individualistic accounts of well-being. Now, if Aquinas's views reveal a strong emphasis on the formative and sustaining role of family relationships and ritual propriety in achieving a good life, he might be considered close to the typical Confucian view of this matter. In this reading, honoring parents means honoring the cultural and family traditions they embody—making filial piety a foundational virtue for navigating broader social responsibilities.

The Limits of Family Obligation

Perhaps most significantly for dialogue between traditions, Aquinas establishes clear boundaries for filial piety. In this section, we will explore the relation between religious virtue and filial piety, including Aquinas's hierarchy of significance attributed to these terms. We notice unequivocally that he places religious virtue (*religio*) above filial piety (*pietas*) and he does so without hesitation. In *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Question 101, Article 3, Aquinas argues that since God is the supreme cause of our existence—higher than parents—obligations to God must take precedence:

"Religion is given preference to piety, because divine worship is paid to a higher principle than human honor." (Aquinas, [n.d.]: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3101.htm)

But this hierarchy creates practical dilemmas. What happens when parental demands conflict with religious obligations? Aquinas addresses this directly in II-II, Question 101, Article 4:

"Worship of parents may be omitted for the sake of divine worship. For this reason the Lord says (Luke 14:26): 'If any man come to Me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters... he cannot be My disciple.'" (Aquinas, [n.d.]: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3101.htm)

The tension becomes even more complex regarding religious vocations. Individuals pursuing a spiritual calling often find themselves trying to harmonize personal convictions and societal expectations, and all of this within the wider context of potential conflicts between their devotion to religious life and their obligations to family, tradition, and community norms. It is rather revealing to observe the way Aquinas deals with this conundrum. In II-II, Question 189, Article 6, he offers what might be called a nuanced compromise:

"If one's parents be in such need that they cannot be fittingly supported save by the service of their children, these latter may not lawfully enter religion in neglect of their duty... If, however, the parents' necessity be not such as to stand in great need of their children's assistance, the latter may... enter religion even against their command." (Aquinas, [n.d.]: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3101.htm) This framework reveals Aquinas grappling with real-world conflicts between competing moral claims. His resolution—prioritizing divine obligations while recognizing genuine parental need—suggests a more flexible approach than might initially appear (Glenn, [n.d.]: https://www.catholictheology.info/summa-theologica/summa-part2B.php?t=22).

What makes Aquinas's approach particularly interesting is how he synthesizes Ciceronian and Augustinian influences. In the *Summa*, he distinguishes between *pietas* as a virtue (concerned with devotion to parents) and *pietas* as a gift of the Holy Spirit (a divinely given capacity for devotion to God as Father). The virtue of piety,

following Cicero, involves devotion to parents and, through them, to kindred and *patria*. Aquinas positions this as a "potential part" of justice—not strict justice involving precise legal debt, but justice in a broader sense involving "moral debt" that can never be fully repaid (d'Amecourt, 2014: 231-272). Why? Because parents are the origin of our being and governance, having birthed and raised us. This debt requires both duty (service and support) and homage (respect and remembrance). Interestingly, Aquinas argues that parents owe children ongoing support even beyond death, while children owe parents ongoing respect but only sporadic support as necessity requires. Aquinas then proceeds by showing his readers how the piety extends beyond the familial bonds, though in a measured way. He describes it as "spillover," that is, piety toward parents extends to kindred, fellow-citizens, and friends of one's *patria*. This does not happen in equal measure, but in gradation. What this help us understand, for example, is why the Ten Commandments emphasize filial rather than civic behavior: honoring parents provides the foundation for, and takes precedence over, honoring one's country.

Contrasts with Confucian Understanding

When we turn to Confucian filial piety, the differences become apparent, though perhaps not as stark as expected. The typical Eastern thought is situated in different metanarrative and metaphysical contexts. The weak dualism of a monotheistic view is substituted with a more monistic understanding of reality, which results in different emphases and ethical hierarchies. To be more concrete, Confucianism emphasizes respect, obedience, and devotion to family, particularly parents and ancestors, defining these as essential to both personal moral development and social harmony. Unlike Aquinas's God-centered framework, Confucianism situates filial piety within networks of social obligations and reciprocal relationships (Zhao, 2013: 291-304). The significance of this ontological and semantic background cannot be overstated. Unlike Aquinas or other typical Western thinkers, filial piety was deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese culture and social norms. It influenced Chinese culture's moral compass by highlighting hierarchical relationships and elevating respect for elders to a top priority (Feng, 2020). Naturally, this is not to minimize comparable emphasis in other cultures. However, according to Confucianism, the family was the fundamental unit for moral behavior, and a strong commitment to the family eventually benefited society as a whole. With ramifications for ethics and social interactions, it is a collective, bottom-up moral development.

However, a comparison is still possible despite the mentioned disparity in situatedness and emphasis. In actuality, there are both similarities and differences between the philosophical underpinnings of Aquinas' and Confucianism's methods. Although Aquinas's emphasis on divine commandments contrasts with Confucianism's emphasis on social harmony and hierarchical respect, both traditions acknowledge the importance of family relationships (McCabe, 2010). As we mentioned above, this discrepancy reflects essentially different presumptions regarding the origin and character of moral authority. According to Aquinas, filial responsibilities ultimately stem from natural law and God's will. According to him, they are an essential component of a cosmic order that is independent of culture. Contrarily, Confucian filial piety is rooted in the development of peaceful communal life and arises from and serves social relationships themselves. The will of a Creator God is not reflected in any overarching, divinely established order of creation. This has clear practical ramifications because, whereas Aquinas might use the divine hierarchy to reconcile conflicts between religious and familial obligations, Confucian philosophy would be more inclined to look for solutions that uphold social harmony and honor preexisting relationship structures.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this comparative analysis: It demonstrates the virtue of filial piety's universality while also reminding us of the various moral systems that influence its application in various cultures. It's crucial to keep both of these in mind and maintain their creative tension. Once more, their theological foundations might be the most interesting distinction. Although they both support respecting parents, Aquinas's view of love as fundamental complicates filial responsibilities and connects them to larger theological frameworks (Sin, 2020: 60). It is still unclear whether this is an insurmountable divide or a possible area of agreement, which the relationship between Christ and the Father may help to clarify.

3. Christ and the Father: A Theological Model for Filial Relationships?

This brings us to what might be the most fascinating aspect of Aquinas's thinking about filial piety. How does the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father inform our understanding of family obligations? At first glance, this seems like an impossibly abstract theological question. Yet Aquinas's exploration of this divine relationship reveals surprisingly practical insights about human filial bonds.

His approach to Christ's relationship with the Father sits at the heart of his theological framework, influencing both divine authority and the moral implications of family relationships. Aquinas clearly draws on the theological-philosophical traditions of his era, presenting Christ as simultaneously divine and human. This view reflects the so-called Chalcedonian Christian orthodoxy and presents a duality of natures (united within one person) that creates fascinating parallels for understanding filial obligations. Aquinas can namely distinguish what happens between the Son and the Father depending on whether the relationship is reflecting Christ's human or divine nature. In his human nature, Christ assumes a subordinate role to the Father, and this, Aquinas suggests, provides a model for human relationships characterized by love, obedience, and reverence.

But how exactly does this work? The theological complexity here is genuinely challenging.

The Challenge of Christ's Dual Nature

As mentioned above, Aquinas emphasizes what theologians call Christ's "dual nature". This understanding conveys the conviction that Christ, ever since his incarnation, remains fully divine and fully human. In his human nature, Christ appears as God the Father's servant, as when he declares in John 20:17: "I ascend to My Father and to your Father, to My God and your God." (Aquinas, [n.d.] Question 20: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/4020.htm) This relationship, Aquinas argues, emphasizes Christ's dependent role in his human capacity, reflecting obedience and service. In other words, the divine Logos humbles himself and subjects himself willingly to the Father in his humble form of human nature.

Yet this creates an interpretive puzzle. How can Christ be both equal to the Father (in his divine nature) and subordinate to him (in his human nature) without falling into the Arian heresy that the Son is inferior to the Father? (Senthil, 2022) Aquinas thinks about this conundrum carefully, emphasizing that Christ's subjection relates specifically to his human nature, not his divine essence, which he holds immutable and fully equal to the Father.

It does not stop with the Christological reflection. In fact, the Trinitarian implications become even more complex. Aquinas affirms real distinctions between the persons of the Trinity. He is careful to differentiate between "relation" and "essence". The persons of the Trinity do not differ in essence but in relational attributes. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit maintain distinct personal identities while sharing identical divine essence (Mason, 2018). Christ's incarnation as "Son of Man" represents a temporal father-son relationship that doesn't compromise the eternal ordering within the Trinity. Curiously, Aquinas notes that any of the three divine persons could have

assumed human nature, since divine power exists equally in all three (Aquinas, [n.d.] Question 20: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/4020.htm). In other words, Aquinas is careful to stress that the Incarnation did not flow from any "deficiency" that made the Son more capable than the Father or the Spirit. The divine power that brings about the union of humanity and divinity is numerically one and therefore shared in full by all three Persons. In principle, then, the Father or the Holy Spirit could have taken flesh, because omnipotence is indivisible. So the only way to make distinctions among the Persons is based on their eternal relations, not their capacity to act *ad extra* (i.e. externally). The historical fact that the Son became incarnate reflects fittingness within the overall *oikonomia salutis* (economy of salvation). What Aquinas meant by this (and witch him the Chalcedonian Christian orthodoxy) is that the Son is eternally "Word" and "Image," so revealing God in human form suits Him uniquely. This fact does in no way impose any limitation on the Father or the Spirit. In short, the mystery is contingent choice, not constrained ability. Aquinas reminds his readers that any Person could have done it, but only the Son actually did.

What Does Christ's "Subjection" Actually Mean?

Here's where Aquinas's analysis becomes particularly relevant for understanding human filial relationships. Christ's subjection to the Father, he argues, doesn't signal inferiority but reflects his role within the Trinity. In human form, Christ is subordinate to the Father as a servant, while his divine nature remains equal to the Father (Reeves, 2016). Augustine's notion "that the Son is less than Himself" in his human capacity captures this duality (Aquinas, [n.d.] Question 20: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/4020.htm). Aquinas, a critical interpreter of Augustine, reiterates this double movement in Christ. As God, the Son "presides and rules together with the Father"; as man, He "is subject and serves," so that Augustine can paradoxically say "the Son is less than Himself" (Summa Theologica, Part III, Question 20: De Trin. I, 7) without denying His equality in divinity. Aquinas is careful to make these distinctions as these prevent him from sliding into a ranking of natures: the incarnated Logos' subordination belongs only to the assumed humanity, not to the eternal Word.

So what happens if we read this Christological tension through family life? We get an interesting glimpse into the question why Aquinas matters for ordinary households. The argument goes like this: Because the incarnate Son obeys the Father without forfeiting dignity, obedience itself is redeemed: it becomes an act of freely offered love, not proof of inferiority. Modern writers such as Michael Reeves (2016) underline the same point when they reject "eternal subordination" theories and trace Christ's earthly obedience to a voluntary role, not an ontological gap. Hence, virtues of humility and respect are conceived of as shaping filial piety as duty not only to earthly parents but also to God (Floyd, 2025). The connection between divine authority and familial obligations challenges and enriches traditional views of hierarchical relationships (Saint Mary's Press Editors, 2023).

But what does this mean practically? If Christ's obedience to the Father represents perfect filial relationship, how should this inform human family dynamics? That logic spills into the Fourth Commandment, as we will see in the next section.

Distinguishing Divine and Human Authority

Aquinas draws a crucial distinction between worship of God and reverence for earthly parents. He never allows for these to be mixed or displace. While filial piety involves honor due to parents and homeland, religious virtue goes beyond and is elevated above the filial piety. It encompasses worship of God, which predisposes religious virtue to hold superior position (Aquinas, [n.d.]: Question 121 www.newadvent.org/summa/3121.htm). God, in Aquinas's view, is the principle of

our existence and governance. Due to his ontological superiority, God by far exceeds earthly fathers or nations. This distinction emphasizes that divine worship should be considered a higher calling than filial piety toward human relationships. The Catechism roots children's honor for parents in God's own fatherhood and calls such respect "filial piety" (Catholic Church, 2003: 2214-2216). Here, the divine-human pattern reappears: loving submission to legitimate authority is framed as gratitude, humility, and mutual up-building, never as servile loss of worth. Filial duty remains always grounded not in power asymmetry but in the Son's humble, love-motivated obedience. The implication of this is equally binding on parents, whose authority must mirror God's self-giving rule.

Yet this raises uncomfortable questions. Does prioritizing God over parents lead to neglecting family obligations? How do we balance competing loyalties?

Christ as the Ideal of Filial Piety

Perhaps most intriguingly, understanding Christ's relationship with the Father establishes a foundation for Christian concepts of filial piety. This is at least what Aquinas seems to be implying: Christ embodies perfect obedience and devotion to the Father, serving as a model for human relationships with God. Incarnation remains the crucial event here. In light of this key event, Christ's submission to the Father emphasizes humility and respect as essential in filial relationships, guiding believers in expressing reverence and love toward God (Flynn, 2010). In fact, the principle is not just pedagogical as it goes beyond the "exemplar" function. In Aquinas views, the Spirit of the Father and the Son becomes an active principle, a personal force enabling believers to express love and reference toward God and then, by extension, also toward one's parents and others (though in a lesser, gradient way).

In any case, the relationship between Christ and the Father provides a theological template for Aquinas's understanding of filial piety. While Christ demonstrates perfect obedience to the Father, this obedience doesn't indicate inferior status but expresses perfect love and unity. This parallels filial relationships, where obedience shouldn't merely represent submission but express love and respect.

The events of the incarnated Logos submission go even further, however. Christ exemplifies perfect filial piety through fulfilling the Father's will, even unto the cross. There is this profound element of self-sacrifice that underlies the Christian narrative and Aquinas own deliberation. This voluntary obedience of the Son illustrates that true filial piety goes beyond external compliance. It finds its true fulfillment in its acceptance of parental will. This, in return, brings the believer in the broader context under God's will.

What then does Aquinas actually do when he establishes Christ's relationship with the Father as a model for filial piety? This is one of the key questions in our reflection on this topic. Aquinas namely appears to be intentional in his framework setting. He creates a rich theological framework for understanding relationships between children and parents, and between humans and God. All are interconnected and dependent one on another tough the vertical hierarchy remains intact and, in fact, in the center of Aquinas' project. This perspective suggests, if we are correct in our interpretation of Aquinas, that genuine filial piety—whether toward earthly parents or God—stems from profound love and recognition of fundamental relationships, leading to voluntary rather than coerced obedience.

Yet questions remain. It is one thing to summarize and offer a refreshed perspective on Aquinas's teaching on filial piety situated in his wider theological presuppostions; and it is quite another thing to offer a more conclusive judgment on the viability of making comparisons between Confucianism and Aquinas's version of Christian theology. Can Aquinas's theological model truly bridge the gap between Christian and Confucian understandings of family obligation? Does it offer practical guidance for contemporary family relationships, or does it remain too abstract for real-world

application? The answer may depend on how seriously we take Aquinas's integration of divine and human relationships.

4. Can Aquinas Help Bridge Catholic-Confucian Differences?

This brings us to perhaps the most challenging question: whether Aquinas's theological framework can actually, meaningfully contribute to resolving centuries-old tensions between Catholic doctrine and Confucian practice. We ask this question with utmost humility and seriousness because the historical conflicts are not merely a matter of academic discourse. They have influenced real people's lives and shaped real communities, divided families, and influenced entire societies across East Asia.

The Persistent Issue of Ancestor Worship

Why has the tension between Confucian filial piety and Catholic doctrine proven so enduring? The root issue seems deceptively simple but proves remarkably complex, especially when we frame the issue of filial piety in terms of ancestor worship. In what follows, we will try to explain why and to delineate some contours of possible solutions. As we have shown in our study, the cultural practice of filial piety is far from being peripheral in cultures where Confucianism has deep roots and ancestors veneration is pervasive. In reality, this practice is fundamental to Confucian ethics. The cultural practice itself is ancient, going back to Neolithic era. Historically it became visible in Shang oracle-bone rites-has long fused blood-kin devotion with religious practice, crossing Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and popular traditions (Tavor et al., 2019). Over time it stretched from imperial state cults to household altars, lineage halls, and graveside festivals such as Qingming and Double Ninth, and it still thrives today in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the global diaspora, (Tavor, 2024), as well as among other South-East Asia nations. Filial piety in Confucianism represents a fundamental commitment to virtue and moral development throughout society and as such is taken extremely seriously.

Catholic doctrine, however, has traditionally prioritized worship exclusively for God. Catholicism is namely a strictly monotheistic religion viewing ancestor worship with deep suspicion. What has been the main concern? Liturgically and theologically speaking, the main concern has been that such practices might constitute idolatry (Slater et al., 2020). These differing theological frameworks create genuine conflict around the nature and expression of filial obligations, particularly where both traditions coexist.

But is this conflict as irreconcilable as it initially appears? After all, we have ample instances of the lived experience of "Confucian Christians" and the creative harmonization of both traditions in individuals and communities (Slater et al., 2020). What can these teach us about the compatibilities and pervasive tensions between these two systems of thought? Across East and Southeast Asia, self-described *Confucian Christians* walk a narrow ridge between piety and idolatry. Catholic families often appeal to Pope Pius XII's 1939 decree *Plane Compertum*, which re-classified bowing, incense, and tablet veneration as "merely civil" signs of esteem (Pius XII, 1939). According to this decree, such practices are allowed so long as the gestures are detached from petitions for supernatural favor. Protestants, lacking an official magisterial ruling, arrive at parallel accommodations on the ground: during Qingming they clean graves, lay flowers, read Psalms of thanksgiving, and share a picnic, while quietly abstaining from burning "hell-money" or food offerings, thus re-casting the visit as a family memorial rather than a cultic transaction. Some scholars note that even this Catholic relaxation is eyed warily by evangelical writers, who still see the 1939 compromise as edging toward syncretism.

The liturgy itself is linguistically trimmed: prayers once voiced *to* the ancestors are reformulated as prayers *for* them, or as thanks *to God* for their lives; incense is offered "in gratitude," not "in supplication." Likewise, what Confucians call *xiao* is re-interpreted as an exercise of the natural virtues of justice and gratitude. This eases the tension as any Christian can endorse such views and practices without implying divine status for the dead (Slater et al., 2020). These field-tested strategies do not erase the doctrinal fault line, but they do relativize the stark worship-versus-superstition binary by relocating ancestral rites inside a civic and familial context. Whether such semantic maneuvering genuinely resolves the metaphysical clash, or merely softens it, remains open. In any case, the stubborn persistence of these hybrid rituals suggests that the most promising dialogue unfolds in precisely those "grey zones" where dogma meets domestic life.

When it comes to worshipping ancestors in a ritualistic way, Confucian doctrine maintains that ancestor worship is something more than merely filial duty. The cultural/religious practice of ancestor worship is a direct means (by way of rituals) of cultivating essential virtues, namely respect, humility, and empathy. These virtues are necessary for social harmony and individual moral development (Tavor, 2024), thus the ritual is essential for Confucians. Catholics, while acknowledging the importance of family and honoring parents, remain a bit careful and partially apprehensive regarding this practice. They continue to emphasize direct relationship with God and worship directed solely to Him. In their view, there can only be one "latreia", i.e. true worship of the one, true God. This belief often puts Catholicism at odds with Confucian ancestor reverence, which traditional Catholicism interprets as potentially ascribing divine-like veneration to ancestors (Slater et al., 2020).

The interpretive challenge runs deep. Catholicism, despite the aforementioned decree by Pius XII, frequently views ancestor worship rituals as potential idolatry (Bae, 2004: 346-350). It depends on the local bishop and the way the practice is reported and conceived by the local Catholics. A stricter interpretation complicates accepting ancestral reverence within Catholic frameworks, whereas a more lenient interpretation is open to consider it legitimate, providing the hermeneutic framework is sufficiently calibrated on the side of the practitioners. In the end, the Catholics will always emphasize that they prioritize divine authority over familial reverence.

From the Confucian perspective, ancestor worship represents a natural extension of filial duty. This remains non-negotiable. From traditional Catholic viewpoints, especially those more conservative ones, such a practice might encroach on exclusive worship due to God in an exclusively "monolatrist" religion.

Could Aquinas Offer a Way Forward?

This is where Aquinas becomes genuinely interesting. His voice in Catholic circles still carries much weight so his views might provide a bridge between the two traditions on the issue of filial piety and ancestor worship, though this remains speculative. Here we go back to our claim that his moral philosophy emphasizes natural law and moral obligations inherent in human relationships, including parent-child bonds. We see a useful point of contact between the two seemingly in commensurable traditions here. Significantly, Aquinas directly suggests filial piety shouldn't be considered incompatible with Christian worship but rather an expression of deeper moral responsibility to both family and God (Park & Muller, 2014). Aquinas grounds filial duties in human nature and divine commandments, linking them to broader understanding of virtue and moral responsibility (Yang, 2019; He views filial piety as virtue encompassing more than external expressions—it requires sincere inner commitment to honor and love parents and, by extension, one's community (Glenn, [n.d.], https://www.catholictheology.info/summa-theologica/summa-part2B.php?t=22).

How far can Aquinas lead us by reinterpreting filial piety through virtues like charity and justice? Does this amount to a reconciliatory approach? The answer to these questions depends on whether believers can continue honoring familial obligations while maintaining fidelity to divine authority, according to Aquinas and the papal decree, *Plane Compertum*. Nevertheless, whether understanding Aquinas's contributions could actually pave the way for more harmonious coexistence of filial piety within Catholic frameworks remains an open question. What we are suggesting based on our research of this issue is that using Aquinas teachings and authority within the Catholic communities, it might enrich both traditions and their adherents.

Is there a Reconciliatory Framework?

Perhaps most promisingly, Aquinas's moral and political philosophy provides a framework that might address conflicts between Catholic and Confucian perspectives on filial piety and ancestor worship. Daniel Qin's (2013) "fulfilment approach" gives Aquinas fresh traction here. Qin bluntly states that "the fifth commandment is the fulfillment of Confucian filial piety … Jesus is the fulfiller of both the fifth commandment and Confucian filial piety" (Qin, 2013: 141). That claim aligns with Aquinas's own conviction that natural and divine law overlap without collapsing into each other (Summa Theologica I-II, q. 94, a. 4). When we express it in Thomistic terms, Confucian *xiao* would be a naturally knowable precept perfected, not abolished, by grace. (Qin, 2013).

Aquinas argues that filial piety is inherently tied to virtues of respect and love for parents and ancestors. In other words, he insists that filial bonds run both ways, locating them under the virtue of justice rather than mere sentiment (Butcher 1996). He emphasizes bidirectional moral relationships integrating compassion, respect, and effective interaction within family structures, promoting harmony in both family and society (Butcher, 1996). This view aligns surprisingly well with Confucian ideals of filial piety, which also emphasize maintaining stable and harmonious relationships through reciprocal obligations (Bae, 2007). Also, that bidirectional logic resonates with Qin's reading of Niebuhr's Christ-above-culture paradigm, where Christ, on the one hand, fulfills cultural aspiration; on the other hand, He, as the divine Logos, simultaneously judges it. If we look at this from a practical perspective, this keeps the Catholic scruple against idolatry in play while allowing Confucian rites to be reread as civic gratitude rather than cultic petition. We have observed this interpretive move already as a visible phenomenon in lived compromises among "Confucian Christians." Curiously, Aquinas's philosophy encourages balanced understanding of moral obligations. Rather than emphasizing only unidirectional duty of children to parents, he advocates for moral frameworks incorporating emotional communication and respect, allowing more nuanced interpretations of filial duty (Park & Muller, 2014). Aquinas warns against absolutizing any creaturely good. But we can make the same point from the other side: Confucian filial piety, left to itself, slides toward humanism, nepotism, and gender hierarchy. There are no easy remedies against these ills. Cultural striving alone may not do the trick, unless aided from above, in Aquinas view. The Thomistic framework therefore functions less as a final synthesis than as a grammar for ongoing translation across traditions.

Thus, significant questions remain. Can theological frameworks developed in 13th-century Europe truly address the complexities of East Asian family relationships? Are we perhaps overstating the potential for reconciliation?

Relevance for the Modern World

These questions become more pressing when we consider contemporary challenges. Aquinas's understanding might support modern transformation of traditional filial ethics. His emphasis on practical application of moral principles encourages adapting

these values to meet contemporary social practices and needs (Poskaite, 2014: 99-101). The modern Confucian revival is unfolding amid urbanization and global migration. Although the "external form and ancient style" of Confucianism have faded, its interpersonal ethos "is still alive and flourishing" in twenty-first-century Chinese societies (Qin, 2013: 146). Aquinas's stress on virtues over ritual props up that ethical core while freeing communities to adapt surface forms. Now, this does not need to be interpreted in the sense that rituals are not important. Rather, that there is an open possibility, an inviting flexibility (for example) to exchange burnt offerings for prayers of thanksgiving.

In our contemporary context—where both Catholicism and Confucianism face challenges from industrialization, urbanization, and globalization—might Aquinas's views on filial piety contribute to maintaining traditional family values while adapting to new social realities? His understanding of honoring parents not just as formal moral obligation but as expression of love and gratitude could help traditional communities understand filial piety in ways that preserve cultural identity while fitting contemporary contexts.

Additionally, Aquinas's placement of filial piety within broader frameworks of justice and natural law provides potentially common language for dialogue between Catholicism and Confucianism. By recognizing filial piety as universal virtue stemming from human nature rather than merely specific cultural tradition, different religious communities might find common ground for mutual respect and learning, while developing new approaches to traditional practices suitable for the modern world. Also, Aquinas's habit of mapping duties along a hierarchy of goods enables precisely such common ground (while reserving differences): children's debts of gratitude are natural, but worship belongs to God alone. That distinction allows Catholic and Confucian actors to stand shoulder-to-shoulder on elder care legislation or migrant family policy even when liturgical lines stay firm.

But are we being overly optimistic? The historical conflicts suggest these differences run deeper than theological frameworks alone can address. Whether Aquinas's insights can truly bridge such fundamental differences remains an open question—one that deserves continued exploration but shouldn't be answered with premature confidence.

5. Conclusion

After examining Aquinas's concept of filial piety alongside Confucian traditions, what have we actually learned? The comparison reveals what I would characterize as a nuanced moral framework that might—and I emphasize might—contribute to reconciling some long-standing cultural and religious differences between Eastern and Western traditions. Yet I'm hesitant to claim too much for this analysis.

Aquinas's placement of filial piety within justice, while emphasizing the delicate balance between obligations to God and obligations to parents, certainly provides an interesting foundation for understanding both traditions. But does it constitute a genuine breakthrough in intercultural dialogue? That seems less certain. Put in other words, Aquinas supplies the conceptual scaffolding: filial piety as a virtue of justice ordered to the common good and ultimately to God. If we situate this scaffolding within a broader cultural cartography, where the Confucian xiao is seen as both gift and snare, in need of fulfilment rather than erasure, we might move a step forward. Instead of a tidy fusion we arrive at a disciplined hospitality, that is, if we are patient enough. Such reasoning invites Catholics to see in ancestor respect a fragment of natural law, and Confucians to see in the fifth commandment, and in the Christ figure of the Gospels, the horizon that safeguards that fragment from idolatry. Whether this invitation will be accepted depends, as Niebuhr reminds us, on historically situated choices made "in humility" because every synthesis is provisional.

Moreover, the relationship between Christ and the Father, as Aquinas presents it, offers a theological model for filial piety that could help Catholic believers appreciate Confucian family values more deeply. Similarly, Aquinas's emphasis on love and respect rather than mere formal compliance might provide Confucians with fresh perspectives on filial piety beyond traditional rituals. Whether this actually happens in practice, again, depends on factors far beyond theological analysis. Academic dialogue cannot guarantee lived reconciliation, but it can clear imaginative space and delineate new possibilities. In that space, Aquinas's measured hierarchy of loves and Qin's (2013) fulfilment hermeneutic together reveal a modest hope: honoring parents may yet become a shared moral workshop where East and West learn, critique, and—occasionally—bless one another. By recognizing the universal value of honoring parents while respecting its specific cultural expressions, we might indeed build more peaceful and mutually respectful communities based on shared values.

But perhaps I'm being too optimistic. The missionary conflicts of previous centuries suggest that theological frameworks alone, however sophisticated, cannot easily overcome deep cultural differences rooted in centuries of practice and belief, and sometimes bad historical experiences. Ultimately, we need to recognize that the questions raised by the encounter between Catholicism and Confucianism—about the nature of worship, the role of ancestors, the proper ordering of obligations—touch on fundamental assumptions about reality itself. And such questions are never easily resolved. Still, the exercise has been illuminating. If nothing else, examining Aquinas's approach reveals that Western Christianity contains more sophisticated thinking about family relationships than is sometimes assumed. His careful attention to the hierarchy of obligations, the limits of filial piety, and the relationship between human and divine authority suggests that Christian theology can engage seriously with Confucian concerns about family and social harmony.

Whether this engagement can move beyond academic exercise to contribute to real reconciliation between communities remains to be seen. That will depend not only on continued scholarly dialogue but on the willingness of practitioners in both traditions to risk genuine encounter with each other's deepest convictions. The theological groundwork, at least as I understand it, seems more promising than the historical conflicts might suggest. But the real test will come in lived experience, not academic analysis.

AI Tools Declaration

I used Claude 3.7, Google AI Studio, Grok 3, and StormAI to assist with literature screening and summaries during the initial research phase. These tools were used to find additional articles related to the research topic, with all final selections made by human authors. All AI-generated content was thoroughly reviewed, verified, and revised by the author, and I take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the manuscript.

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