

Hobnails, Clouted Shoes & Godliness:

Levelling the Natural Law Tradition

PRASANTA CHAKRAVARTY

The language of “natural law” has been a part of the Catholic tradition since Catholicism accepted the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas as the basis of teaching in the seminaries. In his fourfold classification of law, Aquinas placed “natural law”—*lex naturalis*—as one of the fundamental principles to the whole idea of legality in human affairs, the other three being eternal law, human law and divine law. To Aquinas, the essence in nature was the dispositional properties of matter. Disposition in matter means natural proclivities, which in turn leads towards a dynamic concept of nature in the sense that nature is not frozen in time and space and that there is scope for a certain Aristotelian idea of development and innovation in matters natural.¹

“Natural law” in Thomistic tradition means tendencies of properties to develop in a structured way. Certainly there is a telos as well as a hierarchy in this scheme but the important aspect to understand is that by appealing to “natural law” and by giving it an equal position with the eternal, divine and human laws, Aquinas is providing an ethical grounding to a Christianity that would not be solely based on grace and faith. His repeated appeals to practical reason for the first time allow Christianity to conduct a dialogue with the Aristotelian concept of “natural law.” In Aquinas’s discussion of “natural law” one can see three closely connected structural tendencies. First, to preserve the being that possess a concept of “natural law.” Second, a fervent attempt to realize the potentialities of reason. And third, to preserve the species in general based on inter-subjectivity.