

What is 'ultimate concern' and is Tillich right that it is the best definition of religion?

Paul Tillich understands religion in terms of 'ultimate concern'—a formulation intended to describe the comprehensive orientation of the human person towards that which is held to be ultimate. This essay will defend ultimate concern as the best formal definition of religion through Aquinas's doctrine of the last end.¹ First, it will give a rational defence of Tillich's account; secondly, it will show that its ostensibly modern formulation has profound resonance within the orthodox Christian intellectual tradition.

Aquinas's doctrine of the last end provides the principal framework for this defence. His account of human action, final causality, and the virtue of religion supplies a classical theological basis for understanding how the whole life of the rational creature may be ordered towards an ultimate end. The argument will therefore move from Tillich's account of ultimate concern, through Aquinas's doctrine of the last end and religion, to a qualified evaluation of Tillich's proposal.

From the principles developed by Aquinas, the answer is yes: ultimate concern articulates the rational creature's total orientation towards God as unfailing principle and last end. Tillich's formal account nevertheless requires material determination, since only God can adequately fulfil that orientation.

Tillich defines faith as 'the state of being ultimately concerned'.² By this he does not mean that faith is simply one concern among others. Human beings are concerned by many second-order things, including food, shelter, social relations, intellectual enquiry, and political life. Yet the ultimate concern is that to which everything else tends and within which everything else is contextualised. It ultimately orients and orders all other dimensions of human existence, rendering every subordinate concern conditional and preliminary in relation to it.³ Religion therefore concerns the orientation of existence as a whole.⁴

¹ Tillich's distinction between the formal structure and material content of faith concerns the difference between the structure of ultimate concern and the particular content or object towards which that concern is directed. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 4.

² Tillich's fuller formulation is: 'Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned. The content matters infinitely for the life of the believer, but it does not matter for the formal definition of faith'. See *Ibid.*

³ Tillich states that '[t]he religious concern is ultimate; it excludes all other concerns from ultimate significance; it makes them preliminary'. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three Volumes in One* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 11–12.

⁴ Mary Ann Stenger notes that Tillich 'often interchanges faith and religion and sometimes offers the same definition for each word'. She points, for example, to *The Courage to Be*, where Tillich defines religion as 'the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself' (p. 156) and, a few pages later, offers the same definition for faith (p. 172). See Mary Ann Stenger, 'Faith (and religion)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. by Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 91–104 (p. 103, n. 1); and Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 156, 172.

This accounts for Tillich's insistence that ultimate concern is unconditional, total, and infinite. Faith is not reducible to intellect, will, or emotion; it is the centred act of the whole person.⁵ It grasps the human person in all operations of their existence—characterising and giving form to every other activity—such that lesser concerns are ordered in relation to what is held to be ultimate. The concern is *unconditional* because its claim does not depend upon changing desires or circumstances; *total* because no dimension of life is excluded from it; and *infinite* because it admits no boundary beyond which its claim ceases to apply.⁶ It demands the total surrender of the person, so that everything they do is subordinated to—and shaped by—this ultimate concern.

Tillich grounds this account scripturally in the *Shema*. Deuteronomy 6:5 commands Israel to love God with the whole heart, soul, and strength. Tillich maintains that the term 'ultimate concern' is derived from this demand, which expresses the character of genuine faith as total surrender to God.⁷ His concept is therefore not merely a modern existential abstraction; it is an attempt to translate into formal theological language the biblical demand for undivided devotion. God is not to be loved alongside other goods as one concern among many, but as that ultimate good by reference to which every finite good receives its proper place.

Nevertheless, Tillich distinguishes the formal structure of ultimate concern from its particular content. The content matters infinitely for the life of the believer, but it does not determine the formal definition of faith.⁸ Formally, therefore, the same totalising structure may be directed towards God or misapplied to a finite reality, since whatever concerns a person ultimately acquires a governing hold over their existence. Nation, success, ideology,

⁵ Tillich describes faith as 'an act of the total personality' which 'happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements'. It is neither a movement of one special faculty nor the aggregate of several faculties, but a centred act which exerts 'a decisive impact on each of them'. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 4.

⁶ Tillich writes: 'The ultimate concern is unconditional, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. The unconditional concern is total: no part of ourselves or of our world is excluded from it'. He adds that it is 'ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite'. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, p. 12.

⁷ Tillich cites Deuteronomy 6.5—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."—and states: 'This is what ultimate concern means and from these words the term "ultimate concern" is derived'. He continues that these words express 'the character of genuine faith, the demand of total surrender to the subject of ultimate concern'. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, pp. 2–3. In *Systematic Theology*, he describes ultimate concern as 'the abstract translation of the great commandment', citing its form in Mark 12.29–30. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, p. 11.

⁸ This distinction allows Tillich to separate the formal structure of faith from the truth or falsity of its object. The formal structure may remain one of unconditional commitment even where its content is idolatrous. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 4.

wealth, and social standing may consequently function as ultimate concerns, because each can demand that every other good be sacrificed in its name.⁹

Tillich's examples make clear that finite realities cannot bear ultimacy without becoming destructive. Nationalism becomes demonic when the nation assumes the status of the only god and requires truth, justice, family, health, and life to be subordinated to it.¹⁰ Likewise, success becomes idolatrous when it ceases to denote the legitimate actualisation of human potential and instead demands the sacrifice of personal conviction, genuine human relations, and every other value for the sake of power or social predominance.¹¹ The problem is not simply excessive attachment but false worship: a preliminary and finite reality is elevated to the rank of ultimacy.

The consequence of such idolatry is what Tillich calls 'existential disappointment'.¹² A finite good may organise the whole personality, but it cannot fulfil the infinite promise invested in it. Because the centring point remains peripheral rather than truly ultimate, the person eventually loses their centre and suffers a disruption of the personality—only the true ultimate can satisfy without bringing the person to ruin.¹³ The crucial distinction, therefore, is between the formal structure of ultimate concern and its materially adequate object. Formally, every human being may be grasped by an ultimate concern; materially, only God can fulfil that orientation—the Thomistic analysis will specify why no finite good can fulfil that role. Hence Tillich's severe but illuminating judgement: 'Our ultimate concern can destroy us as it can heal us. But we never can be without it'.¹⁴

Aquinas provides a philosophical and theological framework through which Tillich's account can be defended by beginning from the teleological structure of human action. Every properly human act is performed for the sake of an

⁹ Tillich writes that 'everything which is a matter of unconditional concern is made into a god'. He gives money, success and the nation as examples of realities which may receive divine significance through being treated as ultimate. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 44.

¹⁰ Discussing extreme nationalism, Tillich writes: 'Everything is centered in the only god, the nation — a god who certainly proves to be a demon'. He explains that nationalism requires economic wellbeing, health, family, truth, justice, and humanity to be sacrificed when the nation becomes ultimate. See *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

¹¹ Tillich describes success as 'the god of many people in the highly competitive Western culture'. It demands 'unconditional surrender to its laws' even where this entails sacrificing 'genuine human relations, personal conviction, and creative *eros*' (p. 3). He later clarifies that success becomes idolatrous not through the natural desire to actualise one's potential, but through readiness 'to sacrifice all other values of life for the sake of a position of power and social predominance' (p. 44). See *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 44.

¹² Tillich distinguishes true faith from idolatrous faith by stating that, in the former, ultimate concern is directed towards 'the truly ultimate', whereas in the latter 'preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy'. The result is 'existential disappointment', eventually producing 'a loss of the center and a disruption of the personality'. See *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹³ The attitudes characteristic of ultimate concern 'seem fully appropriate only if their object is maximally great—so perfect and splendid that nothing greater is conceivable'. See William J. Wainwright, *Monotheism and Hope in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 1.

¹⁴ See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 16.

end, since voluntary action is directed towards something apprehended as good.¹⁵ Rational creatures move themselves towards their ends knowingly, exercising dominion over their actions through free will.¹⁶ The end is therefore not merely the point at which an activity ceases, but that for the sake of which it occurs and which gives the act its direction and intelligibility.

Particular actions may be directed towards immediate goods, but such subordinate ends cannot proceed indefinitely without some final principle of desire. Aquinas therefore argues that there must be a 'last end'; otherwise, nothing would finally move the appetite, no action would reach its term, and the agent's intention could never come to rest.¹⁷ Final causality does not designate merely the last item reached in a sequence; the last end is first in the order of intention—the good for the sake of which the entire sequence occurs and which gives subordinate actions their intelligible order. Tillich's ultimate concern functions in a closely analogous way: it contextualises, orders, and evaluates all lesser concerns because it is that to which everything else tends and within which everything else is contextualised.¹⁸

The last end must also be one, since several uncoordinated goods cannot each function as the perfect and governing end of a single life. Whatever is treated as final becomes 'master of [one's] affections', since the person takes from it their 'entire rule of life'.¹⁹ This closely resembles Tillich's claim that whatever concerns a person ultimately becomes their object of worship. If money, pleasure, or success is what a person is finally aiming for, it will contextualise everything else they do. Other goods will be subordinated according to whether they serve that governing end. The totalising influence of ultimate concern is thus intelligible within Aquinas's account of final causality: the final end exercises a hold over the whole life because all lesser choices derive their practical order from it.

¹⁵ Aquinas distinguishes properly human acts from involuntary 'actions of a man' by locating the former in deliberate will. Since 'the object of the will is the end and the good', he concludes that 'all human actions must be for an end'. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), I-II, q. 1, art. 1, resp., p. 583.

¹⁶ Aquinas writes that rational creatures 'move themselves to an end' because 'they have dominion over their actions through their free-will, which is the faculty of will and reason'. By contrast, irrational creatures are moved towards determinate ends through natural inclination without apprehending the end formally as an end. See *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, art. 2, resp., p. 584.

¹⁷ Aquinas distinguishes the order of intention from the order of execution. The last end is first in intention because it moves the appetite, whereas the first means employed is first in execution. Hence, 'if there were no last end, nothing would be desired, nor would any action have its term, nor would the intention of the agent be at rest'. See *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, art. 4, resp., p. 586.

¹⁸ It is, however, important to acknowledge that Tillich and Aquinas are not offering identical definitions or operating within identical metaphysical systems.

¹⁹ Aquinas states that '[t]hat in which a man rests as in his last end, is master of his affections, since he takes therefrom his entire rule of life'. He illustrates the point through Philippians 3.19—'[w]hose god is their belly'—and argues that the last end must so fill the appetite that nothing else remains to be desired as an independent perfect good. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 1, art. 5, sed contra and resp., p. 587.

Aquinas accordingly states that a person must desire everything they desire for the sake of the last end. Whatever is desired is desired 'under the aspect of good'; if it is not regarded as the perfect good itself, it is sought as tending towards that good.²⁰ This does not mean that the last end must be consciously contemplated during every action; its first intention remains operative within particular desires—even when one's thoughts are directed only towards their immediate objects.²¹ In this respect, ultimate concern need not be an explicitly formulated conviction. Every human activity is ultimately ordered towards the last end, even where the person has a misapprehension of what that last end is.

This distinction between the formal character of the last end and the reality in which it is sought explains moral disorder. All human beings desire fulfilment under the formal aspect of the last end, but they disagree about the object in which that fulfilment consists. Some seek their consummate good in riches, others in pleasure, and others in some further created good.²² Sin does not ordinarily arise because the sinner desires evil simply as evil; it arises because a partial or finite good is pursued contrary to the proper order of goods. Aquinas thus observes that sinners do not abandon the intention of the last end; rather, they mistakenly seek it in other things.²³ In Tillichian language, the finite is elevated into ultimacy; in Thomistic language, a created good is treated as though it were the last end.

Aquinas therefore excludes every created good as a candidate for final beatitude. No finite reality can entirely quieten the human appetite, since any such good leaves something further capable of being desired. Happiness, as the perfect good, must satisfy without remainder; otherwise, it would not be the last end at all. Aquinas consequently concludes that only the universal good can satisfy the will, and that this is found 'not in any creature, but in God

²⁰ Aquinas writes: 'Man must, of necessity, desire all, whatsoever he desires, for the last end'. This is because 'whatever man desires, he desires it under the aspect of good'; a good not desired as the perfect good must be desired as tending towards the perfect good achieved through the last end (p. 587). Secondary objects move the appetite only insofar as they are ordered towards its first object. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 1, art. 6, resp., pp. 587–588.

²¹ Aquinas clarifies that '[o]ne need not always be thinking of the last end, whenever one desires or does something'. Nevertheless, 'the virtue of the first intention, which was in respect of the last end, remains in every desire directed to any object whatever'. He compares this to walking along a road without thinking of the destination at every individual step. See *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, art. 6, ad 3, p. 588.

²² Aquinas distinguishes the formal aspect of the last end from the particular reality in which it is located. All agree in desiring the fulfilment of their perfection, but 'some desire riches, as their consummate good; some, pleasure; others, something else'. Various pursuits in life therefore arise because people seek their last end in different objects. See *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, art. 7, resp. and ad 2, p. 588.

²³ Aquinas states that '[t]hose who sin turn from that in which their last end really consists: but they do not turn away from the intention of the last end, which intention they mistakenly seek in other things'. Sin therefore retains the formal pursuit of an apprehended good while materially misidentifying the good capable of providing final fulfilment. See *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, art. 7, ad 1, p. 588.

alone'.²⁴ Human beatitude consists finally in God because only God can fulfil the total orientation of the rational creature without leaving something further to be desired.

Aquinas thus gives a robust defence of the premises underlying Tillich's definition. Human action is ordered towards ends; subordinate goods receive their order from a last end; finite goods produce disorder when required to bear the weight of ultimacy; and only God can satisfy the human appetite completely. Tillich's claim that idolatry consists in making a finite concern ultimate therefore corresponds closely to Aquinas's account of disordered desire, in which a limited good is pursued as though it could constitute final happiness.

Having established God as the true last end, Aquinas's account of the virtue of religion specifies how the human person is consciously ordered towards that end. He considers several possible derivations of *religio*: frequent reflection upon divine things, the repeated choice of God after negligence, and *religare*—'to bind together'.²⁵ Whichever derivation is preferred, religion 'denotes properly a relation to God'—the one to whom the creature ought to be bound 'as to our unfailing principle', and 'to Whom also our choice should be resolutely directed as to our last end'.²⁶ Religion therefore describes not merely belief *about* God, but the total orientation of the rational creature *towards* God as unfailing principle and last end.

This accounts for the totalising influence that the virtue of religion has upon life. Aquinas distinguishes religion's proper acts, such as sacrifice and adoration, from the acts of other virtues which religion directs towards the honour of God, because 'the virtue which is concerned with the end, commands the virtues which are concerned with the means'.²⁷ Religion is consequently not one compartment of existence alongside others. Precisely because it concerns the last end, it orders subordinate activities towards that end. This closely parallels Tillich's claim that ultimate concern renders every

²⁴ Aquinas concludes: 'It is impossible for any created good to constitute man's happiness. For happiness is the perfect good, which lulls the appetite altogether; else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired'. Since 'naught can lull man's will, save the universal good', and this is found 'not in any creature, but in God alone', 'God alone constitutes man's happiness'. See *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 2, art. 8, resp., p. 595. Aquinas elsewhere states that rational creatures attain their last end 'by knowing and loving God'. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 1, art. 8, ad 3, p. 589.

²⁵ Aquinas considers *religio* as deriving from repeated reflection, renewed choice, or *religare*—'to bind together', citing Augustine's formulation: '*May religion bind us to the one Almighty God*'. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. by Fr. Laurence Shapcote, vol. 17 (Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, Inc., 2017), II-II, q. 81, art. 1, resp., p. 728.

²⁶ See *Ibid.*

²⁷ Aquinas writes: 'Religion has two kinds of acts. Some are its proper and immediate acts, which it elicits, and by which man is directed to God alone, for instance, sacrifice, adoration and the like. But it has other acts, which it produces through the medium of the virtues which it commands, directing them to the honour of God, because the virtue which is concerned with the end, commands the virtues which are concerned with the means'. See *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 81, art. 1, ad 1, p. 728.

lesser concern preliminary and conditional. Both accounts describe the comprehensive orientation of the person towards that which stands as ultimate.

Nevertheless, the two formulations are not identical. Aquinas's account is materially determinate: religion is properly directed towards God and includes concrete acts of divine worship. Tillich's definition seeks a 'formal criterion' capable of functioning across different theologies and religions, thereby abstracting the structure of ultimacy from its specifically Christian content.²⁸ This allows Tillich's category to describe nationalism, success, ideology, or other finite realities when they acquire ultimate significance. Aquinas, by contrast, supplies the material specification which Tillich's formal account initially leaves open. Their convergence therefore lies in their shared recognition that religion concerns the total orientation of the person towards an ultimate end; Aquinas identifies God as the only end adequate to that orientation.

Tillich's definition is strongest when understood as a *formal* account of religion: it identifies the structure by which something becomes religiously ultimate for a person, without reducing religion to doctrinal assent, institutional membership, or ritual observance.²⁹ Its particular strength is that it explains why realities which are not conventionally called religious may nevertheless exercise religious power. Nationalism, political ideology, economic success, or social status can demand loyalty, sacrifice, and obedience with an absoluteness ordinarily associated with God. Tillich's broad account of faith is thus applicable not only to religious studies, but also to culture and politics.³⁰ Tillich's definition consequently identifies religion at the level of ultimacy rather than merely at the level of its professed object.

This breadth, however, generates the most serious objection to Tillich's proposal. The category of 'ultimate concern' risks becoming 'overly inclusive'.³¹ If virtually any object may acquire ultimate significance, the definition risks becoming so general that it can no longer discriminate adequately between

²⁸ Oswald Bayer contrasts Tillich's abstraction of the great commandment with the more literal concentration of Luther and Barth, citing Luther in support of this contrast. He argues that Tillich instead seeks a 'formal criterion' fitting for 'every' theology and religion, including Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity. See Oswald Bayer, 'Tillich as a systematic theologian', in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. by Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 18–36 (p. 33 and n. 11).

²⁹ Ultimate concern 'may take the form of worship', involving praise, love, gratitude, supplication, confession, and petition, but 'can also take the form of a quest for the ultimate good'. See Wainwright, *Monotheism and Hope in God*, p. 1.

³⁰ Stenger observes that Tillich's broad analysis of faith is applicable to 'culture and politics, as well as to religious studies', and argues that his recognition of distortions of faith gives the concept 'critical and analytical value', particularly in relation to false absolutes, nationalism, and political forms of ultimacy. See Stenger, 'Faith (and religion)', p. 103.

³¹ Bayer argues that 'Tillich's category of "ultimate concern" is overly inclusive' and warns that the differentiation between 'belief and unbelief, God and idol' risks becoming irrelevant within so general an account of ultimacy. See Bayer, 'Tillich as a systematic theologian', p. 29.

true and false religion,³² and the distinction between 'belief and unbelief, God and idol' may ultimately lose its force.³³ The objection is significant because a definition which includes everything capable of functioning religiously may appear to identify the structure of religion only by sacrificing its theological specificity.³⁴

Yet Tillich's own distinction between genuine and idolatrous faith already denies that every ultimate concern is equally valid: a finite good may acquire the form of ultimacy while remaining incapable of fulfilling the infinite claim invested in it.³⁵ Here Aquinas provides the strongest material specification of Tillich's argument. Human beings may mistakenly pursue riches, pleasure, or other created goods as though they constituted the last end, but only God can satisfy the appetite without remainder.³⁶ Any attempt to pursue a finite reality as last end will therefore culminate in the fundamental spiritual dissatisfaction which Tillich describes as 'existential disappointment'.³⁷ From the principles developed by Aquinas, Tillich's definition is thus both rationally defensible and possessed of profound resonance within the orthodox Christian intellectual tradition.

Tillich is therefore right, with qualification, to define religion through ultimate concern. The definition is compelling because it identifies the comprehensive orientation which makes religion religious, corresponds to the biblical demand for undivided devotion, and explains both authentic worship and its idolatrous distortions. Nevertheless, 'ultimate concern' is best understood as the most adequate *formal* definition of religion rather than a complete theological definition. It identifies the structure of religious orientation more successfully than it specifies its doctrinal, ecclesial,

³² Summarising Jonathan Z. Smith's criticism, John J. Thatamanil writes that '[t]he more we throw Tillich's categories around, the less work they do', since '[j]ust about anything can become an ultimate concern'. See John J. Thatamanil, 'Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich: A Response to Jonathan Z. Smith's "Tillich(s) Remains"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78.4 (2010), 1171–81 (p. 1173).

³³ See Bayer, 'Tillich as a systematic theologian', p. 29.

³⁴ Thatamanil characterises Smith's objection as a dilemma: 'Water down Tillich and he ceases to be useful; thicken him up and he is too hard to swallow'. See Thatamanil, 'Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich', p. 1174.

³⁵ Tillich distinguishes true from idolatrous faith on precisely these grounds: 'In true faith the ultimate concern is a concern about the truly ultimate; while in idolatrous faith preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy'. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 12. He similarly defines idolatry as the elevation of 'a preliminary concern to ultimacy', whereby 'something essentially finite is given infinite significance', and consequently, '[t]he conflict between the finite basis of such a concern and its infinite claim' becomes unavoidable. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, p. 13.

³⁶ Aquinas distinguishes the formal desire for the last end from the particular object in which it is sought, observing that some identify their consummate good with riches, others with pleasure, and others with some further created good. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Dominican Fathers trans.), I–II, q. 1, art. 7, resp. and ad 2, p. 588; and *Ibid.*, I–II, q. 2, art. 8, resp., p. 595.

³⁷ Tillich describes 'existential disappointment' as the 'inescapable consequence of idolatrous faith'. He adds that such faith ultimately leads to 'a loss of the center and to a disruption of the personality'. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 12.

sacramental, or revelatory content. Aquinas supplies precisely the material determination which Tillich's formal account leaves open: God—rather than any finite object—is the only true last end capable of fulfilling the creature's ultimate orientation without remainder.

Tillich's account of 'ultimate concern' is compelling because it identifies something more fundamental than the outward forms by which religion is ordinarily recognised. Religion concerns the orientation which gives unity, hierarchy, and direction to a human life. The decisive question is therefore not simply what a person professes to believe, but what functions as the good for whose sake all other goods are ordered. In this respect, Tillich's language is less a departure from classical Christian theology than a modern articulation of a structure already present within it.

Aquinas makes that structure intelligible by showing that human desire cannot rest finally in any created good. The possibility of idolatry arises precisely because finite goods can be treated as though they possessed the ultimacy that belongs properly to God. Tillich's account is therefore strongest where it exposes the religious character of such misdirected ultimacy while preserving the distinction between genuine and idolatrous faith.

Ultimate concern may consequently be judged the best formal definition of religion, provided that its limits are recognised. It identifies what makes religion comprehensive and ultimate, but cannot by itself determine the truth of its object. Aquinas supplies that determination: religion reaches its proper fulfilment only when the rational creature is ordered towards God—the unfailing principle and last end in whom desire can finally rest.

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