

THE ETERNITY OF THE WORLD IN THE THOUGHT OF SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

(*de Aeternitate Mundi and Quodlibet XII, q.5, a.1*)

Shelomita Selamat*

Abstract

Keabadian dunia menjadi salah satu topik yang menjadi perdebatan di kalangan para pemikir abad pertengahan. Sebagian pemikir menganggap bahwa dunia bersifat abadi atau sudah ada sejak awal mula. Namun, para pemikir lainnya beranggapan bahwa dunia tidaklah abadi. Dalam argumen-argumen yang dikemukakannya, Santo Thomas Aquinas mengatakan bahwa dunia tidaklah abadi dan tidak seorangpun yang dapat membuktikan awal mula dunia. Bagi Santo Thomas Aquinas, hal ini tidak dapat dijelaskan melalui pembuktian demonstratif, melainkan hanya dapat dipahami dengan iman. Hanya dengan imanlah orang percaya bahwa dunia diciptakan oleh karena kehendak bebas Allah.

Keywords

eternity of the world, time, faith, will of God

Aristotle's philosophy was at a high level of importance in the thirteenth century. At the time, the texts of Aristotle had been translated into Latin.¹ It was becoming mandatory for all the students at the university to read the works of Aristotle. One of Aristotle's teachings that aroused some disputation was concerning the eternity of the world. Aristotle believed in the eternity of the world, contrary to the doctrine of the Catholic faith which states that the world had a beginning in time and therefore is not eternal. It raised the question whether the world in fact had a beginning in time or on the contrary had existed since eternity. The question became a great problem at the time. It raised a heated debate between philosophers and theologians. Some of them said that the world is not eternal and had a beginning, while others admitted eternity.

As a theologian at the time, Saint Thomas Aquinas also gave attention to this problem. Saint Thomas Aquinas studied the texts of Aristotle and gave commentaries on them. As a Christian thinker, Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that the world is not eternal. The world had a beginning in time and God created the world by His will. Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that we cannot demonstrate when the world was created, since it was an article of faith.² He argues

* STIKAS Santo Yohanes Salib, West Kalimantan. E-mail: shelomita.selamat@stikassantoyohanessalib.ac.id

¹ The XIII century is characterized by the influence of the entire *Corpus Aristotelicum*, which at the beginning of the century began to be known in Latin translation, following a series of journeys through most of the world. The writings of Aristotle began to circulate in the *universitates*, and from March 1255 their study in the faculty of Liberal Arts in Paris became obligatory: every magister *artium* now had to deal with texts like *Physics*, *De Caelo*, *De Generatione et Corruptione*, *The Metaphysics*, texts in which the eternity of movement and time, of celestial bodies, etc., are supported. A. INZERILLO, *Il Problema della Eternità del Mondo visto da Tommaso d'Aquino*, www.ilgiardinodeipensieri.eu. (accessed on November 4, 2012)

² Regardless of ambiguities about the eternity of the world in the writings of some thinkers during the earlier Middle Ages, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 had declared the temporal beginning of the world to be an

that only faith can make us believe that the world was created out of nothing in time and therefore the world is not eternal. Saint Thomas Aquinas elaborated his argument in his work *de Aeternitate Mundi* and also mentions it in *Quodlibet XII*. In this article, we will see Saint Thomas Aquinas's thought on these two books.

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS ON THE *DE AETERNITATE MUNDI*

De Aeternitate Mundi was probably written by Saint Thomas Aquinas in 1271 during the heated debate between philosophers and theologians on the eternity of the world.³ This book discusses whether the world exists from eternity or had a beginning in time. He refuses the philosophical thought that says that the world is eternal and will always exist. As a believer, Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that the world was not eternal. In the beginning there was nothing, except for God, as the Bible says. Then, by His will, God created the world. Therefore, the world is not eternal and had a beginning in time. Saint Thomas Aquinas against Aristotle's view which believed that the world has always existed. Yet in this book he also rejects the claims of Christian thinkers who say that we can prove rationally that the world had a beginning. At the end of this book, again, he maintains his positions as a believer by saying that only by faith can we say for sure that the world had a beginning. We cannot demonstrate it through reason alone.

The World was Created by the Will of God

In the beginning of *de Aeternitate Mundi*, Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that only by faith can we say that the world was created from nothing and does not exist from eternity. According to him, the world has had a beginning, and this is an article of faith. We cannot demonstrate an article of faith. Faith is something beyond reason. It is beyond the human intellect and understanding. Therefore, it is not possible to prove with our limited reason that the world was created from nothing and does not exist from eternity.

Saint Thomas has a different perspective than Aristotle who believed that the world is eternal. According to Saint Thomas, the world is not eternal, which means that it has not always existed. The world has a limited duration in time. Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that God created the world from nothingness - *creatio ex nihilo*. As it is written in the book of Genesis, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth. The earth was formless and deserted and darkness covered the abyss" (Gen. 1:1-2a). However, due to the problems of Saint Thomas's time, many thinkers doubted this. Some wondered whether the world could have existed forever, while others believed that the world has a limited duration in time.

As a believer, Saint Thomas Aquinas said that he cannot accept the thesis according to which there may be something already present from the beginning, uncreated and independent of God, because such an opinion is clearly contrary to Catholic faith. The philosophers also maintain that everything that exists is caused by the first cause. Therefore, it would be

article of faith, thus limiting the scope of disputations on the eternity of the world. R. C. DALES, *Medieval Discussions of the Eternity of the World*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1990, 50.

³ The date of this work has been highly debated by the scholars for many years. Given the context that we have already noted, Mandonnet situated it at first during the second period of teaching in Paris and, more precisely, during 1270. That period saw increased acrimony in the controversy that temporarily culminated in the condemnation of 10 December 1270, pronounced by the bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier. Mandonnet admitted, however, that this opusculum might be situated one or two years later. J.-P. TORRELL, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 1, The Person and His Work* (translated into English by Robert Royal), The Catholic University of America Press, Washington (DC) 2005, 185.

impossible to say that the world has no origin. In Saint Thomas Aquinas's words, "Such an abominable error is contrary not only to the faith but also to the teachings of the philosophers, who confess and prove that everything that in any way exists cannot exist unless it be caused by him who supremely and most truly has existence."⁴ The origin of the world requires total and radical dependence on God as first cause of all things.⁵ Without the first mover, the world could not exist. Briefly, for Saint Thomas Aquinas the main factor that leads something to exist is God.

God created the world from nothing. The creature was made from nothing. The creature exists from nothing. What does this mean? Saint Thomas Aquinas explains: "no temporal priority of non-being to being is posited, as there would be if there were first nothing and then later something."⁶ At the end of his book, again Saint Thomas Aquinas says that we cannot prove the beginning of the world in time demonstrably. As he says, "It has not yet been demonstrated that God cannot cause an infinite number of things to exist simultaneously."⁷ It all beyond human knowledge and understanding. Again, in *de Sententiis 2, d.1, q.1, a5*, Saint Thomas Aquinas emphasized that no one by his intellect can demonstrate the beginning of the world in time. As he says, "I do not believe that a demonstrative reason for this can be devised by us..."⁸ We can only say that the world exists because of God's will. The existence of the world is a consequence of God's will. Moreover, Saint Thomas Aquinas says that there is no metaphysical necessity constraining God from holding the created universe in being for whatever type and length of duration He wills.⁹

Is It Possible That the World Always Exists and Yet Is Caused by God?

Everyone agrees that God can ensure that something has always existed, considering his infinite power. Thus, there is only one possibility that this is impossible if a thing caused by God can always exist. Logically, by His infinite power, God can do everything. Responding to this problem, Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that even God could have done it, this could not be done. According to him, there are two reasons for this: *uel propter remotionem potentie passivae, uel propter repugnantiam intellectuum*.¹⁰

For the first reason, due to lack of passive power, Saint Thomas Aquinas brought the example of angels. Before God created the angel, it has been said that the angel could not be made, because it was not made from a pre-existing material. But passive power does not precede its being. Therefore, we rely on our faith to believe that a creature could not have existed forever, because otherwise we would admit an eternal existence of passive power and

⁴ Error abominabilis est, non solum in fide, set etiam apud philosophos, qui confitentur et probant omne quod est quocumque modo, esse non possit, nisi sit causatum ab eo qui maxime et uerissime esse habet. *de Aeternitate Mundi* (85a 9-13).

⁵ Cf. F. KERR, *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York (NY) 2009, 24.

⁶ Unde patet quod secundum hanc expositionem non ponitur aliquis ordo eius quod factum est ad nichil, quasi oportuerit illud quod factum est nichil fuisse et postmodum aliquid esse. *de Aeternitate Mundi* (87b 175-179).

⁷ Et praeterea non est adhuc demonstratum quod Deus non possit facere ut sint infinita actu. *de Aeternitate Mundi* (89b 306-308).

⁸ Cf. R. C. DALES, *op. cit.*, 99.

⁹ Cf. *ST I-Ia, q.19.a.3*.

¹⁰ "Either because of an absence of a passive potentiality or because of some contradiction between the ideas involved". *De Aeternitate Mundi* (85b 28-30).

this is a heresy. Thus, according to him, this does not prove that God cannot do something that has always been.

The second reason is that even if God could have done it, this could not be done. It could not be done because, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, it implies a contradiction. He believes that God cannot make this happen because it would mean that the thesis destroys itself. Now, the entire question is “whether to be wholly created by God and not to have a beginning in time are contradictory terms”.¹¹ According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, there is no contradiction between them. If there were, it would be because the agent cause must precede in time or because the non-being must precede in time.

For the first reason (the agent cause must precede in time), God is out in time so that as an agent cause He need not precede in time. This is because God produces his effect not by means of a movement, but instantaneously. In the instantaneous operation, the beginning and the end are simultaneous, indeed identical. When a thing produces its effect instantaneously, cause and effect are contemporary. The end of the action is simultaneous to the same effect. Thus, there is no contradiction in saying that a cause, which instantaneously produces its own effect, does not have to precede its effect in time.

For the second reason (the non being must precede in time), Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that there is also no contradiction in the fact that a created thing has always existed or that its non-being must necessarily precede in time. Saint Thomas Aquinas quotes Saint Anselm's words that the creature was made from nothing (*ex nihilo*). There is nothing but God before creation. God built the creature. The creature was made, it would have been necessary that first it was nothing and immediately after it was something. The world exists with time and in time, and time is the way of being of all things that become. The creature was made from nothing, so it is not necessary that non-being precedes the creature in duration.

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS ON THE *QUODLIBET XII, Q.5, A.1*

Disputation between the scholars as academic activity was one of the characteristics of the medieval universities. Formal disputations were held twice a year, during Lent (Easter) and during Advent (Christmas).¹² They disputed various topics and proposed certain questions. Saint Thomas Aquinas was one of the masters at the time of his disputations. He proposes his views on the *Quodlibet*. The quodlibets were divided into two groups: *Quodlibets VII–XI* belong to the first period, while *Quodlibets I–VI and XII* (the *reportatio* on this latter was not revised by Saint Thomas Aquinas) belong to the second.¹³ One of the polemic topics at the time concerned the eternity of the world. Besides *de Aeternitate Mundi*, Saint Thomas Aquinas also proposes his views in *Quodlibet III, q.14, a.2* and *Quodlibet XII, q.5, a.1*. Both were written before Saint Thomas Aquinas expressed himself in more detail in the ongoing debate on the eternity of the world in his work *de Aeternitate Mundi*.

¹¹ *In hoc ergo tota consistit questio, utrum esse creatum to Deo secundum totam substantiam et non habere durationis principium, repugnet ad inuicem, uel non. de Aeternitate Mundi* (86b 77-80).

¹² They developed over two sessions. In the first, as the name indicates, those present, whether they were masters or students or even the simply curious, could raise all sorts of questions (*de quolibet ad voluntatem cuiuslibet*). The master normally let his bachelor respond and did not intervene unless he got into difficulty; the master reserved the right to give his magisterial determination in the second session, which took place either the next day or several days later. J.-P. TORRELL, *op. cit.*, 207.

¹³ Apart from this general framework, there are still many differences among scholars about assigning them to Christmas or to Easter of one year or another. *Ibid.*, 208.

Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote *Quodlibet XII* a few months after presenting his arguments in *Quodlibet III*.¹⁴ The point of view of Saint Thomas Aquinas in *Quodlibet XII, q.5, a.1* is closely related to the *Quodlibet III, q.14, a.2*. On the *Quodlibet XII, q.5, a.1*, Saint Thomas Aquinas discusses whether the heaven and the earth is eternal.¹⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas's response is very short. He does not provide a long discussion, but he pointed out very clearly that the world is not eternal. Below is Saint Thomas Aquinas's response:

It should be said that it is not, but that the world began belongs to the number of those things which fall under faith, not under demonstration. For those things which depend on the simple will of God are able to be and not be; and no necessity on the part of God induces them to be; but the divine goodness which is the end of things, can be such both if the world exists as well as if it does not.¹⁶

For Saint Thomas Aquinas both the heaven and the earth is not eternal. He has in mind that the existence of heaven and earth depend on the will of God (*voluntate Dei*). It is necessary because the will of God determines whether something exists or not. He emphasized that we cannot demonstrate this problem with scientific methods. We can only accept it under faith as the gift of God. We do not need to demonstrate it rationally. Our reason fails to understand the reality of the beginning of the world. All things that may or may not be depend only on the will of God. Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that the ultimate goal of all created things is divine goodness. Furthermore, according to him, the divine goodness never changes whether the world began, as it actually did, or that the world, by hypothesis, was created from eternally.

Saint Thomas Aquinas affirms that no one can prove that the world is not eternal. What he states in *Quodlibet XII, q.5, a.1* emphasizes this in more detail than in *Quodlibet III, q.14, a.2*. In *Quodlibet III, q.14, a.2* he says, "*Videtur quod demonstratiue probari possit mundum non esse eternum*". In his response, St. Thomas clearly said that we are not able to demonstrate scientifically that the world is not eternal. We have to receive it only by faith. As he says,

The things that under the divine will cannot be proved demonstratively ...; for, the creation of the world does not depend on any other cause but only the will of God, for which the things concerning the principle of the world cannot be proved demonstratively, but are considered only by faith ...¹⁷

For Saint Thomas Aquinas, the things that can be proven demonstratively are subject to human reason. But, no one can prove the things that under the simple divine will. What depends on the divine will cannot be investigated with our reason.

¹⁴ If *Quodlibet XII*, as we mentioned, is from Christmas of 1270, the *Quodlibet III* may be both Easter of the same year; both, however, immediately precede the *De Aeternitate Mundi*; E. BERTOLA, "Tommaso d' Aquino e Il Problema dell'Eternità del Mondo", *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*, 66 (1974), n. 2-4, (Milan: Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, 1974), 347.

¹⁵ *Utrum celum uel mundus sit eternus*.

¹⁶ *Dicendum quod non, set mundum incepisse est de numero eorum que cadunt sub fide, non sub demonstratione. Nam que dependent ex simplici uoluntate Dei possunt esse et non esse; et ad hoc quod sint, non inducit aliqua necessitas ex parte Dei; diuina autem bonitas, que est finis rerum, potest esse ita si not sit mundus sicut si sit. Quodlibet XII, q.5, a.1.*

¹⁷ *Dicendum quod and quae simplici uoluntati diuinae subsunt, demonstratiue probari non possunt ...; creatio autem mundi non dependet ex alia causa nisi ex sola Dei uoluntate; unde ea quae ad principium mundi pertinent demonstratiue probari non possunt; sed sola fide tenentur ... Quodlibet III, q.14, a.2, res.*

THE WORLD HAS A BEGINNING AS AN ARTICLE OF FAITH

Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote *de Aeternitate Mundi* after he proposed his views on *Quodlibet III* and *Quodlibet XII*. Those books were written to support the debate on the eternity of the world at that time. We have seen the saint's view in those two books. Actually, there is no essential difference between what he wrote in *Quodlibet* and in *de Aeternitate Mundi*. In contrast to the brief comments in *Quodlibet XII*, he made a more detailed comment in *de Aeternitate Mundi*. Practically, his arguments remain unchanged.

In *Quodlibet III, q.14, a.2*, which is closely related to *Quodlibet XII, q.5, a.1*, Saint Thomas Aquinas quotes some Scripture verses related to faith as something that cannot be demonstrated. In his reply, he says that the things which underlie the simple divine will cannot be demonstrated; and it is a truth that the world was created by the will of God. The things that concern the principle of the world are considered only by faith. Likewise, he wrote very clearly at the beginning of his work *de Aeternitate Mundi* about our faith: "Let us assume, in accordance with the Catholic faith, that the world had a beginning in time".¹⁸ As we have seen, the argument of Saint Thomas Aquinas is very clear: only by faith can we know that the world is not eternal. The beginning of the world in time cannot be demonstrated rationally.

Saint Thomas Aquinas expressly says that the world was created by the will of God to be not eternal. He expresses his thought in gravity and measure. As he says, "*Prius duratione fuerit nichil et postea fuerit aliquid*".¹⁹ He believes that all creation, including our world, are in a relationship of total dependence on God, since "everything that is, is from God, God giving to each existing".²⁰ However, the beginning of the world in time cannot be demonstrated and no one could prove it. We cannot demonstrate rationally the beginning of the world since human reason is very limited. This truth, that the world has a beginning, must and can only be accepted by faith. Faith, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, is something that goes beyond human reason. Therefore, we can only accept this fact, even though it cannot be proven scientifically. Only by faith we do believe that the world was created by God from nothing. That the world is not eternal is a truth that falls under the faith, not under a demonstration.

CONCLUSION

The eternity of the world was a matter of debate between philosophers and theologians in the medieval period. Many have tried to demonstrate the eternity of the world, including Christian thinkers. Saint Thomas Aquinas maintains that no one can prove or demonstrate the beginning of the world in time. The world is not eternal, and yet the beginning of the world cannot be proven with human reason. He simply believes that the world was created by the will of God which relates to the divine goodness. God created the world from nothing, as it is written in the book of Genesis. However, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, this cannot be demonstrated scientifically based on the human intellect. We are unable to demonstrate the beginning of the world using scientific methods. This path could not lead to rational conclusions. Only by faith can we accept this fact. Faith is something that beyond the human mind. Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that there are many things beyond the mind of man and these things must be accepted only by faith.

¹⁸ *de Aeternitate Mundi* (85a 1-2).

¹⁹ *de Aeternitate Mundi* (88a 188-189).

²⁰ J.-P. TORRELL, *op. cit.*, 163.

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