

THOMAS AQUINAS

During the 12th and 13th centuries, Western European civilizations advanced in several ways. There was great improvement in agriculture, a revival of trade and commerce, the emergence of towns as manufacturing and trading centers, and the development of strong central secular governments in England and France. There were many cultural achievements as well. Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles were perfected in such cathedrals as those at Caen and Chartres. Poetic literature became widely pursued and admired, and the Classic works of the Greek and Roman thinkers were recovered from centers of Muslim and Jewish learning and translated into Latin. In Italy and France, the first Universities evolved out of cathedral schools. Scientific learning, partly under the influence of Muslim treatises in mathematics, astronomy and medicine was revived by Roger Bacon and a number of others. St Dominic and St Francis of Assisi founded the religious orders that bear their names and the Dominicans and Franciscans became rivals in learning, invaded the universities and figured prominently as members of the faculties.

All of the most important thinkers in the later middle ages in Western Europe were either Dominicans or Franciscans. At one time or another, all of them were associated with the university of Paris (chartered in 1200) and all of them tried to come to terms with the newly discovered works of Aristotle.

Available at Paris by 1250, were Aristotle's main works on logic, physics, metaphysics and ethics together with Muslim commentaries on them and various Muslim and Jewish treatises in which aristotelian themes were developed. Avicenna, Averroes, Algazali and Maimonides were among those represented. This abundance of fresh material covering a wide range of topics but from non-christian thinkers presented no small challenge to Christian thinkers. How were people who were used to a basically Augustinian framework going to deal with Aristotle and his muslim and jewish followers? What happened, roughly, was that the Franciscan thinkers, notably Bonaventure, adhered fairly closely to the tradition of Augustine and adopted a more or less critical attitude toward Aristotle, particularly in metaphysics, whereas the Dominican thinkers, notably Thomas Aquinas, (1225 - 1274) revolutionized Christian Philosophy by reconciling Aristotle's Philosophy with the doctrines of the Church.

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Aquinas not only produced an immense group of scholarly writings, (in the original Latin version, they run to 25 volumes) he also took part in a number of debates over controversial issues of great importance to the Church. To mention only one example, at Paris during his final visit there (1269 - 1272) he was confronted with some faculty of the university who interpreted Aristotle after the manner of Averroes in ways that were inconsistent with Christian doctrines. Headed by Siger of Brabant (1240 - 1284) these "Latin Averroists", as they were called, were associated with propositions (on account of which Bonaventure had rejected Aristotle's metaphysics) such as the eternity of the world and the unity of the active intellect in all human beings.

Exactly what Siger and others made of these things is hard to determine. Did they themselves believe that Aristotle had really proved the eternity of the world. And, if they did believe this, was it also their view that the Christian doctrine of creation was somehow also true? (The Latin Averroists have often been said to have held a double truth theory of this sort, according to which two opposed statements could both be true, one in Philosophy, the other in theology? Was this based on an honest misunderstanding of Averroes?

Or did they think the eternity of the world, although a conclusion to which the best reasoning is inevitably driven should nevertheless be counted false in favor of divine revelation to the contrary? Whatever their precise attitude, the Latin Averroists certainly expounded Aristotle in ways that made him seem irreconcilable with the teachings of the church. This only revived and heightened the anxieties of Church officials who, from time to time, had issued prohibitions, more or less disregarded at Paris, against the teaching of Aristotle's metaphysics. Aquinas, of course, vigorously opposed the Latin Averroists and tried to establish an interpretation of Aristotle that was moderate and acceptable in Christian schools.

Aquinas was canonized as a saint in 1323, 48 years after his death. In 1270 and again in 1277, the Bishop of Paris had formally condemned a number of propositions attributed to the Latin Averroists and a few attributed to Aquinas. Of course the censure against Aquinas was rescinded by the time of his canonization. A long series of papal endorsements culminated in 1879 when Pope Leo XIII accorded a kind of official status to Aquinas' teachings.

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Pope Leo not only commended Aquinas for his scholarship but also for "carefully distinguishing reason from Faith ... and yet joining them together in a harmony of friendship." (See *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Treatise on God In Kaufmann and Baird)) It is by faith that we adhere to revealed truths pertaining to divine matters on which our salvation depends. Some of these revealed truths are also, for some persons, ascertainable by reasoning. And such reasoning is the concern of metaphysics or that part of metaphysics called natural theology. Other revealed truths are not, for any human being, ascertainable by reasoning but they may be elucidated and criticisms of them may be rebutted; these are the concerns of sacred theology. In Aquinas' terminology, revealed truths that are not ascertainable by reasoning are articles of faith, whereas revealed truths that are ascertainable by reasoning he calls "preambles" to the articles of faith. God's existence and unity are examples of Preambles. The doctrines of the trinity and the creation are examples of Articles. Principles of Logic and Philosophical methods generally are useful in sacred theology for spelling out and systematizing the implications of Articles of faith and for neutralizing attacks on the Articles. Although Articles of Faith cannot be proved, authority based on divine revelation assures us that, *in themselves* (though not *to us*, in this life) they are certain in the highest degree. So, he says, we can be confident that criticisms of the articles are never conclusive but are always arguments that can be answered. But the usefulness of this and other philosophical methods for theological purposes does not mean that sacred theology stands in need of the philosophical sciences. Sacred theology is the noblest of the sciences because of its incomparable certainty and importance.

In fact, Aquinas had to be very careful about the point that faith and reason seem to be *intrinsically incompatible* attitudes. (See Odo of Rigaud). Because, it seems, as soon as something is evident to natural reason either intuitively or by conclusive proofs, one knows that thing for a fact. One does not *then* need to take this proposition on faith and, in a way, the emergence of certainty as established by natural reason may seem to entirely take the place of faith, if faith was present *earlier*. This seems to mean that, if the existence of God can be proven, then that proposition is not one that absolutely requires faith and, so, should not be classified as an Article of Faith. Indeed, this is why Aquinas calls it a Preamble to The Articles of Faith.

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So, the philosophical sciences, properly and at most, are its "inferiors and handmaidens." Other sciences, Aquinas says, derive their certainty from the natural light of human reason, which can err, whereas sacred theology derives its certainty from the light of divine revelation, which cannot err.

So, whatever may be found that is contrary to sacred theology in the other sciences, it must be condemned as false. Consequently, philosophy can never come into any real conflict with sacred theology because the superior certainty of revelation gives sacred theology the right to adjudicate in any controversies with her that philosophers may start.

But Aquinas did not take the attitude that sacred theology has to watch with a jealous eye the exercise of natural reason in the philosophical sciences. Divine revelation as a matter of God's grace is perfectly harmonious with the conclusions of natural reason at its best "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it". Natural reason at its best, according to Aquinas, is to be found in the works of Aristotle. How did Aquinas use and develop Aristotle's ideas?