CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 73: Thomas Aquinas: Greatest Medieval Theologian

Thomas Aquinas: Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual fact about Thomas Aquinas

editors

Trounced

In a detail from Andrea di Bonaiuto's fourteenth-century fresco The Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas, heretics Averroes and Arius crouch beneath the enthroned Aquinas. Averroes (also called Ibn Rushd; 1126-1198) was a Muslim philosopher who, according to Aquinas, made a hash of Aristotle and led many medieval Christians astray. Arius (c. 250-c. 336) denied Christ's full divinity by positing that "there was [a time] when the son was not."

Aquinas participated in no physical crusades against heresy, but he did believe that heretics "deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death."

Fancy meeting you here

Aquinas and several of his enemies make appearances in James Joyce's daunting 1922 novel Ulysses. In chapter one, a character is asked for his views on Hamlet but replies, "I'm not equal to Thomas Aquinas and the fiftyfive reasons he has made to prop it up. Wait till I have a few pints in me first." Arius, Sabellius (the third heretic at Aquinas's feet in The Triumph), Averroes, and Moses Maimonides (see page 37) pop up as well.

Heeding the call

Franciscans in Assisi will soon enjoy a new feature in their habits: cell phone pockets. Some critics consider the innovation inappropriate, but Elisabetta Biancheri, who designed the habits, said, "It is simply a functional item of clothing. Even monks make phone calls." Biancheri is right about the phones, but she shouldn't call Franciscans "monks"—they're friars, and, as Thomas well knew, there is a difference (see page 23).

Word-aholic

Thomas did not even live to see his fiftieth birthday, but he produced an enormous body of writing: more than 10,000,000 words in some 60 works. Thomas lacked the time to pen so many words, and if he had written them, no one would be able to read them (he had notoriously bad handwriting). Instead, he dictated to secretaries—sometimes several at once. A thirteenth-century source avers that Thomas "used to dictate in his cell to three secretaries, and even occasionally to four, on different subjects at the same time."

Lighten up

Because Thomas wrote on just about every subject, he eventually touched on entertainment, but the way he approached it (in his Commentary on the Ethics of Aristotle) suggests that it wasn't one of his strong suits: "Amusement does have an aspect of good inasmuch as it is useful for human living. As

man sometimes needs to give his body rest from labors, so also he sometimes needs to rest his soul from mental strain that ensues from his application to serious affairs. This is done by amusement." He did, however, dispute at least one completely silly question in his career: "Whether truth is stronger than either wine, the king, or woman."

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From the Editor: The Eminent Obscure

How accounting, Aristotle, and the first teachers' unions transformed higher education.

Elesha Coffman

About a year and a half ago, we listed a number of potential issue topics on a survey and asked you, our readers, to choose your favorites. We figured that you would be most interested in American personalities, ministry pioneers, or maybe worship music—familiar, approachable topics that hit close to home.

You wanted Thomas Aquinas.

Now, Thomas is not exactly familiar. His name is familiar, certainly, but many people know little about him beyond a dictionary definition: thirteenth-century Italian theologian and philosopher, wrote (but never finished) Summa Theologica, developed concepts of natural law and transubstantiation.

None of this rudimentary information makes Thomas seem the least bit approachable. Theologian-philosophers write ponderous, inscrutable books. The Summa is, in fact, a ponderous, inscrutable book. Natural law and transubstantiation are ponderous, inscrutable ideas.

In portraits, Thomas even looks ponderous and inscrutable. Plus, he wears a monastic robe and a halo, which aren't the hippest of accessories.

When I first saw the survey results, I guessed that Thomas's main draw was the mystery factor, or the guilt factor—people felt they ought to know more about him but knew they would never research him on their own. In working on the issue, though, I found that—whether survey respondents realized it or not—Thomas's life and ideas do hit close to home.

Thomas prayed, read the Bible, and preached with a devotion we would all aspire to. He asked, and answered, questions that Christians across time and space have wondered about: Who is God, how does he operate, how can we know him, and what does he want us to do? And while Thomas never addressed such modern conundrums as genetic engineering, Open Theism, and neuroscientific explanations for the soul, his arguments still inform Christian responses to these and many other debates.

Thomas is not a figure you can grasp and move beyond. No matter how deep you dig, there is always more of him to puzzle out. But it really is important and worthwhile to start somewhere. Try the next page.

By the way, you have probably noticed that we stopped printing letters from readers in the magazine. The volume of mail did not warrant a full page, so we decided to use that editorial space differently. Online, however, we frequently post letters, answer questions, and offer other opportunities for interaction. To join in, you can visit our Web site, http://www.christianhistory.net, and click on Free CH Newsletter, Letters, Ask Christian History, or whatever strikes your fancy.

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The Dazzling 'Dumb Ox'

His family thought he was throwing his life away. His classmates thought he was stupid. They didn't understand.

Ralph McInerny

Shortly after Thomas Aquinas died, on March 7, 1274, miracles began to occur near his body. The monks of the Cistercian abbey at Fossanova, where Thomas was buried, feared that the remains might be stolen and taken off to a Dominican resting place.

Jealous of their treasure, the Cistercians took macabre precautions. They "exhumed the corpse of Brother Thomas from its resting place, cut off the head and placed it in a hiding place in a corner of the chapel." That way, if the corpse were taken, the head would still be theirs. His sister was given a hand, a finger of which was to take a grisly trajectory of its own.

The reverent mutilations continued. By the time the canonization process began in 1319, the corpse had been reduced to bones, from which the flesh had been boiled away. In 1396 the bones were moved to the Dominican monastery at Toulouse. The remains were relocated to the church of St. Sernin during the French Revolution, then returned to the monastery in 1974. They rest there today.

A person who knows of Thomas only through his philosophical writings might conclude that his corpse had more interesting experiences than he did. Thomas did spend more hours reading and writing than most of us could imagine, but his life was hardly uneventful.

Black sheep, white habit

Thomas Aquinas was born in the family castle at Roccasecca in 1225. At 5, he began school at Montecassino, the great Benedictine monastery that was almost visible from the promontory on which the family castle stood.

The commanding site of the monastery offered military advantage, and the ongoing struggle between the forces of the emperor and those of the pope made Montecassino unsafe. Thomas was therefore enrolled in the University of Naples, where he first met members of the Order of Preachers, or Dominicans.

Like the Franciscans, the Dominicans were a mendicant order whose friars vowed to live faithfully in poverty, chastity and obedience. Dominic had wanted his followers to be well trained for the refutation of heresy, so the order also emphasized education.

Attracted by the Dominican ideal, Thomas joined the order in 1244. This shocked his family. They took him captive and held him for a year, seeking to dissuade him from his decision.

Thomas's family hoped he would become a Benedictine and live at Montecassino, where an uncle had been abbot. That was a respectable ecclesiastical career his brothers could understand. But Thomas would not abandon his more demanding vocation, nor would he consent to merely wear his white Dominican habit under a black cloak while living among the black-habited Benedictines.

His brothers sought to turn Thomas from the religious life by subjecting him to the ultimate test. They sent a woman into Thomas's room to seduce him. The young friar drove her from the room, then fell on his knees. From that moment on, it is said, he suffered no more temptations against purity.

Big ox

The family finally accepted Thomas's choice, and he traveled north to the University of Paris. His peers there might have voted him "most studious," but hardly anyone deemed him "most likely to succeed."

When Thomas attended lectures, he seldom spoke, leading his fellow students to conclude that he was, if not physically, then intellectually, dumb. They nicknamed him "dumb ox."

Thomas's mentor, Albert (who would be called the Great), knew better. He replied that the bellowing of this ox would be heard throughout the world.

Thomas surmounted the academic challenges at Paris. Navigating institutional politics proved more difficult.

Many Paris masters disliked Dominicans and Franciscans. These orders were a standing rebuke to clergy who had grown worldly and indifferent. It was one thing for Dominic and his first followers to study at Paris, but when Dominicans and Franciscans sought appointment to the ranks of teaching professors, the masters resisted.

When Thomas, along with Bonaventure, his Franciscan counterpart, completed the requirements to be named masters of theology, they were refused admission to the ranks of professors. The pope himself intervened to get the two admitted.

A master at work

The task of the master of theology was summed up in three infinitives: ***legere***, ***disputare***, ***praedicare*** (to lecture, to dispute, to preach). The theological curriculum consisted of two tracks: Scripture and the Sentences of Peter Lombard, a theological compilation.

The master of theology, designated ***magister sacrae paginae***, lectured on books of the Old and New Testament. Thomas's surviving biblical commentaries include work on all the epistles of Paul and on the gospels of John and Matthew. Thomas also penned a remarkable work called the Golden Chain (***Catena Aurea***), an anthology of comments by the Fathers on the four gospels.

A commentary on Job, an unfinished commentary on the Psalms (he got through the first 51), and one on Isaiah represent Thomas's work on the Old Testament.

Disputations complemented the exegetical effort of lecturing. During a disputation, students and masters presented prepared comments on a difficult question. At the end of the day, the presiding master provided a magisterial summary and defense of his thesis.

But his responsibilities were not done. Within a stated period, the master had to provide to the stationer of the university a written version of the dispute, which others could have copied.

Thomas's writings include several Disputed Questions, clustered around discussions of truth, God's power, charity, and the cardinal virtues. These are not transcripts of the events that occasioned them, but they do give the flavor of debate at a medieval university.

In addition, every master of theology was a priest and therefore expected to preach. The sermons of Thomas still await a definitive edition, but those he preached on the creed, on the Lord's Prayer, and on the Ave Maria are well known in the Latin translation from the Italian in which he delivered them.

Though Thomas took these traditional academic pursuits very seriously, his intellectual endeavors ranged much further. A "new" philosophy threatened the Christian worldview, and someone needed to respond.

Aristotle: friend or foe?

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a massive amount of classical writing became available in Latin translation. Aristotle ranked foremost among the newly rediscovered authors.

In Toledo, a team of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars produced the first translations of his text, as well as of the commentaries on them by such Islamic scholars as Avicenna and Averroes. Some of Aristotle's works had been known in monastic and cathedral schools, as had a partial translation of Plato's ***Timaeus***, but the giants of Greek philosophy were rarely read except indirectly through Augustine and other church fathers.

The liberal arts tradition, going back to the fifth century, had established a working balance of secular and sacred learning. Secular learning (study of the seven liberal arts) provided a foundation for sacred learning (study of the Bible). Reason and faith were considered compatible and complementary.

Aristotle shattered this confidence. For one thing, his works—including ***Nicomachean Ethics*** and the ***Politics***, ***Physics***, and ***Metaphysics***—did not fit into any of the seven liberal arts. Natural knowledge of the world, philosophy, obviously covered much more ground than had been imagined.

Moreover, Aristotle's impressive treatises seemed to conflict with Christian faith, particularly on these three subjects:

> ***Creation***. In the course of proving the existence of a Prime Mover, Aristotle stated that the world of moved and moving things had always existed. This left no room for, "In the beginning, God. ..."
>
> ***Afterlife***. Aristotle was understood to deny personal immortality. In speaking of the soul, he argued that intellect could not corrupt and cease to be, but he seemed to mean an intellect existing separately from humans. Thus, while individual humans perished, disembodied Intellect went on. Christian dogma described a very different eternal destiny.
>
> ***Providence***. By describing God as "thought thinking itself," Aristotle apparently denied that God knew or cared about anything other than himself. This God's eye could not possibly be on the sparrow.

The Aristotelian challenge provoked three responses.

Bonaventure and the Franciscan school concluded that, because Aristotle contradicts Christian doctrine, he is obviously wrong and his writings are of no use in the pursuit of truth.

The so-called Latin Averroists admitted that Aristotle says things that are different from what Christian believers hold, but this is because he is doing philosophy, where his positions make sense. The fact that they conflict with revealed truths is not a problem, because philosophy and theology are different realms.

Thomas chose to read Aristotle carefully and see if he was indeed a menace to the faith. Thomas commented on a dozen works of Aristotle, seeking an accurate understanding of the text. This convinced him that Aristotle's thought was, for the most part, true and compatible with Christian revelation.

On the questions of personal immortality and divine providence, Thomas argued that the presumed errors of Aristotle stemmed from a misreading by Islamic commentators. As for Creation, Christians must accept that on the basis of revelation. A person operating without divine revelation could logically conclude that the world had always existed.

Silence

Early in his career as a master, Thomas began a number of summaries of Christian doctrine: the ***Summa contra Gentiles***, the ***Compendium of Theology***, and his most famous work, the ***Summa Theologica***. He completed only the first of these.

At first, Thomas wrote his works with his own hand. His writing suggests someone left-handed, writing in great haste in the Latin shorthand of the time. Thomas's hand has been dubbed the ***litera inintelligibilis***, unreadable writing. No wonder that with time he was assigned secretaries to take dictation.

Toward the end of his career, though, he ceased writing—or dictating—almost altogether. A series of mystical experiences, to which his fellow friars attested, apparently influenced this decision.

In his last years, spent in Naples, Thomas was often observed in mystical rapture. He spoke and wrote less and less until his final year, which he reportedly spent in silence.

In 1274, the pope summoned him to consult on doctrinal questions at the Council of Lyons. On the way, Thomas fell ill. Some writers speculate that he simply had no desire to continue arguing his work, which he had come to view as mere "straw."

When the seriousness of Thomas's condition became clear, he was removed to the Cistercian abbey at Fossanova. The monks there are said to have asked him to comment on the Song of Songs, and he complied.

One report holds that when those reading the text to him spoke the words, "Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields," Thomas fainted. After he revived, he received the ***Viaticum***, or final Communion. Then he died.

Throughout his life, Thomas sought the removal of all obstacles between himself and God. In death, he finally achieved unity with God. His corpse may have gone on to its own adventures, but his mind and soul rested at last.

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Left Behind

A life of fabulous privilege lost its grip on Thomas.

Robert Payen

In Naples Thomas possessed his own residence, his own retinue, a host of servants. He took up riding on horseback, with plumes and flowing silks, around the bay.

He visited the blue grotto and Capri. He had a taste for beauty and liked to repeat Augustine's saying: "If the work of His hands be so lovely, O how much more beautiful must be He who made them." He learned lucidity as much from the clear outlines of the bay as from the venerable old Irishman who taught him.

And then quite suddenly, saying nothing to his parents, he embraced the Dominican Order of Preachers, put on their white and black habit, and announced that his titles were henceforth in abeyance. He seemed hardly aware of the furor that would inevitably arise from his action.

His mother complained to the Pope and the Archbishop of Naples. He had been a prince and was now vowed to mendicancy as a wandering friar, and he did not care. The Pope offered to make him Lord Abbot of Montecassino with the privilege of wearing his Dominican habit. He refused and wandered alone to Rome. His mind was made up.

Years afterwards, when he came to write the ***Summa Theologica***, he wrote beneath the question: "Whether duties toward parents are to be set aside for the sake of religion?" the simple answer: "Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy to follow Me," and he quoted from Jerome's famous letter to Heliodorus: "Though your father fling himself down on the doorstep, trample him underfoot, go your way and fly with dry eyes to the standard of the Cross."

— from Robert Payne,* The Fathers of the Western Church *(Viking, 1951). Used by permission.

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I Can Write No More'

Why did Thomas suddenly cut short his career? One famous author has a guess.

G.K. Chesterton

[Thomas] had returned victorious from his last combat with [radical Aristotelian] Siger of Brabant; returned and retired. This particular quarrel was the one point, as we may say, in which his outer and his inner life had crossed and coincided; he realized how he had longed from childhood to call up all allies in the battle for Christ; how he had only long afterwards called up Aristotle as an ally; and now in that last nightmare of sophistry, he had for the first time truly realized that some might really wish Christ to go down before Aristotle.

He never recovered from the shock. He won his battle, because he was the best brain of his time, but he could not forget such an inversion of the whole idea and purpose of his life.

He was the sort of man who hates hating people. He had not been used to hating even their hateful ideas, beyond a certain point. But in the abyss of anarchy opened by Siger's sophistry ... he had seen the possibility of the perishing of all idea of religion, and even of all idea of truth.

Brief and fragmentary as are the phrases that record it, we can gather that he came back with a sort of horror of that outer world, in which there blew such wild winds of doctrine, and a longing for the inner world which any Catholic can share, and in which the saint is not cut off from the simple men. He resumed the strict routine of religion, and for some time said nothing to anybody.

And then something happened (it is said while he was celebrating Mass), the nature of which will never be known among mortal men.

His friend Reginald asked him to return also to his equally regular habits of reading and writing, and following the controversies of the hour. He said with a singular emphasis, "I can write no more." There seems to have been a silence; after which Reginald again ventured to approach the subject; and Thomas answered him with even greater vigor, "I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writings like straw."

— from G.K. Chesterton,* Saint Thomas Aquinas: "The Dumb Ox" *(Doubleday, 1956)

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The Summa and Its Parts

Taken as a whole, the Summa Theologica overwhelms most readers. So take one bite at a time.

Peter Kreeft

Many theologians and philosophers in St. Thomas's time wrote Summas. A Summa is simply a summary. It is more like an encyclopedia than a textbook, and it is meant to be used more as a reference library than as a book. There is extreme economy in the use of words—no digressions and few illustrations. Everything is "bottom line." Such a style should appeal to busy moderns.

The medievals had a passion for order, because they believed that God had a passion for order when He designed the universe. So a Summa is ordered and outlined with loving care.

Yet, though very systematic, a Summa is not a system in the modern sense, a closed and deductive system like that of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, or Hegel. It uses induction as well as deduction, and its data come from ordinary experience and divine revelation as well as philosophical axioms ("first principles").

A Summa is really a summarized debate. To the medieval mind, debate was a fine art, a serious science, and a fascinating entertainment, much more than it is to the modern mind, because the medievals believed, like Socrates, that dialectic could uncover truth. Thus a "scholastic disputation" was not a personal contest in cleverness, nor was it "sharing opinions"; it was a shared journey of discovery.

The "objections" from the other side are to be taken seriously in a Summa. They are not straw men to be knocked down easily, but live options to be considered and learned from. St. Thomas almost always finds some important truth hidden in each objection, which he carefully distinguishes from its error. For he believed not only that there was all truth Somewhere but also that there was some truth everywhere.

The structural outline of the ***Summa Theologica*** is a mirror of the structural outline of reality. It begins in God, Who is "in the beginning." It then proceeds to the act of creation and a consideration of creatures, centering on man, who alone is created in the image of God. Then it moves to man's return to God though his life of moral and religious choice, and culminates in the way or means to that end: Christ and His Church.

Thus the overall scheme of the Summa, like that of the universe, is an exitus-redditus, an exit from and a return to God, Who is both Alpha and Omega. God is the ontological heart that pumps the blood of being through the arteries of creation into the body of the universe, which wears a human face, and receives it back through the veins of a man's life of love and will.

The structure of the Summa, and of the universe, is dynamic. It is not like information in a library, but like blood in a body.

It is essential to keep this "big picture" in mind when reading the Summa because there are so many details that it is tempting to focus on them and lose the sense of their place and order. St. Thomas never does that. His style is atomistic and "choppy," but his vision is continuous and all-encompassing.

Why is the style so choppy? St. Thomas chops his prose into bite-sized segments for the same reason

Mommy cuts Baby's meat into bite-sized chunks. The Summa would lose much of its clarity and digestibility if it were homogenized into continuous, running prose, like watery stew. (A current British version has done just that.)

You say yes, I say no

The ***Summa Theologica*** is divided into four overall Parts (I, I-II, II-II, and III). Each Part is divided into Treatises (e.g., On the Creation, On Man, On Law). Each Treatise is divided into numbered "Questions," or general issues within the topic of the treatise (e.g., "Of the Simplicity of God," "Of the Angels in Comparison with Bodies," "Of the Effects of Love"). Finally each "Question" is divided into numbered "Articles."

The "Article" is the basic thought-unit of the Summa. What we mean in modern English by an "article"—an essay—is what St. Thomas means by a "Question," and what we mean by a "question"—a specific, single interrogative sentence—is what he means by an "Article," e.g., "Whether God Exists?"; "Whether the Inequality of Things Is from God?"; "Whether Sorrow Is the Same as Pain?"

Each Article begins by formulating in its title a single question in such a way that only two answers are possible: yes or no. St. Thomas does this, not because he thinks philosophy or theology is as simple as a true-false exam, but because he wants to make an issue finite and decidable, just as debaters do in formulating their "resolution."

There are an indefinite number of possible answers to a question like "What is God?" If he had formulated his questions that way, the Summa might be three million pages long instead of three thousand. Instead, he asks, for example, "Whether God Is a Body?" It is possible to divide and demonstrate that one of the two possible answers (yes) is false and therefore that the other (no) is true.

Each "Article" has five structural parts. First, the question is formulated in a yes or no format, as explained above, beginning with the word "Whether" (***Utrum***).

Second, St. Thomas lists a number of Objections (usually three) to the answer he will give. The Objections are apparent proofs of this opposite answer, the other side to the debate. These objections begin with the formula: "It seems that ... " (***Oportet***).

These Objections must be arguments, not just opinions, for one of the basic principles of any intelligent debate (woefully neglected in all modern media) is that each debater must give relevant reasons for every controvertible opinion he expresses. The Objections are to be taken seriously, as apparent truth.

One who is seeking the strongest possible arguments against any idea of St. Thomas will rarely find any stronger ones, any more strongly argued, than those in St. Thomas himself. He is extremely fair to all his opponents. I think he descends to name-calling only once in the entire Summa, when he speaks of the "really stupid" idea of David of Dinant that God is indistinguishable from prime matter, or pure potentiality—an idea not very far from that of Hegel and modern "process theologians"!

Third, St. Thomas indicated his own position with the formula "On the contrary ... " (***Sed contra***). The brief argument that follows the statement of his position here is usually an argument from authority, i.e., from Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, or recognized wise men.

The medievals well knew their own maxim that "the argument from authority is the weakest of all arguments." But they also believed in doing their homework and in learning from their ancestors—two habits we would do well to cultivate today.

The fourth part, "I answer that" (***Respondeo dicens***), is the body of the Article. In it, St. Thomas proves his own position, often adding necessary background explanations and making needed distinctions along the way. The easiest (but not the most exciting) way to read a Summa Article is to read this part first.

Fifth and finally, each Objection must be addressed and answered—not merely by repeating an argument to prove the opposite conclusion, for that has already been done in the body of the Article, but by explaining where and how the Objection went wrong, i.e., by distinguishing the truth from the falsity in the Objection.

No one of these five steps can be omitted if we want to have good grounds for settling a controverted question. If our question is vaguely or confusedly formulated, our answer will be, too. If we do not consider opposing views, we spar without a partner and paw the air.

If we do not do our homework, we only skim the shallows of our selves. If we do not prove our thesis, we are dogmatic, not critical. And if we do not understand and refute our opponents, we are left with the nagging uncertainty that we have missed something and not really ended the contest.

Like Socratic dialogue for Plato, this medieval method of philosophizing was very fruitful in its own day—and then subsequently neglected, especially in our day. That is one of the unsolved mysteries of Western thought. Surely both the Socratic and the Thomistic methodological trees can still bear much good fruit. Perhaps what stands in the way is our craze for originality and our proud refusal to be anyone's apprentice. I for one would be very happy to be Aquinas's apprentice, or Socrates'.

Peter Kreeft teaches philosophy at Boston College. This article was taken from his book **Summa of the Summa** ***(Ignatius Press, 1990).***

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Devoutly I Adore Thee

Thomas Acquinas

Devoutly I Adore Thee
O Godhead hid, devoutly I adore Thee,
Who truly art within the forms before me;
To Thee my heart I bow with bended knee,
As failing quite in contemplating Thee.

Sight, touch, and taste in Thee are each deceived;
The ear alone most safely is believed:
I believe all the Son of God has spoken,
Than Truth's own word there is no truer token.

God only on the Cross lay hid from view;
But here lies hid at once the Manhood too;
And I, in both professing my belief,
Make the same prayer as the repentant thief.

O thou Memorial of our Lord's own dying!
O Bread that living art and vivifying!
Make ever Thou my soul on Thee to live;
Ever a taste of Heavenly sweetness give.

Jesu! Whom for the present veil'd I see,
What I so thirst for, O vouchsafe to me:
That I may see Thy countenance unfolding,
And may be blest Thy glory in beholding. Amen.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, translated by E. Caswall

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Medieval U.

How accounting, Aristotle, and the first teachers' unions transformed higher education.

Matt Donnelly

Nowadays the worst part of being the youngest child is the hand-me-down clothes. But in the early Middle Ages, the youngest child couldn't inherit land and often faced a life of hard labor as a serf. As the population grew, these landless serfs began to look for a better life beyond crowded feudal estates. Many took to the road as merchants.

Beginning in the eleventh century, the burgeoning merchant class created a market for education that went beyond learning about Scripture. While theology remained the "queen of the sciences," merchants needed other skills: reading and writing, for communication with suppliers, and mathematics, for balancing books. As supply met demand, the university was born.

Universities became central to life in the Middle Ages. In addition to training and educating merchants, they also educated clergy, shaped public opinion on important theological issues, helped settle ecclesiastical disputes (including the Great Schism of the fourteenth century), and were alternately courted and threatened by power-seeking popes. Although largely unnoticed at the time, the universities also had a leveling influence in that they allowed poor men and youngest sons to gain power and status through education.

Medieval universities quickly gained popularity. By 1250, about 7,000 students attended the University of Paris. Oxford University, located in a much smaller city, boasted a very respectable 2,000 students. All told, 81 universities operated throughout Europe prior to the Reformation.

College Prep

Western Europe's first schools were begun in the sixth century by Benedictine monks who wanted to teach young men to read and write. Because these schools were associated with monasteries, they tended to be in remote locations. Students spent most of their time learning Scripture and copying texts.

In 1079, Pope Gregory VII issued a decree requiring the creation of cathedral schools, controlled by local bishops, for the purpose of educating the clergy. These cathedral schools grew more influential than the older monastic schools, partly because they were located in growing cities, such as Paris and Orléans.

Universities arose from established cathedral schools, especially in France. Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a leading teacher in Paris, taught in a cathedral school on the bank of the River Seine. His enormous popularity attracted other teachers to Paris, and by the turn of the century the University of Paris had been founded.

The University of Salerno, begun in the ninth century as a medical school, is perhaps the oldest university in the Western world. Like other universities, it offered advanced instruction in subjects beyond the typical course of theological study in cathedral schools. The earliest ivies also included the University of Bologna (founded in 1084), Oxford University (1170), and the University of Paris (1200).

The University of Paris distinguished itself as the theological epicenter of Western Christendom, and its

reputation attracted the best and the brightest. Albert the Great and his disciple Thomas Aquinas received theology degrees from the University of Paris in the 1240s. Nine future popes also studied there.

Up until the beginning of the thirteenth century, students from throughout Europe traveled to centers of learning, such as Cologne, Paris, or London, and sought out a master, or teacher. A student would arrive in the city, look for a place to live, and then attempt to hire a master to teach him.

Alexander Neckham, for instance, traveled from a small town near London to Paris in the 1170s. He studied under a fellow Englishman named Adam dou Petit Pont—French for "Adam of the Little Bridge," because Adam taught in a house on the bridge across the Seine near Notre Dame.

Beginning in the thirteenth century, however, students and masters began to follow the example of the wider society and set up guilds. Guilds were associations of people who came together to create uniform standards for various industries and control membership requirements.

The University of Paris was born when students and masters grouped together into guilds and called themselves ***universitas*** (a Latin legal term for "a whole").

With the arrival of guilds, anyone who hoped to become a teacher needed to complete six years of study in liberal arts. Individual universities added their own requirements as well.

The statutes for the University of Paris, written in 1215, stated that a new lecturer in the arts must be at least 20 years old and "is to promise what he will lecture for at least two years. ... He [also] must not be smirched by any infamy." Theology teachers needed an additional 8 (and later 14) years of education, and they also needed to be at least 35 years old.

In France and England, where students began their studies as teenagers, teachers played the major role in the university guilds, although Cambridge University gave students 15 days to decide whether to commit to a particular master. In Italy, where students were typically older, students had power to hire and fire teachers.

Old traditions, New ideas

Despite their uncertain career prospects, most teaching masters also enjoyed considerable academic freedom. The controversial John Wyclif, for example, taught at Oxford for 30 years before being forced out, in 1381. Not surprisingly, it was in the universities, where reason rivaled revelation, that challenges to church tradition began to arise.

Traditional curricula at monastery and cathedral schools consisted of the venerable Latin trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—and the more advanced quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. In addition, students learned medicine and law.

But all of this was before the Western world rediscovered Aristotle. As trade increased contact between the Christian West and the mostly Muslim East, Westerners bought back the works of Aristotle, which had been forgotten in the West for centuries. In the twelfth century, his works were translated into Latin, the lingua franca of the educated Western world.

Aristotle's works sparked an intellectual renaissance as Aquinas and other Christian scholars sought to integrate Aristotelian and traditional Christian teachings about man and God. Their approach became known as Scholasticism, and it deeply influenced the subsequent course of Western philosophy. As universities spread throughout Europe, they quickly made the works of Aristotle central to their programs of study.

In addition to reading Aristotle, students were also required to study works by Gilbert de la Porre, Boethius, and others. Theological students, who often spent 14 years or more at university, devoted much attention to the Bible, patristic commentaries on Scripture, and the ***Book of Sentences***, a textbook written by twelfth-century Paris master Peter Lombard (see page 33).

Almost from the outset, universities offered specialized courses of study. At Paris, Cambridge, and Oxford, students focused mainly on theology, church law, and liberal arts. Universities in Italy and southern France emphasized the study of Roman or Greek law and Arabic or Jewish medical texts.

Q-and-A Classes at medieval universities followed a fairly uniform pattern. A master read an excerpt from a standard text (Aristotle, for instance), then lectured on the standard commentaries on the text. Finally, he led a class discussion of the commentaries and the text itself. Students took notes on wax tablets, or less frequently on parchment. Paper cost far too much for everyday use.

Beyond lectures, disputation was the most popular learning tool at medieval universities. A disputation took place when two or more masters debated a text using the question-and-answer approach developed by Peter Abelard. Sometimes these disputations took place over several days. Debates between rival masters could last for years or even decades.

As a result of these disputations, the Western world developed a systematic understanding of the Christian faith. Many of the disputations centered on Peter Lombard's ***Sentences***. Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham all wrote commentaries on the ***Sentences***.

After three or four years of study, students were questioned orally by a master or a committee of masters. If the student passed his oral exams, he could become a baccalaureas, the equivalent of obtaining a bachelor's degree. This entitled him to serve a master as an assistant teacher.

After another two or three years of study, the student took extensive written exams. If he passed, he earned an advanced degree, such as a master of arts. He then had the ability to become a university master, whereupon he hoped to be able to teach a student like Thomas Aquinas.

Matt Donnelly is a former assistant editor at Christianity Today International.

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Life on Campus

Not all medieval students were monks, but all observed a regimented lifestyle.

Matt Donnelly

A medieval student's day usually began at 4 or 5 in the morning, when the watchman's horn resounded throughout the city. After attending Mass from 5 to 6, the student attended classes until 10. Then came lunch, a paltry meal consisting of some beef and thick soup of beef gravy and oatmeal.

Classes continued after lunch until about 5, followed by an evening meal. Then students studied their notes by candlelight until they went to bed at 9 or 10.

This routine was broken by the observance of saints' days and religious festivals, when the university was closed. On those days students could travel throughout the city, play games, and even exercise in areas beyond the city walls.

For various reasons, roughly two-thirds of students never completed the six years of study necessary to become a teacher. Some succumbed to the distractions present in a city far from home. Paris, for example, had a population over 50,000 and featured numerous taverns, where students passed their days drinking and gambling. Prostitutes found many customers near universities, too.

Boys left home for universities as early as age 12, and they didn't always find a healthy environment in which to learn adult behavior. Jacques de Vitry observed in the thirteenth century that University of Paris students from different lands were obnoxious and frequently at odds with one another and the surrounding community.

He wrote, for example, that "the English were drunkards ... the sons of France proud, effeminate and carefully adorned like women ... the Germans were furious and obscene at their feasts ... the Poitevins, traitors and always adventurers. The Burgundians they considered vulgar and stupid."

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How You Should Study'

In a letter, Thomas shares his tips for academic success.

Thomas Acquinas

Since you asked me, my dearest in Christ Brother John, how you should study in order to acquire the treasure of knowledge, I offer you this advice on the matter: Do not wish to jump immediately from the streams to the sea, because one has to go through easier things to the more difficult. Therefore the following points are my warning and your instruction:

I command you to be slow to speak, and slow to go to the conversation room.

Embrace purity of conscience.

Do not give up spending time in prayer.

Love spending much time in your cell, if you want to be led into the wine cellar.

Show yourself amiable to all.

Do not query at all what others are doing.

Do not be very familiar with anyone, because familiarity breeds contempt, and provides matter for distracting you from study.

Do not get involved at all in the discussions and affairs of lay people.

Avoid conversations about all, any and every matter.

Do not fail to imitate the example of good and holy men.

Do not consider who the person is you are listening to, but whatever good he says commit to memory.

Whatever you are doing and hearing try to understand. Resolve doubts, and put whatever you can in the storeroom of your mind, like someone wanting to fill a container.

Do not spend time on things beyond your grasp.

Following such a path, you will bring forth flowers and produce useful fruit for the vineyard of the Lord of Power and Might, as long as you live. If you follow this, you can reach what you desire.

—translated by Joseph Kenny, O.P.

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Good Habits

Benedictines, Franciscans, and Dominicans all sought to live by high ideals, but only one order matched Thomas's love for both spirituality and intellect.

Steven Gertz

Authorities at Oxford University in the fourteenth century bore a grudge against Dominican friars. "We have learned from experience," grumbled the Congregation of Masters at Oxford, "that noble persons of this kingdom, gentlemen, and even those of common birth, desist from sending their sons ... to the university ... because they are very fearful that the friars will entice them into joining the Mendicant orders."

Thomas Aquinas's family had reason to fear the friars' influence. His wealthy parents sent their son off to school to begin a lucrative church career, and the next thing they knew, he had renounced riches and joined the Order of Preachers.

Why were men like Aquinas so attracted to the friars that they would risk their family's disapproval and rejection? And just what were a young man's choices when considering the religious life?

The classic choice

In Aquinas's day, thousands of abbeys throughout Europe subscribed to the Rule of Benedict, written in the sixth century. The Rule, not a book of rules only, set up a whole way of life for the monk. It designated eight calls to prayer and worship each day—Vigils began at 2:00 a.m., then Lauds, Prime at dawn, Tierce, Sext at noon, Nones, Vespers in early evening, and Compline. At these hours, monks prayed aloud and sang the psalmody in a choir, then listened to lengthy readings from Scripture or the Rule.

Benedictines lived with many restrictions. Monasteries regulated the monks' diet, forbidding them to eat meat, though some could eat fowl. Monks were allowed one meal per day, usually consisting of vegetables.

They were expected to engage in regular manual labor—monasteries were to be self-sufficient. They could not speak in the church or dormitory, though conversation was permitted elsewhere.

The abbot had absolute charge over the monks' spiritual and physical affairs, including their mobility. And abbots forbade their monks to own private property.

But there was another matter for men like Aquinas to consider—Benedictine monasteries had grown wealthy and powerful. In twelfth-century Canterbury, England, half the houses in the town and suburbs belonged to the monastery.

Some monasteries had political loyalties as well. In England, the king appointed abbots to act as local governors.

The people's choice

When Francis of Assisi began wandering the countryside and preaching in the town squares in 1209, he departed from the pattern of contemplative, structured religious life.

Francis debated with his friends "whether they ought to live among men, or betake themselves to solitary places." But Francis would not be tied to a monastery, as monks had to be. His passion for the gospel and for the common people who needed to hear it was too great.

Francis demanded absolute poverty from his followers, who became known as friars (from the Latin word for brother). He forbade them to own houses or receive money. For clothing, they were given a gray tunic with a white cord at the waist—hence their name, "Gray Friars." Beyond this, Franciscans relied on charity, begging for daily sustenance.

This radical approach appealed to rich individuals who were disillusioned with the church's wealth. Salimbene, a Franciscan friar, wrote, "there are many in both orders of friars [Franciscans and Dominicans] who, if they had been in the world ... would have been priests, canons, archdeacons, bishops and archbishops, perhaps even cardinals and popes, like them. They should recognize that we have given up all these things to go begging." In fact, all of Francis's companions were children of merchant or knightly families of the town of Assisi.

To become a follower of Francis, then, was to reject family wealth, join a fraternity of men, and live with few belongings and often little food. It meant spending much time ministering to the needs of the poor (particularly lepers) and going out in pairs to preach repentance and penance. In many cases, it meant settling in urban centers, where audiences and charitable donations were plentiful but quarters were cramped and sanitation was lacking.

The Franciscan order soon split into two groups, the "Conventuals," who permitted communal property ownership, and the "Spirituals," who argued for a return to absolute poverty and emphasized the need to be always on the move.

But even as the order obtained property and created hierarchy, Francis's ideal remained central to the friars' convictions: to trade the pursuit of wealth for the ministry of the gospel among the poor.

The apologist's choice

The life of Dominic de Guzman paralleled Francis's in several ways. Dominic lived simply, owning only what he could carry and begging for his food. Dominic also insisted on absolute poverty, refusing to allow his followers even to own communal property. And like Francis, Dominic turned down the contemplative, cloistered life to spend his time preaching.

But the order Dominic founded was unique in two key ways. First, Dominic did not abandon monasticism altogether. For example, he required his followers to wear the habit of an earlier order, a white tunic under a large black cloak and hood—hence the name "Black Friars."

He incorporated traditional elements he believed would be beneficial, such as the Rule of Augustine. This rule offered little practical guidance on organizing a monastic community, though, thus giving Dominic freedom to accommodate the Rule to a friar's itinerant life.

Further, he omitted sections on manual labor and government. And he required the friars to sing the office in choir "briskly and succinctly lest the friars lose devotion."

Second, Dominic fashioned his new order after an encounter with heretical Albigensians, a dualistic sect that rejected material possessions, marriage, and the eating of meat and eggs, and preached that the

soul must be freed from its material body. To combat such ideas, Dominic sought papal approval for an order of preachers. He was granted permission by Pope Honorius III in 1216.

Countering heretical teachings meant securing those places where new ideas flourished, so Dominicans entered the great universities. By 1218, they had taken positions at Paris and Bologna, and in 1221, they established a presence at Oxford.

To join the Dominicans during Aquinas's time was to embrace the ***vita apostolica***—the simple, evangelistic lifestyle of the friar. It was also to embrace all that education could offer for the service of the Church.

How attractive this was to young men in the universities like Aquinas can be verified by looking at the numbers. Jordan of Saxony, who succeeded Dominic, proudly reported in 1226 that "within four weeks of our arrival [in Paris], 21 brethren entered" the order, and he duplicated his success at Vercelli and Oxford.

Not all of the Dominicans were university-educated—some "lay brothers" performed minimal manual labor needed to release their more educated members to study. But most Dominicans clearly committed their lives to the pursuit of knowledge.

Making the decision

Why did Aquinas choose the Dominicans? The reason he did not choose the Benedictines seems clear—he desired a humble station, and the cloistered life in a wealthy monastery held no appeal. But why not the Franciscans?

The answer seems to lie with Aquinas's growing fascination with Aristotle and his admiration for the leading Aristotelian scholar of the time, Dominican master Albert the Great. Aquinas likely applied to the Dominican order in the hope he could study with Albert, which, in fact, he did.

To understand why Aquinas chose as he did is to understand perhaps the greatest truth of his time. The Dominicans and Franciscans represented nothing less than a new commitment to revitalized spirituality and apostolic fervor. When the church had grown lazy and increasingly materialistic, the friars reminded people what being a Christian was all about.

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Thomas Aquinas: Christian History Timeline - Storms of the Thirteenth Century

The Christian History timeline.

Aquinas

1225 Thomas Aquinas born at Roccasecca

1230 Begins studies at Montecassino

1239 Continues studies at University of Naples

1244 Joins Dominicans; family protests decision by imprisoning him for a year

1245 Released by his family, Thomas goes to Paris to study with Albert the Great

1248 Accompanies Albert to newly founded Dominican school at Cologne

1250 Ordained a priest

1252 Returns to Paris; writes ***Contra impugnantes Dei cultum***, a defense of mendicant orders

1256 Named master of theology at Paris

1259 Sent to Italy, where he would teach at Anagni, Orvieto, Rome, and Viterbo

c. 1260 Begins ***Summa contra Gentiles***

c. 1265 Begins ***Summa Theologica***

1269 Recalled to Paris to combat Averroist Siger of Brabant and other philosophers

1273 Suddenly stops work on ***Summa Theologica***

1274 Dies at Fossanova, en route to Council of Lyons

1277 219 Thomistic propositions condemned at Paris

1278 Dominican General Chapter formally imposes his teachings on the order

Monasticism

c. 1200 Albert the Great born

1203 Dominic de Guzman preaches against heretical Cathars

1206 Francis of Assisi renounces wealth

1209 Albert, patriarch of Jerusalem, establishes ascetic rule for Carmelite order

1210 Pope Innocent III approves Friars Minor (Franciscans)

1212 Clare, a disciple of Francis, founds Poor Clares, a female Franciscan order

1215 Fourth Lateran Council models guidelines for monastic observance on Cistercian system

1216 Order of Preachers (Dominicans) approved

1220 Famed preacher Antony of Padua joins Franciscans

—Francis resigns leadership of his order

1221 Dominic dies

1226 Francis dies

1243 Bonaventure joins Franciscans

1245 Division between Conventuals and Spirituals roils Franciscan order

1247 Renegade Franciscans begin crusade against Jews in Vienne; Pope Innocent IV disowns them

1257 Bonaventure, elected Franciscan Minister General, seeks to heal order's internal divisions

1265 John Duns Scotus born

1274 Bonaventure dies

Academia

1200 University of Paris founded

1204 Influential Jewish scholar Maimonides dies

1209 Unrest in Oxford drives a group of scholars to settle in Cambridge

1210 Lecturing on Aristotle prohibited at Paris

1214 Oxford University given first privileges

1221 Emperor Frederick founds University of Padua

1224 University of Naples founded

1231 Parisian ban on teaching Aristotle lifted

1240 Works of Averroes become known

—Albert the Great and Roger Bacon begin work on Aristotle

1244 University of Rome founded

1247 University of Siena founded

1248 Albert founds faculty of theology at Cologne

—Bonaventure begins teaching at Paris

1252 Paris masters pick fight with mendicant orders

1258 Sorbonne founded as college for theology students within University of Paris

1263 William of Moerbeke, a Dominican, makes new translation of Aristotle

1270 Bishop of Paris condemns Latin Averroism

World Events

1202 Leonardo Fibonacci helps popularize superior Arabic math with publication of ***Liber Abaci*****1204** Fourth Crusade sacks Constantinople, the Eastern Christian capital

1209 Thousands of Cathars (and Catholics) die at sack of Béziers, France

1212 Muslim forces lose major battle near Toledo, Spain

1215 King John of England seals Magna Carta; Innocent III annuls it

1217 Peter Waldo, founder of Waldensians (a proto-Protestant group in the Alps), dies

1220 Frederick II crowned Holy Roman Emperor

1227 A Japanese monk returning from China introduces Zen Buddhism to Japan

1232 Inquisition set in motion by Frederick, then taken over by Pope Gregory IX

1240 Sultana Raziyya of Delhi, the first female Muslim ruler, killed by Turkish-backed Hindu troops

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Theology on the Edge

When competing ideologies had fragmented Christian thought, Thomas forged a solution.

J. David Lawrence

Thomas Aquinas appeared at one of the most critical times in church history. Science, secularism, and human reason battered Christian theology. Thomas reconciled apparently contradictory forces, enabling the intellectual structure of the church to survive.

The great crisis

Augustine, bishop of Hippo from 395-430, taught that all people are corrupted by original sin and can be saved only by God's grace according to his eternal, elective decree. Though scholars such as John Cassian and Gregory the Great modified his doctrines to make more room for human works, by the early twelfth century, the church accepted the essence of Augustine's theology.

After the vibrant theological thinking of the fifth century, the church turned to the task of evangelizing pagan Europe, channeling its energies into missionary activity rather than theology. By 1000 the church had reached its goal.

At the same time, the advent of the High Middle Ages brought another era of fruitful theological scholarship, beginning with Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033-1109), who defined the doctrine of the atonement.

Then, in the late eleventh century, crusaders brought a challenge from the Middle East that rocked the theological foundations of the Western church. In Muslim libraries, they had discovered Aristotle.

Aristotle did not begin with God and move downward to the material world, as Plato did. He began with the particulars, moving upward in increasing generalizations toward God. He assumed diversity, not unity, and incorporated the whole of existence into his system.

The great Islamic scholar Averroes, born in Cordoba, Spain, in 1126, became the foremost commentator on Aristotle. When a learned young professor in Paris, Peter Abelard, picked up the Aristotelian approach and applied it to the writings of the church fathers, the bomb exploded.

Abelard's book ***Sic et Non*** (Yes and No) examined the writings of the early Christian Fathers and showed their discrepancies, contradictions, and disagreements on theological matters. While Abelard did not subject the Bible to the same type of criticism, he certainly opened the door to inquiry into Scripture and all the doctrines of the church.

Abelard's critical approach aroused the ire of the respected scholar Bernard of Clairvaux, who charged Abelard with making faith, which Augustine said was a gift of divine grace, only a matter of opinion. Bernard claimed that Abelard had taken away the certitude of Christian salvation and thus undermined the whole of Christian theology.

With the bitter exchange between these two men, the war was on. Students and professors in medieval universities took sides on the issues, and lively and enthralling debates ensued. But the medieval church

tottered on the brink of collapse, for at this point, no one was sure what Christians believed, why they believed it, or how they should define their belief.

Putting it together

Thomas undertook the awesome task of resolving this problem. No one else had dared.

The Aristotelians would not accept the old Augustinian views, lest science and reason be stifled. The Augustinians would not accept the Aristotelian view, lest faith be undermined and salvation become a merely intellectual matter. Thomas set out to bring both sides together in a reasonable synthesis.

His two great works, ***Summa contra Gentiles*** and ***Summa Theologica***, became the most complete statement of belief in all Christian theology to that day, and, to a large degree, to this day. Only Calvin's ***Institutes of the Christian Religion*** approach Thomas's thorough and complete treatment of doctrine.

Thomas had plenty of critics. Aristotelians charged that he had not gone far enough in vindicating science and reason. Augustinians, especially Franciscans, thought he had gone much too far and sacrificed the sovereignty of God. Thomism was not accepted fully in the Roman Catholic church until the sixteenth-century Council of Trent.

Thomas, however, was undaunted. He labored to achieve the conclusions of Augustinian theology, in which he truly believed, by using the methodology of Aristotelianism, in which he also believed. Although this "Thomistic synthesis" has been compared to a theological house of cards, he essentially accomplished his objective.

The following examples of Thomas's distinctive thought highlight the breadth and depth of his arguments.

Apologetics

Thomas is most remembered for his five-fold apology for the existence of God. All of his five ways involved empirical observation, an Aristotelian tool.

For instance, Thomas observed that everything is in a process of change. By reasoning that every change is produced by some cause, and that a thing cannot be at the same time cause and effect, he arrived at the fact that God is the ***ultimate cause*** of all things.

Second, continuing the idea of cause and effect, Thomas reasoned that there must be an efficient cause for all things that exist, and that a sequence of such efficient causes exists in the natural world. Behind all causes producing effects must lie an ultimate ***first efficient cause***, which is God.

Third, God is the ultimate ***necessary cause***, for there must be one cause that lacks the possibility of not being.

Fourth, by observing that there exists a gradation in things (such as things becoming more or less hot), there must be something that is the ***ultimate degree of all things*** and thus the cause of gradation.

Last, the governing and operating of the universe points to an ***intelligent force*** guiding it to its ultimate end.

Christian apologists still widely use his five-fold proof of the existence of God, though they do not always note the source of the arguments.

Revelation, grace, and providence

The use of reason, based on observation of empirical data, continued into all aspects of Thomas's theological system. Reason could only proceed so far, though, and when it reached the end of its potential, Thomas taught that the Christian must rely on revelation.

This blending of reason and revelation allowed Thomas to synthesize Aristotelianism with Augustinianism, but it also alienated him from extremists. Averroists (radical Aristotelians) thought his use of revelation betrayed science. Franciscans, especially John Duns Scotus, thought his use of reason compromised God's eternal decrees, wisdom, and power.

Contrary to criticism, however, Thomas did not abandon the idea of divine sovereignty. He modified the straightforward Augustinian doctrine of predestination, which was accepted completely by the Franciscans, by teaching that God gives to his people the "habit of grace," in which they can approach God and perform acceptable works.

The Christian must then persevere in good works by God's grace. Christians who fail to persevere cannot be saved.

Thomas attempted to harmonize this emphasis on good works, which began as early as Gregory the Great in the late sixth century, with the Augustinian doctrine of salvation by grace alone. He wanted to preserve both the church's tradition regarding meritorious good works and Augustine's doctrine of salvation by grace.

Thomas steered a course much closer to Augustine in regard to God's sovereign governing of the universe. He asserted plainly that God is the governor and provider of all things: "He who believes that everything comes about by chance does not really believe in the existence of God. No one, however, can be found so foolish as not to believe that natural things are governed, provided for, and arranged by God when they happen in a certain order and at definite times."

What Thomas observed in the natural realm, he applied to the physical and spiritual universe: God arranges and governs all things. No Reformation leader could have stated the matter more definitely.

Atonement

Two views of Christ's atonement clashed in Thomas's day. Anselm saw the atonement as a satisfaction for the sins of God's people. Peter Abelard claimed the atonement was essentially an example of love drawing people to Christ.

Thomas affirmed that the atonement had a profound exemplary effect on the people of God, but he strongly emphasized the substitutionary nature of Christ's work. The atonement, he taught, was not only an example for us to follow, but a remedy for sin. Christ's death erased the stain of sin, paid for the offense against God, and negated the power of sin in our lives, enabling us to live a new life.

"I reply," wrote Thomas in his ***Summa Theologica***, "that a proper satisfaction comes about when someone offers to the person offended something which gives him a delight greater than the hatred of the offense. Now Christ by suffering as a result of love and obedience offered to God something greater than what might be exacted in compensation for the whole offense of humanity."

This analysis of the atonement placed Thomas much more on the side of traditional, conservative Christian theology than the rationalist school of Abelard.

Transubstantiation

Regarding transubstantiation, Thomas again defended traditional ideas as defined by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. He taught that consecrated Communion bread and wine were changed in very substance into the body and blood of Christ while retaining the "accidental" appearance of bread and wine.

In other words, the priest changed the bread and wine into the ***actual*** body and blood of Christ, but the elements retained the ***appearance*** and ***taste*** of bread and wine. This distinction between substance and accident came from Aristotle.

It is misleading to project this concept back into the early church, because early Fathers lacked the philosophical categories to make it work. Nonetheless, the Council of Trent would later declare, "Since Christ our Redeemer said that that which he offered under the appearance of bread was truly his body, it has therefore always been held in the Church of God, and this holy Synod now declares anew, that through consecration of the bread and wine there comes about a conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. And this conversion is by the Holy Catholic church conveniently and properly called transubstantiation."

Evaluation

Thomas's work has aroused both awed admiration and virulent opposition. Mystics and humanists complained that it was too complicated and impersonal. Protestants disliked the accommodation to Aristotelianism and the reliance on philosophical arguments rather than on Scripture. Vastly different viewpoints compete yet today.

Thomas would probably agree that, in spite of his best efforts, it was beyond him to capture the Transcendent with words or to define the Undefinable. But as God's obedient servant he performed, by the help of divine grace, the work of his calling.

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Aquinas for President?

His views on government, law, and economics would shake the system.

David Lawrence and Elesha Coffman

Like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas considered all areas of thought his province. As a result, he became unquestionably the most systematic political philosopher of the Middle Ages, as well as an original legal theorist and an unconventional economist.

Government, Aquinas taught, is the result of sin and is necessary to mitigate its consequences. Political organization is natural to fallen man and necessary for his development. Even though the church is superior to the state, and the greater purpose of man is eternal life, the temporal world is important, and peace and order, leading to temporal happiness, can be preserved through the state.

While sin necessitates government, law undergirds it. Specifically, Aquinas defined four types of law.

Eternal law, which governs the universe, comes from the eternal and immutable decrees of God. Natural law, which enables people of reason to understand eternal law, is also ordained of God, but unlike the secret decrees of God, it is perceptible through reason. Human law consists of concrete rules enacted by man. Divine law, which is the ultimate will of God, is revealed in Scripture.

Aquinas believed that all law was essentially reasonable and binding. Political authority, by contrast, was binding only if it conformed to natural law, divine law, and the common good of the community. Otherwise, governments would become tyrannical.

Attention to the common good also drove Aquinas's economic ideas, which were, not surprisingly, based on Aristotle. These ideas principally concerned interest rates and prices.

Aristotle thought that charging interest on a loan, known in the Middle Ages as "usury," was unfair and unnatural because instead of using money to procure valuable goods, usurers used wealth to create more wealth. Aquinas put it this way: "to receive usury for money lent is, in itself, unjust, since it is a sale of what does not exist."

Even by Aquinas's day, lending at interest was too widespread to root out. The market economy was still developing, though, and Aquinas sought to influence it for the common good with what became known as "just price" theory.

Both Aristotle and Aquinas had reservations about merchants, but Aquinas was much more realistic. Aristotle thought that vendors should never sell goods for more than they paid for them. Aquinas thought that vendors deserved to be compensated for their labor, out-of-pocket costs, and risks. The cost of the product, plus related expenses and a small margin for profit, represented the just price. Additional mark-ups were selfish and destructive, even if the new price represented what the market could bear.

So, if Aquinas were campaigning for president, he might vow to make communities safer, recall justice to its historic and divine roots, drop the interest rate to zero percent, and mandate just prices for all goods and services. He would win every debate, but not many votes.

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Thomas Aquinas: A Gallery of Scholastic Superstars

The white heat produced by these great minds lit up the High Middle Ages.

Stephen E. Lahey

MR. MIDDLE GROUND
Peter Lombard
c. 1100-1160

Peter Lombard's birthplace, the Piedmontese town of Novara, lies at a strategic crossroads between Turin, Milan, Genoa, and Switzerland. When Peter found himself at the crossroads of competing approaches to theology, he again chose the middle ground.

The intellectual climate of the early twelfth century was stormy. Peter Abelard (1079-1142), author of ***Sic et Non*** (Yes and No), questioned everything—and readily flouted church authority—in a quest for theological truth. Ecclesiastical authorities struggled just as vigorously to maintain the primacy of church fathers such as Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great.

Peter Lombard responded to this clash by writing a textbook characterized by its rigorous approach to the whole spectrum of theological knowledge. This text, called ***Sentences***, would become the template for formal theological discourse well into the Modern period.

"We have studied to encircle the Tower of David with shields ... and open things withdrawn from theological inquiry and display the knowledge of the church's sacraments as far as our poor understandings might reach." So begins Peter's prologue to the four books in which he attempts to navigate a path between reckless speculation and authoritarianism.

The first book, on the unity of God and the nature of the Trinity, is followed by books devoted to created beings and their corporeal and spiritual natures, the Incarnation and Christ's rescue of humanity, and the sacraments and the four last things (death, judgment, hell, and heaven).

Peter consistently looks to both tradition and reason. While exploring questions about the Trinity, for example, he quotes Augustine: "Against the garrulous reasoners, more elated than capable, one must use catholic reasons and congruous similitudes ... so that satisfying their questions we may more fully instruct the meek." Then he tirelessly combs through Scriptures in search of precedent for the puzzling doctrine of "the plurality of persons and the unity of divine essence."

Eventually his reasoning takes him to Augustine's idea that the nature of the Trinity can be discovered in the three-fold operations of the human mind. From there Peter proceeds, using the same careful analysis, to the relation of the three persons to one another, and to creation.

Peter's analysis is slightly stodgy, but it invites sophisticated philosophical analysis. The great theological minds of the later Middle Ages, including Aquinas, Scotus, Bonaventure, and William of Ockham, defined the foundations of their philosophical theology by writing detailed commentaries on the ***Sentences***. Some of these commentaries have become well known, but ***Sentences***, unfortunately, remains largely untranslated and unavailable.

THE ORIGINAL DUNCE
John Duns Scotus
c. 1266-1308

Perhaps no great medieval thinker is as little understood as John Duns Scotus. Scholars cannot agree when or where he was born, students try to avoid reading his dense work, and some theologians wonder if he strayed into heresy. The most common reference to his name, sadly, is the derogatory epithet "dunce," used to describe someone who cannot give a simple answer.

Scotus, known as the "Subtle Doctor," was likely born in the town of Duns in the Scots lowlands. He joined the Franciscans and studied in Oxford until 1301. Francis's emphases on loving Christ in the Eucharist and respecting church authorities influ- enced Scotus throughout his career.

In 1304 he was named Franciscan Regent Master at the University of Paris, where he conducted theological disputations and became known as the greatest theologian of his generation. In assigning Scotus to the university post, Master Gonsalvus Hispanus called him "Friar John Scotus, of whose laudable life, excellent knowledge, and most subtle ability as well as his other remarkable qualities I am fully informed, partly from long experience, partly from report which has spread everywhere."

While he was in Paris, conflict arose between King Philip IV of France (who wanted to raise funds for a military campaign by taxing French clergy) and Pope Boniface VIII (who believed that church properties—as well as all spiritual and much temporal authority—belonged to the papacy). Scotus's support for the pope got him kicked out of the country, but he soon returned. He died on November 8, 1308, after traveling to Cologne to serve as rector at the Franciscan college there.

Scotus's thought is difficult to characterize. He did not write clearly or systematically. Because he died young, he was unable to finish or synthesize many of his writings. His work at times reads like a series of sharp, unrelated arguments. Further muddling matters, he frequently wove his own position into his assessment of other philosophers' ideas. Nevertheless, his Aristotelianism is manifest to any reader familiar with disputes of the day, as is his use of the Muslim thinker Avicenna.

Though Scotus's positive view of the human will conflicted with both Aquinas and Augustine, Scotus's arguments for the Immaculate Conception of Mary raised more of a ruckus in his day.

Early church fathers who had promoted Mary's special status had already raised the idea of her sinlessness, but Scotus was the first to suggest that she was free from inherited sin because Christ's grace was applied to her, preventatively, at her own conception.

Because Albert the Great, Bona-venture, and Aquinas had all opposed this theory, their Dominican and secular heirs launched an attack. Jean de Pouilly went so far as to call the idea heretical and declared, ominously, that anyone who supported it should be countered "not with arguments but otherwise." Nonetheless, Scotus's thesis gained ground, and the Immaculate Conception was made dogma in 1854.

Until well into the Modern period, the "Subtle Doctor" was widely known and respected as the zenith of scholastic thought. His work embodies an analytic precision, systematic complexity, and theological depth that continues to awe his readers, few though they may be.

THE "UNIVERSAL DOCTOR"
Albert the Great
1206-1280

While teaching at Cologne in 1245, Albert noticed the remarkable mind of his shy pupil Thomas. Albert famously scolded students who derided Thomas's apparently plodding behavior, saying, "Call this young

man a dumb ox, but his bellowing in doctrine will one day resound throughout the world!" If his student had not risen to prominence, though, Albert likely would be remembered as the greatest Dominican philosopher in the thirteenth century.

Born to a noble family in Swabia in 1206, Albert joined the Dominican order and studied theology in Padua. His mastery of the range of natural sciences, from astronomy and physics to zoology and botany, earned him the sobriquet "Universal Doctor." He combined that scientific knowledge with formal scholastic reasoning and an experimental approach to learning.

While his contemporaries were largely content to accept Aristotle's science as the final word on the natural world, Albert insisted that experiments alone would advance scientific understanding. "The aim of natural science," he said, "is not simply to accept the stories of others, but to investigate the causes at work in nature."

Albert and his Franciscan contemporary Roger Bacon both dedicated their lives to proving that the scientific study of the physical world could benefit the church, while turning a blind eye to nature's complexities would only detract from God's glory. Bacon's approach was occasionally iconoclastic and abrasive, but Albert's was guided by a respect for authority and a sensitivity to nuance that ensured his writings a wide and appreciative audience for centuries to come.

Albert had scant patience for the occult, and he viewed alchemy, the mystic attempt to unlock nature's secrets through weak metaphysics and superstition, as unalloyed nonsense. Unlike these silly speculations, his own careful reasoning pointed the way to later discoveries. He used mathematics to demonstrate that the earth is round, which had not been done since classical antiquity, and he wrote of the probable existence of continents yet undiscovered by Europeans.

Albert's scientific reputation spawned wild stories of magical pursuits. One tale holds that he created a thinking, speaking robot. Thomas supposedly destroyed the creature, fearing that it was the work of the devil. Such stories are likely the product of early Modern scientists eager to denigrate the work of their medieval predecessors.

Sadly, Albert outlived his brilliant pupil, but he never forgot him. When a campaign arose to condemn Thomas's writings, he expended his last energies to return to Paris to defend his student's work. He died soon afterward.

PIOUS PEACEMAKER

Bonaventure

c. 1217-1274

Giovanni Fidanza, later known as Bonaventure, joined the Franciscans when he was 17. After Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure was the person most responsible for the organization and growth of the Franciscan order. He was also one of its greatest theologians.

Bonaventure began a friendship with Thomas Aquinas at the University of Paris, where they received their doctorates together in 1267. He wrote voluminously, establishing himself as the Franciscans' answer to the Dominican Aquinas.

In each of Bonaventure's theological works, he reveals his devotion for the beauty of creation and the realization of God's love in each creature. Perhaps the best example of his unique approach is "The Mind's Road to God," which leads the reader in a series of six meditations from contemplation of God's reflection in nature, in the natural faculties of the human soul, and ultimately through grace to the perfect Being of the divine.

The purely intellectual theorizing that was creeping into scholastic discourse repelled Bonaventure. He was determined to keep love, compassion, and an awareness of nature's abundance as integral parts of daily spiritual development.

"The beauty of things," he wrote, "in the variety of light, shape and color, in simple, mixed and even organic bodies—such as heavenly bodies—and minerals like stones and metals, and plants and animals clearly proclaims the divine power that produces all things from nothing, the divine wisdom that clearly distinguishes all things, and the divine goodness that lavishly adorns all things."

Bonaventure had gained a reputation for an even-handed, judicious temperament while studying in Paris, and the Franciscans desperately needed that influence. The order had been split by violent disagreement about Francis's ideal of apostolic purity. One group, the Spirituals, denounced all property ownership as a compromise with the curse of Original Sin. The other group, the Conventuals, saw the Franciscan mission as including an embrace of the world and its trappings.

Bonaventure's willingness to listen carefully and lovingly to all sides of a dispute allowed him to rescue the order from chaos by instituting a code of laws that struck a balance between the two factions. His biography of Francis, approved by the order in 1263, helped define that compromise. He even explained the rule of poverty in a way that made sense to a world entranced with material success.

As his reputation within the church grew, he earned the position of Cardinal-Bishop of Albano in 1273. Bonaventure was not eager to become a prince of the church, though. When papal envoys came bearing the cardinal's wide-brimmed hat, the story goes, they found Bonaventure washing dishes outside a Florence convent. Rather then interrupt himself from his task, he told the envoys to hang the hat on a nearby tree until he had time to free his hands.

He died while trying to mend the Roman church's schism with the Greek church a year later. He might have been poisoned.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 73: Thomas Aquinas: Greatest Medieval Theologian

A Mingling of Minds

Why was one of Christianity's best thinkers so ready to learn from a Muslim and a Jew?

David B. Burrell

The work of Thomas Aquinas may be distinguished from that of any of his contemporaries by his attention to the writings of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), a Jew, and Avicenna, (980-1037) a Muslim. His contemporaries, especially in Paris, were responsive to the work of another Muslim, Averroes (1126-1198), for his rendition of Aristotle, but Aquinas's relation to Averroes and to those who took their lead from him was far more ambivalent.

Aquinas respected Rabbi Moses and Avicenna as fellow travelers in an arduous intellectual attempt to reconcile the horizons of philosophers of ancient Greece, notably Aristotle, with those reflecting a revelation originating in ancient Israel, articulated initially in the divinely inspired writings of Moses. So while Aquinas would consult "the Commentator" (Averroes) on matters of interpretation of the texts of Aristotle, that very aphorism suggested the limits of his reliance on the philosophical writings of Averroes, the ***qadi*** from Cordova.

With Maimonides and Avicenna his relationship was more akin to dialogue, and especially so with Rabbi Moses, whose extended dialectical conversation with his student Joseph in his ***Guide of the Perplexed*** closely matched Aquinas's own project: that of using philosophical inquiry to articulate one's received faith, and in the process extending the horizons of that inquiry to include topics unsuspected by those lacking in divine revelation.

We may wonder at Aquinas's welcoming assistance from Jewish and Muslim quarters, especially when we reflect on the character of his times: the popular response to the call to arms of the Crusades as well as a nearly universal impression on the part of Christians that the new covenant had effectively eclipsed the old.

Aquinas may have shared these sentiments, for all we know, yet his overriding concern in reaching out to other thinkers was always to learn from them in his search for truth.

In this respect, he epitomized the medieval respect for learning, with its conviction that "truth was where one found it." So he was more inclined to examine the arguments of thinkers than their faith, trusting in the image of the Creator in us all to search out traces of the divine handiwork.

It is worth speculating whether the perspective of Aquinas and his contemporaries was not less Eurocentric than our own. What we call "the West" was indeed geopolitically surrounded by Islam, which sat astride the lucrative trade routes to "the East." Moreover, the cultural heritage embodied in notable achievements in medicine, mathematics, astronomy, as well as the logic, philosophical commentary, translation, and original work in metaphysics begun in tenth-century Baghdad, represented a legacy coveted by western medieval thinkers.

Noted historian Marshall Hodgson has called the culture that informed this epoch and extended from India to Andalusia "the Islamicate," intending thereby to include within its scope Jewish thinkers like Maimonides who enjoyed the protected status of ***dhimmi*** and contributed to Muslim civilization. Christians like John of Damascus enjoyed a similar status, reserved by Qur'anic authority for "people of the book," yet the divisions in Christendom saw to it that thinkers in Paris were better acquainted with

Muslim and Jewish writers than with their co-religionists in Islamic regions.

Aquinas's own geographic and social origins could well have predisposed him to a closer relationship with thinkers representative of the Islamic than his contemporaries could be presumed to have had, in Paris at least. His hometown of Aquino in the region of Naples, itself a part of the kingdom of Sicily, reflected a face of Europe turned to the Islamicate, as evidenced in the first translations commissioned from Arabic: "Latin, Muslim, and Jewish culture mingled freely in Sicily in a unique way that was peculiarly Sicilian."

Moreover, in his later years, when his Dominican province asked him to direct a theological ***studium***, Aquinas expressly chose Naples (over Rome or Orvieto) for its location, and that for intellectual reasons: "there was a vitality about Naples that was absent from Rome or any other city in the Roman Province."

So it might be surmised that these dimensions of his own personal history led him to be more open to thinkers from the Islamicate than his co-workers from Cologne or Paris might have been. In any case, the number and centrality of his citations from Avicenna and Maimonides leave no doubt as to their place in his intellectual development.

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From Interfaith Dialogue to Apologetics

Thomas respected Muslims' knowledge of philosophy, but their misconceptions about Christianity concerned him deeply.

Thomas Acquinas

When the Cantor of Antioch wondered how to explain Christianity to local Muslims, he asked Thomas Aquinas. Thomas answered the cantor with Reasons for the Faith Against Muslim Objections, excerpted below. The translation was provided by Joseph Kenny, O.P., a professor of religious studies at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

The following are the things you say the Muslims attack and ridicule: They ridicule the fact that we say Christ is the Son of God, when God has no wife (Qur'ân 6:110; 72:3); and they think we are insane for professing three persons in God, even though we do not mean by this three gods.

They also ridicule our saying that Christ the Son of God was crucified for the salvation of the human race (Qur'ân 4:157-8), for if almighty God could save the human race without the Son's suffering he could also make man so that he could not sin.

They also hold against Christians their claim to eat God on the altar, and that if the body of Christ were even as big as a mountain, by now it should have been eaten up.

On the state of souls after death, you say that the Greeks and Armenians hold the error that souls after death are neither punished nor rewarded until the day of judgment, but are in some waiting room, since they can receive no punishment or reward without the body. To back up their error they quote the Lord in the Gospel (Jn. 14:2): "In my Father's house there are many places to live in."

Concerning merit, which depends on free will, you assert that the Muslims and other nations hold that God's fore-knowledge or decree imposes necessity on human actions; thus they say that man cannot die or even sin unless God decrees this, and that every person has his destiny written on his forehead.

On these questions you ask for moral and philosophical reasons which the Muslims can accept. For it would be useless to quote passages of Scripture against those who do not accept this authority. I wish to satisfy your request, which seems to arise from pious desire, so that you may be prepared with apostolic doctrine to satisfy anyone who asks you for an explanation. On these questions I will make some explanations as easy as the subjects allow, since I have written more amply about them elsewhere [in the Summa contra Gentiles].

How to argue with unbelievers

First of all I wish to warn you that in disputations with unbelievers about articles of the Faith, you should not try to prove the Faith by necessary reasons. This would belittle the sublimity of the Faith, whose truth exceeds not only human minds but also those of angels; we believe in them only because they are revealed by God.

Yet whatever comes from the Supreme Truth cannot be false, and what is not false cannot be repudiated by any necessary reason. Just as our Faith cannot be proved by necessary reasons, because

it exceeds the human mind, so because of its truth it cannot be refuted by any necessary reason. So any Christian disputing about the articles of the Faith should not try to prove the Faith, but defend the Faith. Thus blessed Peter (1 Pet. 3:15) did not say: "Always have your proof," but "your answer ready," so that reason can show that what the Catholic Faith holds is not false.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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Popes, Philosophers, and Peeping Thomists

Whenever it seems that Aquinas might recede into dusty memory, a new wave of truth-seekers brings him back.

Whenever it seems that Aquinas might recede into dusty memory, a new wave of truth-seekers brings him back.

A significant Catholic moment occurred in the middle of the twentieth century.

Consider these American success stories: Catholic Archbishop Fulton Sheen's TV program ***Life Is Worth Living*** (1951-1957) reached 30 million viewers and earned an Emmy. The great French Catholic philosophers Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson taught in major, secular, American universities and developed a wide lay readership.

Trappist monk Thomas Merton's autobiography, ***The Seven Storey Mountain*** (1948), became an improbable best seller. Catholic fiction writer Flannery O'Connor began a promising career with her first novel, Wise Blood, in 1952. She was soon followed by fellow Southerner Walker Percy, also a Catholic, whose first novel, ***The Moviegoer***, won the National Book Award in 1962.

Few Americans, even Catholic Americans, realize that this mid-century flourishing of Catholicism was made possible by a papal encyclical, ***Aeterni Patris***, composed in 1879 by Pope Leo XIII. Yet, nearly all the significant figures in this movement benefited from Leo's efforts to revive Catholic philosophy by reviving the writings of Thomas Aquinas. The Catholic moment in mid-twentieth century America was very much an Aquinas moment as well.

Hero or scapegoat?

Between the publication of his greatest works, in the mid-thirteenth century, and Pope Leo's encyclical, Aquinas's popularity waxed and waned.

Just a few years after his death, the famous Parisian condemnations of 1277 declared some of the propositions he taught contrary to the faith. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Aquinas's thought was at the center of fierce intellectual battles between the Dominicans, his religious order, and the Franciscans, who defended the rival ideas articulated by their leading theologians, Bonaventure and Scotus.

Despite all this, Aquinas was canonized as a saint in 1323. He has received a host of additional accolades and titles over the years as well: "universal" teacher (1317), the "angelic" teacher (1450), a "doctor" of the church (1567), and the patron of all Catholic schools (1880).

Aquinas came under attack again during the Reformation, when Martin Luther and others accused him of placing reason before faith and of leaning too heavily on non-Christian ideas. Luther, who called Aquinas both a "blind cow" and a "holy man," focused his harshest criticisms on Aquinas's fidelity to Aristotle, alleging that "the spirit of Christ does not reign where the spirit of Aristotle dominates."

During these lean years, when Aquinas took flak from Protestants and from the founders of modern science, the Dominicans kept him alive. Then the Jesuits, the most influential modern religious order, adopted him.

At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), called to reform the church from within and to clarify doctrines central to the clashes with Protestantism, his authority was so great that his ***Summa Theologica*** was placed on the altar alongside the Scriptures. Aquinas's teachings on the Eucharist, grace, and on faith and reason are intimately woven into Trent's decrees on these topics.

Out of retirement

After the early modern period and well into the nineteenth century, Catholic philosophy was a hodgepodge of disparate elements: scholastic theology, Newtonian science, and philosophical theses from Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel. When John Henry Newman, the great nineteenth-century Anglican divine and convert to Catholicism, visited Rome, he was astounded at the lack of knowledge of Aquinas among the church's leading intellectuals.

With his encyclical letter ***Aeterni Patris*** (1879), Pope Leo XIII set out to change all that. The pope saw that many of the greatest challenges to Christianity in the modern age were philosophical and that these challenges needed to be met with a philosophy rooted in the wisdom of Scripture and the Fathers of the Church.

Concerning the preeminence of Aquinas, Leo quoted an early modern commentator: "Because he had the deepest veneration for the sacred Doctors of old, he acquired, in a measure, the intelligence of them all."

Although such great scholars as Gilson, Maritain, and Charles DeKonninck wrote books on Aquinas intended for the non-specialist, their work cannot account entirely for the modern attraction of Aquinas. Gilson confessed that, after all his years of careful study, he could not rival the penetrating picture of Aquinas found in G.K. Chesterton's ***Saint Thomas Aquinas*** (1933), a book that made no "pretense to be anything other than a popular sketch."

Chesterton's "sketch" contains an audacious comparison of Aquinas and Francis of Assisi as the two great revolutionaries of the thirteenth century. In Francis's love of nature as the reflection of God and Aquinas's embrace of Aristotle as the philosophical voice of created nature, both men "reaffirmed the Incarnation by bringing God back to earth."

Thomas Merton, whose encounter with the texts of Aquinas while a student at Columbia University contributed directly to his conversion, strikes a similar note in his remarks on Aquinas. In the ***Ascent to Truth***, a book on mysticism, Merton argues that Aquinas's devotion to philosophy and the integrity of human reason is in no way opposed to Christian devotion. On the contrary, Aquinas's "intellectualism" is a feature of his "sanity," his refusal "to divide man against himself," his insistence that you cannot "sanctify men by destroying their humanity."

Aquinas's teachings on grace and on the nature and function of art piqued the interest of novelist Flannery O'Connor. Known for her grim, Gothic tales, she was once accused of being a "hillbilly nihilist." She responded curtly that she was a "hillbilly Thomist." O'Connor was particularly taken by Aquinas's teaching, which Maritain communicated to her, that the excellence of a work of art consists in the artifact, not in the good intentions of the artist.

And the figure of Edith Stein—Jewish convert to Catholicism, ardent reader of the works of Thomas, victim of the Holocaust, and now on her way to becoming a Catholic saint—promises to loom large in any retelling of the influence of Aquinas in the twentieth century.

Although most of the work on Stein thus far has been hagiography of rather poor quality, a number of scholars are beginning to examine her philosophical writings, particularly her writings on Thomas.

Not dead yet

But even as Thomism was undergoing this mid-century renaissance, voices of discontent could be heard. In Catholic colleges, where students were required to take at least six courses in philosophy, they rarely encountered the texts of Aquinas directly. Instead, students read arid scholastic manuals, composed by lesser minds more preoccupied with multiplying distinctions than with engaging living philosophical questions.

Even where serious philosophical and theological debate took place, there was a sense that the writings of Gilson and others were not enough. Just as had been true in the early modern period, so too in the mid-twentieth century, the complaint was that Thomas's scholasticism was embarrassingly outdated.

In the late 1960s, in the wake of Vatican II, many Catholics—some with trepidation, others with gleeful anticipation—predicted the demise of Thomas Aquinas. Yet, in striking testimony to what Pope John Paul II has called the "enduring originality" of Aquinas's thought, we have witnessed yet another Thomistic revival.

Unlike previous revivals, which were typically instigated by popes, councils, bishops, and religious orders, recent interest in Aquinas is neither centralized nor systematic. And for the first time in history, participants include numerous non-Catholics, especially Protestant philosophers and theologians.

Ralph McInerny, a student of the aforementioned DeKonninck, coined the term "peeping Thomist" to describe this new group.

Among peeping Thomists are the recently deceased Mortimer Adler, whose dogged determination helped engineer the curricular innovation known as "great books" education, and the Calvinist philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga, who identifies Aquinas as one of the forerunners of his own highly influential theory of human knowledge.

The present pope has made no mean contribution to the current revival of things Thomist. In his latest encyclical, "Faith and Reason," John Paul II recalls philosophy to its ancient vocation: the pursuit of wisdom, a pursuit rooted in love, seeking truth about the highest things, especially God.

Although the pope is careful to recommend a wide-ranging philosophical curriculum, spanning both West and East, he reaffirms the central role of Aquinas in the intellectual life of the Catholic Church. John Paul II commends Aquinas especially for his understanding of faith and reason, whose essence is captured succinctly in the assertion that "faith does not destroy reason but rather restores, elevates, and perfects it."

As Stanley Hauerwas, a premier Protestant moral theologian who has produced many young students of Aquinas, likes to say, serious students of theology today are not asking, "How far can I go?" or "What can I get away with theologically?" but "What ought I to believe?" and "What can my tradition teach me?" So long as Christians ask these questions, they will turn to Aquinas.

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Thomas Aquinas: Christian History Interview - He's Our Man

Evangelicals can embrace a rich inheritance from Aquinas.

conversation with Norman Geisler

In a 1974 Christianity Today ***article marking the 700th anniversary of Aquinas's death, author Ronald Nash said some nice things about the deceased but ultimately judged his system of thought "unsuitable for a biblically centered Christian philosophy" and "beyond any hope of salvage." Norman Geisler disagreed with that assessment then, and he disagrees with it now. We asked Dr. Geisler, president of Southern Evangelical Seminary and author of*** Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal ***(Baker, 1991), for his evaluation of the Angelic Doctor.***

You've studied Aquinas for 45 years now. What makes him so appealing?

He's insightful, he's incisive, he's comprehensive, he's systematic, he's biblical, he's devout, and he's successful. By successful, I mean, first, how many other books are still being read 700 years later? Second, he single-handedly withstood the onslaught of intellectual Islam in the thirteenth century. He reversed the course of history.

Why isn't Aquinas more popular with evangelicals?

Evangelicals have largely misinterpreted Aquinas, and they have placed on him views that he did not hold. Many people are concerned that he separated faith and reason, denied depravity (especially the effects of sin on the human mind), and stood for everything that "Roman Catholic" means to Protestants today. Let me take those concerns one by one.

Francis Schaeffer criticized Aquinas for giving rise to modern humanism and atheism by separating faith and reason. Aquinas would do cartwheels in his casket if he heard that!

He believed in the integration of faith and reason, not the separation. He made a distinction but no disjunction. Aquinas said that faith brings the highest kind of certainty and that reason, weak and fallen, cannot attain Christian faith.

Still, Aquinas held human reason in such high regard that some accuse him of denying depravity. He did not. He believed in original sin, he believed in the effects of sin on the mind, and he believed that the mind was so depraved that it could not know supernatural truths. God's revealed truths could be accepted only by faith.

And then there's the concern that Aquinas was a Roman Catholic, and we Protestants disagree with Catholicism at key points. In truth, most Protestants today could have accepted what the Roman Catholic church taught up to the time of the Reformation.

Even Martin Luther and John Calvin believed that the Roman Catholic church, up to the Council of Trent, was basically orthodox—a true church with sound fundamental doctrines as well as significant error.

Many of the Catholic beliefs that concern Protestants most were not declared dogma until long after Aquinas. For example, Aquinas denied the immaculate conception of Mary, and it was not declared dogma

until 1854. Aquinas never believed in the bodily assumption of Mary, which was defined in 1950. Aquinas didn't believe in the infallibility of the pope. That was not pronounced until 1870—600 years after Aquinas.

On the other hand, Aquinas held many beliefs associated with the Reformation. He upheld a version of ***sola scriptura***. He believed in salvation by grace through faith—just look at his commentary on Ephesians 2:8-9.

John Gerstner, the late Calvinist theologian, went so far as to claim that Aquinas was basically a Protestant.

How can we avoid the misconceptions and find the real Aquinas?

Read him! Quotes and excerpts in other people's books don't count, because many of his critics have taken him out of context. Get it from the horse's mouth, or should I say the dumb ox's mouth.

Aquinas is worth reading. He has stood the test of time. And even where he errs, you can learn more from the errors of a great mind than you can learn from the truths of a small mind. You can see a whole lot farther standing on the shoulders of giants.

What will people find when they read Aquinas, besides philosophy?

People are rediscovering Aquinas as a biblical exegete. He wrote some of the greatest commentaries on the Bible—no one has surpassed his commentary on the Gospels to this day. He has 10 pages on John 1:1, and 78 pages on chapter one. He culls from the Fathers, from the second century up to the thirteenth century, and weaves them together in a continuous commentary.

After all, he was a member of the Order of Preachers. They had to preach the Bible every day and go through the entire Bible in three years.

What can thinkers engaged in today's theological and philosophical debates learn from Aquinas?

We can learn from him in the way he answered Muslim Aristotelianism. He answered it by fighting bad ideas with good ideas, by fighting the pen with the pen, not the sword. We're not going to win the battle of ideas by the sword. We're going to win the battle of ideas with ideas—better ones, more logical ones, more consistent ones.

Second, we can learn how important it is to understand the philosophy of the day. It's like 1 Chronicles 12:32 says, the men of Issachar "understood the times."

Aquinas studied the philosophy of the day, which was Aristotle. He understood it better than his opponents, and he could use it to refute opponents who misused it. We need to do the same thing in every field.

Aquinas is a tremendous example for us because, today, the basic battle is the battle for God. The only way we're going to defend the orthodox, historic view—held by Aquinas, Augustine, the Reformers, and the creeds and councils of the church—that God knows the future infallibly, that God is eternal and unchangeable, that God even exists, is to go back to Aquinas and his great arguments.

What can Christians who aren't theologians or philosophers learn from Aquinas?

First of all, his absolute, unconditional commitment to Christ. He was an extremely devout person. He spent hours in prayer and Bible reading and Bible study. His whole life had a biblical basis—just read his prayers.

In one Thomistic class I took at a Catholic institution, the professor would pray a brief part of one of Aquinas' prayers before class. He would say, "Inspire us at the beginning, direct our progress, and complete the finished task within us." Aquinas had such a succinct way of getting to the heart of an issue.

Here's another of his prayers: "Give me, O Lord, a steadfast heart, which no unworthy affection may drag downwards; give me an unconquered heart, which no tribulation can wear out; give me an upright heart, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Bestow on me also, O Lord my God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you, and faithfulness that may finally embrace you, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

I can't tell you how Aquinas has enriched and changed my life, my thought. He has helped me to be a better evangelical, a better servant of Christ, and to better defend the faith that was delivered, once for all, to the saints.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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Thomas Aquinas: Recommended Resources

Most material on Aquinas gets very philosophical very quickly. This is unfortunate, as the first sight of a passage like "every essence or quiddity can be understood without knowing anything about its existing (esse)" makes a typical non-philosopher put down the book and pick up the remote. Some authors have realized this, though, and have made noble attempts to put Thomas's ideas on the low shelf. Below are several examples, followed by some weightier matter.

Aquinas 101: Crash courses

Thomas Aquinas in 90 Minutes, by Paul Strathern (Ivan R. Dee, 1998), mixes wisecracks and information in roughly equal proportions, but it does give readers a basic understanding of Aquinas's big ideas. ***Hooked on Philosophy: Aquinas Made Easy***, by Robert O'Donnell (Alba House, 1995), is more enlightening while still very readable.

G.K. Chesterton's famous ***Saint Thomas Aquinas: "The Dumb Ox"*** scores high on readability and flair ("The gown that could contain the colossal friar is not kept in stock" is just one memorable phrase) but lacks a bit in coherence. Not quite a biography, but not quite anything else, the book reveals as much about Chesterton and his era as it does about Aquinas. Still, eminent scholar Etienne Gilson called it "the best book ever written on St. Thomas."

A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas: A Handbook for Peeping Thomists, by Ralph McInerny, is another beginner's gem—if you can find it (it's out of print).

Aquinas 201: Original sources

Reading Thomas's work can never be classed as "easy," but some versions are friendlier than others. ***Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation***, edited by Timothy McDermott (Thomas More, 1997), could be considered the "Living Thomas." Peter Kreeft uses an older translation but offers many comprehension hints in ***A Summa of the Summa*** (Ignatius, 1990) and ***A Shorter Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of Saint Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica*** (Ignatius, 1994).

In December 2001, Sophia Institute Press issued another summary: ***Aquinas's Shorter Summa: Saint Thomas's Own Concise Version of His Summa Theologica***. Aquinas wrote it two years before his death, in response to his secretary Reginald's request for a condensed guide to the masterwork. This book is significantly longer than Kreeft's ***Shorter Summa*** (432 pages to 162). Authors always have a hard time editing their own work. For quickest access to some of Aquinas's work, visit the Christian Classics Ethereal Library online, http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/. ***Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings***, edited and translated by McInerny (Penguin, 1998), is another good collection, with an introduction and notes.

Aquinas 301 and beyond

Readers seeking more than 90 minutes of Aquinas's philosophy might enjoy ***An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas***, collected and translated by James F. Anderson (Regnery, 1997); ***Aquinas***, by F.C. Copleston, S.J. (Viking, 1992); Gilson's ***The Christian Philosophy of St.***

Thomas Aquinas, translated by I.T. Shook (Notre Dame, 1994); or ***The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas***, edited by Norman Kretzmann and Eleanore Stump (Cambridge, 1993). Fair warning, though: the "quiddity" quote comes from the Cambridge volume.

In addition to books, some online resources feature in-depth looks at selected Aquinas topics. Dr. Joseph Magee's Thomistic Philosophy page, http://www.aquinasonline.com, is excellent. The Web site for the Jacques Maritain Center at Notre Dame, http://www.nd.edu/~maritain/, has readings, papers, bibliographies, and more. Joseph Kenny, O.P., who provided the translations on pages 22 and 38 of this issue, has more information on Thomism and on Muslim-Christian interactions at his Web site, http://www.op.org/nigeriaop/kenny/.