

Encyclopedia entry: LIFE AND INFLUENCE OF THOMAS AQUINAS

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Intro:

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a Dominican priest in the thirteenth century. Also a Saint and a Doctor of the Church, Thomas is considered the Church's greatest philosopher and theologian. His most important works are *Summa Theologica* and *Summa contra Gentiles*. As an advocate of natural theology, Thomas formulated the "Five Ways" to show that human reason and experience of nature provide sufficient proof for God's existence. Thomas also synthesized Aristotle's philosophy with Christian theology for the first time. Christian philosophy only operated within the framework of Neoplatonism prior to Thomas, so he is credited with single-handedly incorporating Aristotelianism to Christian thought. All his teachings are considered to be official doctrines, attesting to the indelible mark he left on Christian theology and western philosophy at large.

Life:

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was born in 1225 into an Italian aristocratic family—the de Aquino—as the youngest son. The family was based in Roccasecca, between Rome and Naples, where they owned land and a castle. When Thomas turned five, he was sent to the nearby Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino as an "offered" child as it was customary for the younger sons of nobility to pursue a career in the church. Though the family members expected Thomas to eventually become the abbot there, schooling would have also been on their mind as the monasteries replaced the universities as the center of education in the thirteenth century.

At the age of fifteen, Thomas was sent to Naples to begin his studies. Naples was a cosmopolitan place; there Thomas learned his natural philosophy and also his metaphysics—a topic forbidden to Paris students at the time. It was also in Naples where he encountered the Dominicans. They must have made an impression on the young Thomas for he chose to become neither a Benedictine monk nor a regular priest, but a friar in an order that was founded less than thirty years before. The Dominican order is a mendicant order—a begging order— which would have been attractive to a young man because it allowed access to cities, the newly forming economic and scientific centers with universities and academic communities including famous teachers. In addition to the educational opportunities, scholars believe the evangelical simplicity of the order also influenced Thomas to reject the well-endowed monastery in Monte Cristo and become a mendicant.

The family was strongly opposed to Thomas' decision to join the Dominican order as they would have rather seen him as the abbot of the rich monastery of Monte Cassino. Desperate to change Thomas' mind, the family even resorted to abduction and seduction as they kidnapped Aquinas on his way to the 1244 General Chapter in Bologna and attempted to seduce him with a

prostitute. The family eventually returned the resolute Thomas to the Dominicans, and thus at the age of nineteen Thomas became a Dominican.

In 1245, the order sent the twenty-year-old Thomas to Paris to complete his noviciate and continue his studies. At the time, Paris was the “city of the philosophers” and the center of European cultural life which had undergone a renewal of philosophy and theology, in part because the city was beginning to receive and study the whole of Aristotle. Though only parts of Aristotle’s works — and only those relating to logic— had been studied by medieval philosophers, the fresh discovery of his wide range of thought brought forth a tremendous wealth of knowledge for European scholars, particularly in the sphere of natural sciences, medicine, anthropology and metaphysics.

In Paris, Thomas met the Dominican Scholar Albert the Great who had spent twenty years producing an encyclopedia of Aristotelian thought. When Albert was asked to teach at a new general study house in Cologne in 1248, Thomas accompanied him. Thomas was most likely ordained in Cologne, and there he also started to teach as a bachelor, a kind of apprentice professor. In 1252 Thomas was sent back to Paris to teach at the university despite his relatively young age. It is then he began to write a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, which was an endeavor required of any aspiring theologian at the time. His *Commentary on the Sentences (Scriptum super libros Sententiarum)* was his first large work. In 1256, at the young age of thirty-one, Thomas became one of the twelve masters of the Sorbonne, a modern equivalent of a chair in a university department.

In 1259 Thomas left Paris, returned to Naples for a couple of years, and arrived in Orvieto in 1261. There, he was appointed conventual lector whose duty was to educate the friars who were unable to study at a general study house. He finished his *Summa contra Gentiles*, the first of his two masterpieces, which he started in Paris. It is also from this time we have the widest variety of his writings, most of which were responses to requests and questions from correspondents near and far.

In 1265, the Order asked him to move to Rome to start another study house meant for specially selected Dominicans. It is believed that this was a special arrangement to allow Thomas to start a one-man study center where he would have been free to develop courses as he thought appropriate. The fact that the school did not survive Thomas’s departure lends support to the view that this was a unique experiment. It is at this time that he began his most famous work, the *Summa Theologica*.

Three years later, Thomas returned to Paris as a master of the University. He continued to work on the *Summa Theologica*. He was extremely productive in the last ten years or so of his life. He had begun to dictate his work ever since becoming a master, and there are stories telling that he dictated to three or even four secretaries at once, each on a different work.

In 1272, Thomas moved to Naples to find another study house for theological studies. Though he continued to work on the final part of the *Summa Theologica*, the work was never completed. During mass in 1273, Aquinas seemed to have had some sort of religious experience.

Though he physically recovered after a period of bed rest, he never fully recovered from the experience as to continue writing. Aquinas never resumed writing, remarking that in comparison to what he had seen then, all his writings were as straw.

Thomas died a couple of months later on his way to the Second Council of Lyons to which he was summoned by Gregory X to take part. During the journey, Thomas hit his head on a branch—scholars note that his fits of abstraction were well known—and became ill. His childhood monastery of Monte Cassino happened to be near by, so Thomas was taken to the Benedictine monastery, then on to some relatives. After somewhat recovering, he set out for the Council again, but had to discontinue the trip at the Cistercian monastery of Fossanova. There he died on March 7th, 1274, most likely due to blood clot.

Though he weren't canonized until some fifty years later, Thomas immediately achieved a saint-like reputation upon his death, in part because one of the Cistercian monks claimed his eye disease was healed when he pressed his eyes against those of the corpse. In 1323 Thomas was officially canonized by Pope John XXII and declared Doctor of the Church by Pius V in 1567.

Work:

Though it was never a part of his official duties, and though he never taught philosophy, Thomas read and wrote philosophical works throughout his career. For example, he wrote *De Ente et Essentia (On Being and Essence)* while still a bachelor, a work that would later provide him with the metaphysical foundations for his doctrine of God and creation; he wrote a commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate (On the Trinity)* while in Paris; in his later years he wrote commentaries on Aristotle's works. Aquinas' heavy reliance on Aristotle, and philosophy in general, reflects a certain understanding of the relationship between theology and philosophy that grounds all of his works.

While it is true that Thomas was heavily influenced by Aristotle's philosophy, it is important to realize that Thomas was not interested in what Aristotle had to say *per se*. Given Thomas' careful study of various translations and commentaries, it is without a doubt that he was invested in understanding Aristotle authentically. However, Thomas wished to see how Aristotle might be understood in Christian terms, and therefore intended Aristotle's transformation more so than his revival. Thomas believed that the Christian faith could complement and complete Aristotle's philosophy.

Thomas endeavored to solve theological problems by looking at its philosophical ties and examining where philosophy could have gone wrong. Thomas held that theology ought to deal not only with the correct interpretation of Scripture and doctrine, but also with the eradication of anything that hinders faith; he considered mistaken philosophical principles and concepts to be among such stumbling-blocks to be removed. Thus, Aquinas' engagement with philosophy should be seen as an attempt to assess how holding the correct philosophical understanding of things could lead to correct theology or the proper understanding of doctrines.

Because Thomas was convinced that faith and reason can work in harmony, he sought to express theology in rational terms—and his works can be seen as attempts to do exactly this. He relies on the Aristotelian worldview including its metaphysics, natural science, and ethics to explain and support Christian doctrines. Thomas’ belief that faith and reason can work together is also supported by his realist philosophy. He thought that knowing the natural world and understanding it will reveal things about God because nature is created and dependent on God, and therefore ordered in such a way to give us genuine knowledge about reality. In fact, Thomas believed that we could *only* know God from his “effects,” i.e. the observable everyday reality including the natural world, because we could not know God’s nature as it is. The famous “Five Ways” therefore details how five observable phenomena sheds light on the necessity of God.

Summa contra Gentiles

The title of the work — “against Gentiles”— suggests that the work was composed to argue against nonbelievers. In the thirteenth century, Islam presented itself not only as a political and military threat but also an intellectual and spiritual challenge. It was thus thought that the *Summa contra Gentiles* was a commissioned work written at the request of a Dominican general, Raymond of Peñafort, for the purpose of creating a missionary handbook. Scholars eventually came to dismiss this likelihood because there is no dedication to Raymond and because there were no discussions of Muslim doctrines within the book. Others have considered *ScG* a book written for the Christians intellectually battling against other believers in general (as opposed to solely against Muslims). According to this view, the work provided an overall view of Christian convictions at the level of natural reason because it was aimed at convincing non-Christians. A closer look, however, shows *ScG* to be a work that deals more generally with the relationship between faith and reason; in fact, it had even been suggested that *ScG* is an essay in personal reflection as Thomas expresses no specific occasion to write the book.

ScG refutes heretical beliefs and defends Christian doctrines; its aim ranges from correcting the error of those who argue against faith to demonstrating the beautiful intelligibility of the wisdom of divine revelation. The work is split into two sections: Books I-III, which operate within the realm of reason and establishes theological positions that can be reached by philosophy alone; and Book IV, which concerns revealed truths such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. Book I treats God as He is in Himself and whether God’s existence or nature can be proven or discussed. Book II treats God “in action,” that is, in Creation; it examines God as the origin of all things and inquires into the nature of Creation with a focus on the nature of human beings. Book III treats God as the End and shows how all things have their end in God. Finally, Book IV treats the revealed God—that is, the revealed Christian doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, the Sacraments, and the Resurrection.

The different approaches in Book I-III and Book IV stem from Thomas’s belief that there are two different kinds of knowledge we can have about God due to the limitations of human knowledge, which necessarily comes from the senses: natural theology without revelation, and theology with revelation. But since both reason and faith are rooted in the same truth of God, Thomas thought they should compliment each other. Thus, the dichotomous structure of *ScG*, as

well as Thomas's theological examination of our philosophical knowledge, emphasizes our need for revelation by displaying the incompleteness of what we can know apart from Scripture. *ScG* is a book of Christian philosophy, a place where the human search for wisdom and truth, aided by divine revelation, arrive at the ultimate truth.

Summa Theologica:

In the beginning of the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas writes that “a doctor of catholic truth ought not only to teach the proficient, but to him pertains also to instruct beginners” and that “our proposed intention in this work is to convey those things that pertain to the Christian religion, in a way that is fitting to the instruction of beginners.” However, it must be noted that “beginners” does not refer to those with no previous theological education. Aquinas had his fellow Dominicans in mind when he wrote the book and sought to *deepen* their understanding of the Christian doctrine. It is also important to remember that the work was meant for theologians as faith is presupposed throughout the book.

The *ST* uses the scholastic method of inquiry throughout and adheres to a strict structure. The question is first stated, then a couple of “objections” argue against the affirmative answer to the question. Then comes the “*sed contra*”—“but, on the contrary,”— which usually includes short quotation from the bible or other authorities, e.g. Aristotle or Augustine. Aquinas's own views come last as the body of the article.

As its title means “theological summary,” the *ST* seeks to capture the essence of Christian theology: God's existence and nature, the relationship between Man and God, and Christ's work that reconciles Man to God. The first part focuses on God whose existence is known by reason (proved by the Five Ways) but whose essence or nature is only accessible through revelation. After considering God, the source of all things, Aquinas turns his attention to the created world: the angels, the natural world, and finally Man, the zenith of Creation. The second part elaborates on Man, including Man's purpose, which, like Aristotle, Aquinas argues to be happiness; and happiness culminates in our “return” to God since we “came” from God. Again, agreeing with Aristotle, Aquinas argues the purpose of morality is happiness— so the second part deals with what man must do to reach his intended destiny, i.e. his return to God. Since no man is capable of living a perfectly ethical life as to fulfill his purpose, a perfect man had to intercede. Thus the third part of *ST* deals with Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The Sacraments had been provided in an attempt to help Man follow the ways of the perfect man and so *ST* ends with a consideration of the Sacraments.

Influence:

Though now considered one of the most prominent theologians in Catholic history, Thomas was initially accused of being a heretic. At first his work continued to be read after his death, especially by the Dominicans, but theologians of the time began to regard him as an advocate of a ‘new theology’ because of his extensive use of Aristotle's philosophy. Thomas had

freely utilized Aristotelian thought, the newly rediscovered philosophy of the time, and thereby went against the traditional Christian philosophical framework. Until Thomas, Christian thought relied almost exclusively on Platonism, especially because Augustine, a figure of great authority, was deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, a derivative form of Platonic thought. Thus, theologians contemporary to Thomas thought it inappropriate for Thomas to assimilate Aristotle into the Platonic tradition of theology. Matters were made worse from the fact that Aristotle's works reentered the West through Muslim philosophers and theologians. Thomas's teachings were officially condemned by the Bishop of Paris in 1277.

The followers of Thomas, however, continued to wrestle with the complexity of his thoughts and the attacks against it. By the end of the fifteenth century, *Summa Theologica* began to replace Peter Lombard's *Sentences* as the basic theology textbook. Whereas *Sentences* was meant to be used alongside Scripture, *Summa Theologica*, which featured arguments that could be understood and discussed apart from Scripture, became the basic text of what became a new tradition: Thomism. In the nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII, who saw great apologetic strength in Thomas's thought, encouraged more scholars to study Thomas. Thomas studies flourished; journals and institutions were founded, and Thomas's works were taught in all seminaries. In 1567 Thomas was formally elevated to the status of teacher of the church by Pope Pius V, and Pope Leo XIII declared him the patron of all Catholic universities and schools in 1880. By declaring him a doctor, Pope Leo XIII declared all his teachings to be official church doctrine, confirming Aquinas's status as one of the most influential philosophers and theologians ever.

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See also: *Summa Theologica* (The Writing of)

Further Reading:

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