

THE HISTORICAL POSITION OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS.

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IN recent years there has been a noticeable revival of interest in Scholasticism. Philosophers have professed to find the same logical and metaphysical problems in the writings of medieval thinkers that furnish the topics of their discussions. Whether much light will ultimately be obtained from these sources on the real philosophical problems of our day is a question that need not concern us here; but one fact may be regarded as established—namely, that the opinion which used to look down upon the work of the medieval thinkers as nothing but a congeries of theological sophistry, is utterly out of date. The Schoolmen strove as sincerely and earnestly to find the truth in their world as we are striving to find it in ours; if their world was so different from ours it was not their fault. So if only to be just to the thinkers of the past, and thus to be just to ourselves, a brief review of their problems, and of the solutions which they attempted, may not be out of place.

It is generally conceded that in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, Scholasticism reached the summit of its achievement. In singling him out for our purpose, we shall consider his contemporaries and immediate predecessors only as they contributed to shape his thought. It must of course be admitted that there would have been no St. Thomas, or at any rate a very different one, if it had not been for the work of the other great Schoolmen who preceded him, St. Anselm of Canterbury, Abelard, Albertus Magnus. For St. Thomas was, properly speaking, not a creator, but a systematizer and consolidator, giving final shape and place to speculations that had been growing in the course of centuries. Naturally, the particular needs of the Church in regard to philosophy, at the moment when he appeared on the scene, must also be taken into account.

St. Thomas was born at Roccasecca, the castle of his father, near Aquino, northwest of Naples, probably in the year 1227. Nearby was the famous monastery of Monte Cassino, where he studied with the monks to get his elementary training. He then entered the University of Naples, being only ten years old. His father, the proud count of Aquino, wanted him to join the order of the Benedictines, so he might some day become abbot of Monte Cassino, with all its rich revenues. But the boy, on leaving the university six years later, had developed ideas totally different on the subject, being determined to become a Dominican—a mendicant friar. In spite of the violent opposition of his family, who did not shrink from kidnapping him and keeping him a prisoner for a while, he carried out his resolution when he was hardly seventeen.

The unusual talents of the young man were at once discovered, and resolved to give him the best they had to offer, his superiors sent him across the Alps to study with one of their order, Albertus Magnus, the great Schoolman, who was then lecturing in Cologne and Paris. For three years Thomas pursued his studies under this master, at the end of which he received the degree of Bachelor of Theology. Meanwhile he took an active part in the controversies between his order and the University of Paris, foreshadowing his later distinction in subtle argumentation. When he was thirty, Thomas was made Doctor of Theology. After that he lectured on theological subjects in the universities of Paris, Rome, Bologna, and other cities, finally returning to Naples and settling there. Two years later, on a trip to attend the Council of Lyons where another attempt was to be made to reconcile the Roman and Greek Churches, he died at the monastery of Fossa Nuova, near Terracina, 25 miles from the place where he was born. He lived to be only forty-seven years old.

Thomas' greatness had been recognized by the discerning from the very first. Even in his lifetime he was distinguished by the surname "The Angelic Doctor." The archbishopric of Naples was offered to him, and when he declined it, the abbacy of Monte Cassino; but he preferred to lead the humble life he had mapped out for himself so early, preaching and lecturing every day, traveling in the interests of the Church and of his order, and meanwhile finding time to compose the voluminous writings that have immortalized his name, the *Summa theologiae*, *Contra gentiles*, his commentaries on various books of the Bible, on Aristotle, and so forth. The humility of his spirit was as remarkable as the acumen of his in-

telleet. He was canonized in 1323. In 1567, at the close of the great Council of Trent which had to define the position of the Catholic Church concerning the host of questions brought up by the Reformation, he was ranked by the Pope with the four great Latin fathers, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory. Finally, over six hundred years after his death, in 1879, Pope Leo XIII proclaimed his teaching the official philosophy of the Roman Catholic Church.

In spite of the modern significance thus lent to his work, Thomas' activity belongs to the thirteenth century, and we must study the thirteenth century to understand what he was mainly trying to do.

Since the days of Anselm (d. 1109) the philosophic situation in western Europe had changed in many respects. It is characteristic that Anselm's chief work, *Cur Deus homo*, should treat merely of an isolated question of Christian theology, the doctrine of atonement. His most famous achievement, the ontological argument for the existence of God, really did little credit to his sense of logic, and was, as a matter of fact, refuted five hundred years before Kant by St. Thomas himself. The naiveté with which he established faith as the sole basis of philosophic speculation could not but be promptly dispelled by a subtler generation. Perhaps by some law of contrast, Abelard already (d. 1142) taught the very opposite, making doubt the prerequisite of inquiry, understanding, and faith. The greatest change, however, was brought about by the influence of the writings of Aristotle which about this time became available to the Schoolmen.

Up to 1150, only the first two parts of Aristotle's logical treatises, afterward called the *Organon*, had been known in the West. Now, besides the rest of these, his *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Ethics*, and a great number of other writings, either by him or attributed to him, made their appearance. To complicate the issues even more, the Latin translations now first prepared were not made from the original Greek, but from Arabic translations obtained in Spain, the southern part of which was at that time still in the hands of the Moors. Naturally Arabian commentaries on Aristotle and other Greek writers, notably of a neo-Platonic character, were imported also, besides original works of Arabian philosophers.

As far as the Church was concerned, two chief dangers resulted from this influx of new ideas. One was mysticism, belittling the actual content of faith and questioning the divine origin

and value of the whole hierarchical order. To be sure, mystical tendencies are found as clearly as in Scotus Erigena (d. ca. 877) whose teaching was now revived; still, the peculiar neo-Platonic doctrine of the emanation of the world from the Godhead, and the doctrine of ecstasy as the reunion of the soul with God, are plainly discernible in the subsequent philosophical development, even after the condemnation of Erigena's system by the Church (1225), and the heritage from the Arabs must be considered the source. The other danger was rationalism, or, to be more specific, the problem resulting from the conflict between faith and knowledge, which, with Aristotle's world of thought in full view, could no longer be avoided and a few centuries later led to the final emancipation of philosophy.

In this respect the greatest impetus to Western thinking was probably given by the teaching of the Arabian philosopher, Averroës (d. 1198), the greatest expounder of Aristotelianism of his time. His writings were brought to southern France by Jews driven out of Spain by the conquering Christian Spaniards, and naturally could not be overlooked by anybody who studied the new doctrines. Averroës was perhaps the first to arrive at an interpretation of religion as a personal experience that, as such, had nothing to do with the truth-seeking of science. This led him to the introduction of a system which keeps the tenets of faith and the findings of science absolutely distinct, in this way assuring autonomy to both. When it is remembered that Anselm had taught "Credo ut intelligam," the challenge of this new concept will at once be apparent. The proper relation between philosophy and religion thus became an issue of paramount importance for any future Scholastic system.

Other doctrines of Averroës, his concept of the universal intellect and the somewhat neo-Platonic teaching of the highest bliss attainable to man, the merging of the individual soul in the universal intellect in this life, his consequent denial of the immortality of the individual soul, etc., had to be faced likewise, though, not being understood, they were hardly taken as seriously.

Above all, however, it was Aristotle, himself, who impressed the minds of the Schoolmen tremendously. "*The Philosopher*" he soon came to be called. The wealth of his materials of observation, the careful elaboration of his theories, the harmony existing between all the parts of his system, the all-comprehensiveness of his views were overwhelming. Unfortunately, one may say, they

also chimed in to perfection with the dominant demand of the medieval mind for order, organization, and authority, so that one is inclined to think that a smaller, less sensational find might have proven even more stimulating to independent thinking. But Aristotle supplied exactly what had been lacking in the medieval view of the world—a definite knowledge of the objects of our immediate experience. His metaphysical speculations, on the other hand, were found to leave sufficient room for interpretation to cover up all discrepancies when the Christian verities were reached, a subject on which the heathen thinker would have been “excused” anyway. Still, the free spirit of inquiry characteristic of the Greek mind could not but impress the ecclesiastics as something hostile, and it took the efforts especially of Albertus Magnus and his greater disciple, Thomas, to render Aristotle not only harmless for Christian orthodoxy, but to transform him into a veritable pillar of the Church.

Now, this is the problem that confronted St. Thomas: On the one hand, there were the plain facts of nature and human society, as summarized by Aristotle; on the other, there were the Christian revelations. Both were felt to be of equal reality, for in Aristotle the sum of earthly knowledge was believed to be as truly contained as salvation in the gospel proclaimed by the Church. But what relation between the two? Should the facts of nature be understood in the light of the facts of revelation, or vice versa? Or was there no connection between the two, as Averroës had taught? The choice seemed to be between mysticism, materialism, and, perhaps, skepticism.

St. Thomas found an entirely different way out. His central thought was a grading systematizing, and in this he found the neo-Platonic concept of emanation of great value. He taught that there were three realms: a lower realm of nature, and a higher realm of grace, each with its own verities, perfectly valid in their proper spheres; beyond both of them, however, the realm of God’s own presence. The realm of nature, St. Thomas taught, can be completely understood; but of the realm of grace, we have only glimpses vouchsafed to us by divine revelation. It will be seen that, according to this distinction, there could be no contradiction between the two, because the facts of the higher realm were, in their very nature, inaccessible to our reasoning. They were nevertheless true, and could be proven to be true, *to some extent*, by our reason itself. This was possible only because Thomas included

much in the realm of nature that is nowadays regarded as metaphysics: for example, the existence of God, the creation of the world in time, the immortality of the soul, all these were considered by him demonstrable by reason. The doctrines of the Trinity, however, of the Incarnation, the resurrection of the body, and some finer points of the Creed, he declared to be pure articles of faith. But what about the third realm, rising above the realms of reason and revelation? There existed, according to St. Thomas, the possibility of an immediate union with God, through the mystic vision. Why God should choose to manifest himself in this extraordinary way was another mystery of the faith, but too many of these visions had been recorded in the annals of the Church to be quietly disregarded. To obviate all undesirable consequences, St. Thomas taught, in addition, that this realm opened itself to us only in occasional solemn moments of ecstasy that the pious Christian could hope for, but not attain by any effort of his own. A perfectly reasonable attitude to take, and one in agreement with the facts even from a modern psychological point of view; but at the same time mysticism, while most highly exalted, was being made quite harmless from a practical point of view.

This is the philosophical system of Thomas Aquinas in barest outline. It can easily be imagined how many collisions of minor points had to be avoided, though the general scheme may seem plausible enough. But the logical method of Aristotle, thoroughly mastered by Thomas, helped to overcome all difficulties. By ever so many fine definitions and subtle distinctions he managed to make his points, and since formal logic was the only validity test applicable to a theory in those days, his system was doubtless the best-grounded so far devised.

There are many aspects to St. Thomas' teaching that cannot be gone into here because beyond of the scope of this paper. His attitude toward the Church as an institution; toward political, economic, and social questions; his ethical and even his aesthetic teaching would have to be discussed at length to do him full justice. Also, the whole controversy concerning the nature of universals, a strictly philosophical question, had to be ignored, the aim being rather to point out Thomas' central position in the struggle for the liberation of the human mind. For it must be acknowledged that, as Thomism was the culmination of Scholasticism, it was also the first step to the final dissolution of this philosophy.

Thomas had withdrawn the mysteries of Christianity from

rational treatment—a tremendous achievement, showing better than anything else how deep the influence of Aristotle and his Arabian interpreters had gone. But this pointed the way out for many other doctrines troublesome to scientific speculation, the existence of God, the creation of the world, etc., which he had retained in his realm of nature. And his successors, notably Duns Scotus (d. 1308) and William of Occam (d. 1347), were not slow in availing themselves of this opportunity, the latter arriving exactly at the position which Averroës had first taken: that the verities of faith and of philosophy are two utterly distinct subjects. In this way St. Thomas helped prepare, much against his own will, the way for skepticism, experimentalism, empiricism—the road of modern science. At the same time he created, in the recovery and complete assimilation of Aristotelian methods, an instrument for acute and accurate thinking that was as formidable as it was indispensable for the philosophical advance of mankind.

Thomas' system is so well balanced, so well adjusted, so equitable all-around, that from this very fact one might be inclined to conclude he surmised some of the consequences liable to be drawn from his theses. If so, it does his honesty as a thinker the greatest honor to have gone as far as he did.