

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ST. BONAVENTURE AND OF ST. THOMAS

THE Franciscan Bonaventure of Bagnorea and the Dominican Thomas Aquinas are typical of their respective Orders.

St. Bonaventure has been described as 'one of the most lovable figures in the whole history of mediaeval thought, the great doctor of mystical contemplation, the most perfect exponent of Franciscan theology, that is of a theology thoroughly imbued with the religious genius of St. Francis of Assisi.'¹ St. Thomas has been characterized as the architect of the most perfect philosophical synthesis, 'one of the three greatest metaphysicians who ever existed,'² whose only love was the quest for and the championing of truth, *unice veritatis amator*,³ the most eminent personification of St. Dominic's ideal, that is, to uphold, to spread and to defend the Truth.

If it is true that St. Francis never condemned learning for itself, it is equally true that he had no desire to see it developed in his Order. The pursuit of learning was always considered by St. Francis to be more dangerous than useful, and desired it neither for himself nor the members of his Order. His personal influence, profound as it was, did not, however, and could not prevail against the pressure of facts; and the Franciscans soon realized the necessity of developing theological studies.

¹ E. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. London, 1938; pp. 49-50.

² Gilson, *ibid.*, p. 324. The other two greatest metaphysicians of whom Gilson speaks are Plato and Aristotle.

³ Leo XIII in the Encyclical Letter *Aeterni Patris*, Aug. 4, 1879.

St. Dominic's approach to learning was very different. Study was always considered in the Dominican Order, since its very beginning, as one of the most important duties of the Friars and an essential part of St. Dominic's original design. Study is, and must ever remain, a means for the salvation of souls, but a fundamental means without which a Dominican cannot thoroughly achieve the final end of his vocation. The aims of both Orders are graphically expressed by St. Bonaventure:

Alii (Praedicatores) principaliter intendunt speculationi, a quo etiam nomen acceperunt, et postea unctio; alii (Minores) principaliter unctio, et postea speculationi.⁴

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To present a well defined and systematic account of St. Bonaventure's 'multifarious, infinitely diverse and subtly shaded' thought is indeed a most arduous task. Only such a gifted scholar as Professor E. Gilson could undertake it with success, as he has done so splendidly in his *Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, now made available in an English translation;⁵ and though the original French edition was published as far back as in 1924, we may confidently say that even to-day it has lost very little of its remarkable value. Of the *Thomistic Synthesis* we possess an authoritative exposition presented by the well-known professor of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), G. M. Manser, O.P. This fundamental and masterly work now appears in a revised edition notably enlarged and partly re-written.⁶

⁴ S. Bonavent., *In Hexaëmeron*, collatio xxii (ed. Quaracchi, V, n. 21, p. 440).

⁵ E. Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, translated by Dom I. Trethowan and F. J. Sheed. (Sheed & Ward); pp. xiv-551; 18s.

⁶ G. M. Manser, O.P., *Das Wesen des Thomismus*, 2, erweiterte Auflage. Freiburg, Schweiz. (Verlag der Universitätsbuchhandlung: F. Rüttschi), pp. viii-679.

Professor Gilson concludes his brilliant study with the remark—which to one of his reviewers seemed an evident paradox—that the philosophy of St. Thomas and the philosophy of St. Bonaventure never either conflict or coincide. In the light of these two scholarly works we may perhaps have ample opportunity of seeing whether in reality the two doctrines agree or disagree, coincide or conflict. We propose, then, to compare briefly, by indicating rather than by thoroughly discussing, the fundamental tenets of the Franciscan and the Dominican Doctors, and thus attempt to grasp the significance of their intellectual structure.

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The outstanding event in the intellectual movement of the thirteenth century was undoubtedly the meeting of the Schoolmen with the freshly rediscovered Aristotelian Corpus. The new learning was pursued with eagerness and enthusiasm, but its assimilation was unexpectedly slow. Obviously, it was neither moulded in a cast, nor the work of one man or of one group; but rather a protracted advance in which more than one generation of thinkers joined forces. Yet the diffusion and assimilation of Aristotelian thought was assuredly due to St. Albert the Great more than to any other. Expert scientist, profound philosopher and eminent theologian, Albertus Magnus, more than any other master or group of masters, contributed to render Aristotle intelligible to the Latin world: *'nostra intentio est omnes dictas partes facere Latinis intelligibiles.'*⁷

But whilst the new learning stirred up the Universities, particularly in the Faculties of Arts, to fascination and enthusiasm, it soon had to face the mistrust of the older generation, especially amongst the theologians brought up in the Platonic (Neo-Platonic) tradition, who strived to resist and check the vigorous impulse. Hence appeared two

⁷ St. Albert. Mag., *In I Physic.*, tr. 1, c. i (edid. Borgnet, III, p. 2a).

groups of masters, the Aristotelians and the so-called Augustinians, and two currents of ideas, Aristotelianism and Augustinianism. St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure represent in this huge movement of thought two tendencies, two attitudes, two different directions. Their approach to Aristotle was deliberate, and their firm stand and position were taken by both from the outset of their academic career.

St. Thomas realized at once the tremendous wealth of true doctrine embodied in the new learning. Bred first as a boy at Montecassino, where the tradition of classical, scientific and philosophical studies was very much alive; brought up in his early youth in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Naples, where he came into close contact with the Aristotelian masters, Peter Martin and Peter of Ireland; finally, trained as a Dominican under Albertus Magnus, Aquinas was wonderfully fitted for the gigantic task of substituting Aristotelianism for the older speculative tradition.

His line of action was defined even in his earliest works, the treatise *De Ente et Essentia* and the commentary on the Books of the Sentences. But his position was fixed when, engaging in controversy with the 'Gentiles,' he undertook the duties of a Catholic Doctor, whose function is to teach the truth. The attitude of the theologians and of the Averroists drove him, during his second regency at Paris (1269-1272), to a last unwavering step. On the one hand, there were the hesitations, the fumbings, the equivocations of the so-called Augustinians, who, whilst eagerly using Aristotelian teaching, imposed upon it an alien meaning and never ceased, at the same time, to attack Aristotle; on the other hand, there was the growing diffusion of the Averroist movement and the ridicule to which theology itself, the queen of sciences, was being exposed by the clumsy handling of the most vital points of controversy. By stressing the value of Aristotelian learning and more accurately defining the borderlines of philosophy and theology, St.

Thomas put an end to an embarrassing situation. Firmly convinced of the perennial vitality of the main metaphysical theses of Aristotle, sure of his own method and doctrine, he was able to carry out a new constructive philosophy and to confute vigorously and efficiently the Averroist interpretations and conclusions. His adversaries accused him of imposing dangerous innovations upon theology; but his friends admired the new modes brought forward in the schools by his teaching, by his method, by his doctrine. His innovations did not in fact consist so much in the introduction of new doctrines as in the re-fashioning of the traditional learning in a new synthesis. No one was more respectful towards traditional teaching than Aquinas. Rather than indulging in new theories, he examined afresh and entirely assimilated all that was real, true and vital in the learning handed down through the centuries by the Doctors of the Church and by the thinkers of the past, whether Christian or pagan; but the obsolete, the false, the dead, he quietly but firmly rejected. Of course, St. Thomas was not an eclectic, picking and choosing elements from the various sources and mingling them together; but rather, like a wise architect, with the materials at his disposal he built up a wonderful organic structure, comparable only to the superb mediaeval cathedrals, thus elaborating and unifying pagan and Christian culture into the framework of a thorough and perfect synthesis, a homogeneous *corpus doctrinae*.

St. Bonaventure's way led him in a different direction. Study, he tells us, is not forbidden to the Franciscans; it may be very useful and sometimes of necessity; not even philosophy and secular learning are condemned, but they are to be pursued only with a view to grasping the meaning of the philosophical expressions used by theologians and to attack the errors of philosophers. To descend to the level of philosophers is, for him, the most dangerous of all dangers. Masters must be careful not to speak too much in praise of the works of philosophers lest they entice dis-

ciples towards these sources of errors.⁸ Aristotelianism, according to Bonaventure, is a useless and a condemned doctrine. Aristotle, it is true, was a great scholar, but a bad philosopher; Aristotle may satisfy curiosity, but his philosophy is irrelevant to the real, and hence worthless.

St. Bonaventure explicitly calls himself the continuator of Alexander of Hales;⁹ thereby, adds Gilson, he makes his own a tradition other than that from which St. Thomas was to draw his inspiration. In fact, if we accept Roger Bacon's evidence, Alexander was not acquainted with the natural philosophy and with the metaphysics of Aristotle, which he describes as the glory of our times, '*in quibus est tota gloria studii modernorum.*'¹⁰ Apart from the exaggeration usual to Roger Bacon, his words are not devoid of truth. As Professor Powicke has it, 'there is not much reliance upon Aristotle in the works of Alexander.'¹¹ Despite several quotations from the *Metaphysics* and other books, Alexander's knowledge of Aristotle and his commentators is exceedingly scanty,¹² and this in sharp contrast with his contemporaries, William of Auxerre, Philip the Chancellor, Roland of Cremona and William of Auvergne.

⁸ St. Bonav., *In Hexaëm.*, coll. xix, 12 (ed. Quaracchi, V, 422).

⁹ *In II Sent.*, 23, 2, 3 (*editio minor*, Quaracchi, 1938, 566); *Praelocutio (ibid.)*, p. 1). For Books I and II of the commentary on the Sentences I quote from the *editio minor*, which reproduces the text of the *Opera Omnia* critically revised.

¹⁰ *Opus Minus*, ed. Brewer in *Opera hactenus inedita* (R.S.) London, 1859; p. 236.

¹¹ H. Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*. A new edition by F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden. Oxford, 1936; I, 363, n. 3.

¹² *Cfr.* the *Prolegomena* in the Quaracchi edition of Alexander's *Summa Theologica*. I, 1924, n. 20: 'Alexander Halensis et Aristotelismus,' p. xxxix.

Alexander of Hales was succeeded in the Chair of Theology at the University of Paris by John de la Rochelle, and the latter by Odon Rigaud. John's attitude towards Aristotle is significant. As Dom O. Lottin, O.S.B., has shown, John de la Rochelle systematically withdrew from his *Summa de Anima* the Aristotelian texts he had previously introduced in the parallel passages of his *Tractatus de divisione multiplici potentiarum animae*.¹³ Odon Rigaud's suspicion of and bitter attack upon the *philosophantes* is too well known to be insisted upon. Richard Rufus of Cornwall, in his commentary on the *Sentences*, never ceased to oppose theology and philosophy, theologians and philosophers, the followers of the Saints and the followers of the heathens.¹⁴ St. Bonaventure was initiated by these masters¹⁵ 'into an essentially Augustinian theology; and with a clear knowledge of what he was doing he definitely committed himself to the traditional teaching:

Non enim studeo novas opiniones adinvenire, sed communes et approbatas retexere.¹⁶

Such great scholars as Fr. Lemmens, O.F.M., the Quaracchi Scholiasts of the *Opera Omnia*, Cardinal F. Ehrle, and

¹³ O. Lottin, *Les traités sur l'âme et les vertus de Jean de la Rochelle*, in 'Rev. Néoscolastique de Philosophie,' 32 (1930), 5-32.

¹⁴ See a striking instance of Richard's attitude in D. A. Callus, *Two early Oxford Masters on the Problem of Plurality of Forms, Adam of Buckfield and Richard Rufus of Cornwall*, in 'Rev. Néoscol. de Phil.,' 42 (1939), 427 and ff.

¹⁵ Richard of Cornwall was not one of St. Bonaventure's teachers, as Gilson suggests, but his immediate successor as bachelor in the *Sentences*. Since Gilson's book appeared in 1924 much research work has been done on Rufus.

¹⁶ *In II Sent., Praelocutio* (ed. cit., p. 11). I read *adinvenire* with the *minor ed.* instead of *adversare*, as Gilson reads with the *Opera Omnia* edition.

others,¹⁷ traced St. Bonaventure's lack of interest in Aristotle partly to the fact that he was born too early to profit by the theological reform of Albertus Magnus, and partly to his duties as General of his Order, which forced him to sacrifice his career as a teacher and prevented him from completing his scholastic system.

Professor Gilson emphatically, and rightly, discredits such an interpretation. 'It was neither through ignorance nor by reason of a mere chronological chance that he did not become an Aristotelian. The truth is that from the first he had attached himself to a doctrine which was its radical negation' (pp. 3-4). And again: 'St. Bonaventure knew Aristotle well, quoted him constantly, adopted a large part of his technical vocabulary, regarded him as the man of knowledge *par excellence*; but he did not place him on a pedestal' (p. 5).

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In a recent interesting study Augustinianism has been described as that teaching which upheld ever and everywhere God's rights and their supreme domination in all created things, never separating heaven from earth, but rather regarding the latter as the mirror of the former and a stepping stone to it; in a word, whilst acknowledging in theory the distinction between philosophy and theology, in practice it does not consider philosophy save as a particular department of theology.¹⁸

¹⁷ This does not appear clearly in the English translation. It is regrettable, and it seems to me unfair to the English reader that in the English translation many footnotes have been altogether omitted, and others so curtailed that it is sometimes very difficult to realise what weight of evidence they bear on the argument.

¹⁸ F. Tinivella, O.F.M. *De impossibili sapientiae adeptione in philosophia pagana iuxta Collationes in Hexaëmeron S. Bonaventurae*, in 'Antonianum,' 11 (1936), pp. 30-31.

Not everything in this rather poetically phrased description is to be taken in its strict and rigorous sense. As a matter of fact, to maintain God's rights inviolate without any surrender was not the privilege of the Augustinians alone, but the duty of each and every theologian. Neither St. Albert the Great, nor St. Thomas, nor any other thirteenth century theologian (I mean *catholic theologian*, not courtier ecclesiastic) ever gave way on this point. Nor would it be right to suppose that Aquinas, for instance, failed to recognise that the whole creation is the mirror of God, seeing that he proclaimed clearly and strenuously that we acquire the natural knowledge of God's existence and of many of his perfections precisely through our appreciation of the hierarchy of created things. But, apart from this, to regard philosophy as dependent on, subordinate to, and practically, though not theoretically, as a branch of theology, was one of the most characteristic features of Augustinianism.

Since, then, St. Bonaventure is commonly held to be the representative and the most complete exponent of Augustinianism, it is obvious that the fundamental problem dominating the whole discussion in St. Bonaventure's thought is the relation of philosophy to theology; and so it was in the eyes of the Seraphic Doctor himself.

That St. Bonaventure knew well and saw clearly the formal distinction between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, cannot be called into question; Professor Gilson has established this point beyond doubt. Philosophy, according to Bonaventure, is the knowledge of things acquired by means of reason alone. Its distinctive character is an absolute certitude, since it is founded on the clear perception of truth by reason. The domain of theology, on the other hand, is widely different. Its field of investigation is the content of revelation, which must be accepted as true not because evident or proved, but by a voluntary act of faith. We believe, not because theology has shown us that the truths of faith can be clearly per-

ceived by us, but simply because God has revealed them. The certitude of faith, then, is the strongest of all, for it is founded upon an indefectible adhesion of the will. Theology proceeds by way of authority, searching for the major premiss in the Holy Writ guaranteed by the authority of God Himself. All its demonstrations are at the service of faith. Sometimes it brings in reasons and analogies to overthrow its opponents; sometimes it rekindles a tepid faith by arguments which support it; at times it reasons for the greater joy of the perfect, for happy is the state of a believing soul rejoicing in the understanding of what it holds by perfect faith. In all this, theology proceeds by way of authority, not to render evident the truths of faith, but to make more intelligible by reasoning about the truth that must be believed.¹⁹

St. Thomas's teaching on this topic is well known. Philosophy's domain is the whole field of truth that can be reached by human reason. Nothing, therefore, belongs to philosophy if it cannot be attained by the natural light of reason and rendered evident by the data of reason alone. The sphere of theology is the supernatural, which is only known by revelation. Created intellectual powers are absolutely unable to attain without revelation the truths which are the proper subject-matter of theology, such as the Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation, since they are above and beyond the reach of created intellect, and consequently can neither be proved nor fully grasped, even after revelation, but are known simply by faith on the authority of God, Who revealed them. Hence theology rests on the authority of revelation; but in philosophy the truth is reached by reason and the use of reasoning. In philosophy, therefore, the argument from authority is the weakest of all arguments.

It is undeniable, then, that in the main question the distinction between faith and reason, theology and philosophy,

¹⁹ Cfr. Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, pp. 89-92.

we have a substantial agreement between the two Doctors. Gilson is right in stating that this problem is resolved as simply in the doctrine of St. Bonaventure as in that of Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas Aquinas.²⁰

The question is, however, a more complex one. Granted that philosophy and theology, reason and faith are theoretically distinct, there remains still the further task of resolving the practical issue, the question of fact. 'Are we capable, with the sole resources of our reason and in the situation in which we now are, of weaving this tissue of principles and consequences without intermingling the grossest errors? And if we are incapable, where shall we find the light that shall enlighten us?' Moreover, if such infallible light is bestowed upon us, are we capable of using it infallibly? Here lies the whole crux of the difficulty.

Professor Gilson, following St. Bonaventure particularly in his *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, shows how according to the Franciscan Doctor philosophy is doomed to the gravest errors if it regards itself as an absolute, and it must remain incomplete if it will not accept the aid of a discipline higher than itself, namely theology. Every philosopher not aided in his philosophy by the light of faith is inescapably doomed to error; the natural light, though distinct in essence from the infused light of grace, practically and in point of fact cannot philosophize successfully without the help of grace.

Obviously, neither philosophy nor the natural light of reason are in themselves bad. Undoubtedly theology is superior to philosophy, as the supernatural is above the natural; but reason is in itself a light of divine origin, hence good. We are therefore right and safe in following it; it cannot of itself lead us into error. But there is a true philosophy and a false philosophy. Philosophy is true only inasmuch as the reason that has developed it was streng-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

thened by some supernatural aid; but if reason is left to itself without any supernatural help it leads inevitably into errors. A philosophy built in this way is false; consequently, though philosophy and reason, considered in themselves, are good and right, in the present state of things, and in point of fact, they need a special light to guide them through the darkness in safety.

St. Bonaventure develops his thesis in the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* on the lines of history before and after Christ. In the first period of human history, men, though not enlightened by faith, could use reason to satisfy their own curiosity, as if reason had the right to satisfy its own egoistic cupidity, and this led to the grossest errors; or else natural reason, conscious of its divine origin and bent upon returning to its true source, could reach out in desire to God, begging for more light. On the one hand, the Patriarchs, prophets, philosophers, children of the light, with the aid of this light, wished to gather knowledge at its true source, in God, and so become masters of the great truths of philosophy. On the other hand, the Egyptians, looking at rational activity as an end in itself, were immersed in the deepest darkness of idolatry. Amongst the enlightened, the most perfect type is Solomon. He possessed all knowledge in abundance according to its threefold distinction: the truth of things, physics, metaphysics, mathematics; the truth of discourse, grammar, logic, rhetoric; the truth of conduct, i.e. ethics in the 'monastic' order or government of self, in the economic order or government of the family, and in the political order or government of the city. This mastery of the three spheres of philosophy with its threefold subdivision was bestowed upon Solomon by God in response to his own desire: *sic fecit Salomon et factus est clericus magnus*.

Again, we witness the same reaction in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. 'There is a true philosophy, that of exemplar causes, and it is true precisely in that it attributes to things a nature such that they cannot be explained in

their totality by a consideration of themselves alone. And there is a false philosophy, that which denies exemplar causes: and it is false only because the reason stops short at images as if they were autonomous things, instead of proceeding beyond itself and them to God. Plato's philosophy, placing the nature of things outside the things themselves, inserting ideas as intermediary between God and things, is turned towards God; Aristotle's philosophy, in contrast, essentially pagan, denying the ideas and having nothing intermediate between things and God, detaches and separates the world from God. By refusing to admit exemplarism, this philosophy was thrown open to countless errors and involved in blindness and darkness, as is seen in its ignorance of Divine Providence and of the purpose of creation, the eternity of the world, the denial of reward and punishment after death, of liberty and responsibility. In fact, we never find Aristotle speaking of the devil nor of the beatitude of the elect. 'And these are the worst of all errors. Nor are they yet dead; the key of the bottomless pit has not turned upon them; like the darkness of Egypt they obscure men's minds; and the light that should shine forth from the sciences they have established has been extinguished under their errors: and to-day some, seeing Aristotle so great and reliable in other sciences, have been unable to believe that on the highest questions he did not speak truth likewise.'²¹

We reach here the most crucial point in St. Bonaventure's philosophy. Human reason without the light of faith is capable of attaining the principles of metaphysics, but only in so far as it pursues the right path, that of exemplarism. Plato, Plotinus, Cicero and those philosophers whose approach to philosophy was through the reality of ideas, were all enlightened, and found God's presence beneath and beyond things; hence they escaped Aristotle's

²¹ *In Hexaëm.*, coll. VI, 1-5 (ed. Quaracchi, V. 360-361; ed. Delorme, 91-92); Gilson, pp. 94-99.

grossest errors. Yet, because they had not the light of faith to guide them, notwithstanding that they took the right was doomed to incompleteness and deformity. Let us suppose that a man reaches the summit of physics and metaphysics and knows God as the first cause and last end of all creation, and that there is only one God; if he does not grasp the Trinity in Unity, he does not know God as He really is. Now it is impossible without faith to believe in God one and three. His knowledge of God, therefore, is utterly incomplete, nay, wrong and even blasphemous.²² The same holds good in logic and ethics, since, according to St. Augustine's phrase, 'without faith the virtues are powerless.' 'Reason stops when it reaches the uttermost limit of its own nature; but for reason to stop and rest in itself is error.' Unless, then, to the knowledge attained by reason, whether in physics or metaphysics, in logic or ethics, is added the light of grace, philosophy is condemned to incompleteness and leads inevitably to errors.²³

Professor Gilson sums up his brilliant exposition of St. Bonaventure's speculation thus: 'This aid the ancients received as an illumination of the reason, and we since Christ as faith. True philosophy would seem, therefore, to be a reflection of reason guided by faith, and an interpretation of the objects or beings of our experience, considered from the point of view of what revelation enables us to say of them.'²⁴

(To be continued)

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²² *De Donis Spiritus Sancti*, IV, 12 (ed. Quar., V, 476); Gilson, 100.

²³ *In Hexaem.*, Coll. VII, 3-12 (ed. Quar., V, 365-367; ed. Delorme, 99-103); Gilson, 99-102.

²⁴ Gilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.