

# DANTE AND AQUINAS

August 28/30, 2006

## Lectures 2 & 3

This week I want to give a general overview of the thought of St Thomas Aquinas.

### 1 Three crucial developments

- the rise of universities
- the introduction of Aristotle
- the founding of the mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans)

Before turning to these, consider the rather simple story of Thomas's life: [you will find a chronology in the Penguin *Selected Writings*, p. xxxv; the Introduction to the volume may also be of help.]

- Rocca Secca (1225), Montecassino, Naples
- joins Dominicans; family opposition
- north to Cologne (Albertus Magnus), then Paris
- first stint as regent professor at Paris
- sojourn in Italy
- second stint as regent professor at Paris
- return to Naples
- death at Fossanova, March 7, 1274

### 2 The liberal arts tradition

- Augustine
- Cassiodorus, Boethius
- Monastic and Cathedral schools
- 12th century Paris contained a number of schools of both kinds
- chartering the university [the model of the guilds]
- From the liberal arts to the Faculty of Arts

### 3 The hegemony of the liberal arts

I.e. the assumption that they were an adequate summary of secular knowledge, is undermined by the introduction of hitherto unknown (in Latin translation) treatises of Aristotle, accompanied by Islamic commentaries.

- Aristotle and the curriculum of the Faculty of Arts at Paris
- the difficulty should not of course be seen as simply a matter of curriculum.

The new works required a rethinking of the relationship between secular and sacred learning. What to make of the *Metaphysics*, *On the Soul*, etc. Were these compatible with Christian belief? And what to make of Aristotle's teaching that the world had always existed?

#### 4 The Errors of Aristotle and Latin Averroism

Chesterton, in his little book on Aquinas, *The Dumb Ox*, correctly sees the controversy over Latin Averroism as the key.

Three real or apparent Aristotelian tenets:

- the world has always been, it makes no sense to speak of the world itself as coming into being
- according to Averroes, Aristotle did not teach the immortality of each individual soul
- Aristotle, by defining God as Thought Thinking Itself, seems to deny providence since it would be demeaning for God's knowledge to depend on things other than himself.

Latin Averroism, *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas: On there being only one intellect*. I translated it under that title and commented on some of the controversies, Purdue University Press.

#### 5 The tasks of a master

That Thomas was involved in these disputes is at once surprising and unsurprising. Surprising, in that philosophical works were not as such part of his role as master of theology. Unsurprising, because of the theological issues raised.

*Legere, disputare, praedicare*: These infinitive sum up the task of the master of theology.

- To read—that is to comment on the authors making up the curriculum: Scripture, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*
- To dispute: *quaestiones disputatae, quaestiones quodlibetales*
- To preach

These tasks would lead us to suspect among Thomas's writings commentaries on Scripture and on Peter Lombard, disputes of both kinds, sermons—and so we do. But among the commentaries, we also find expositions of Boethius, of Denis the Areopagite, the *Book of Causes*. And there are such polemical works as the *De unitate*, and the little work on the Eternity of the World. And of course there are other writings that did not stem from his professorial tasks directly:

- The *Summa contra gentes*
- The *Compendium theologiae* (unfinished)
- And, preeminently, the *Summa theologiae* (also unfinished)

Surprisingly, there are commentaries on 12 works of Aristotle

#### 6 Defense of Aristotle

Thomas argues that to attribute a denial of providence or personal immortality to Aristotle is simply to misread him. As for the eternity of the world, Thomas will hold that the question cannot be definitively settle philosophically, but only on the basis of revelation.

## 7 The distinction between philosophy and theology

- their principles differ
- this is not to say that they are unrelated: no one can read Thomas's theological writings without being struck by the presence of much philosophical data. . .

*Praeambula fidei*—let us take this as a test case of the relationship between philosophy and theology.

Since philosophers (e.g. Aristotle) have established some truths about God, e.g. that He exists, is one, is intelligent, etc, the question arises as to how these truths relate to revealed truths.

- preambles and mysteries
- but obviously the preambles are embedded in revelation
- that is, a subset of revealed truths are not mysteries

The proof of the reasonableness of belief in the mysteries on the basis of this. If some of the truths which have been revealed can be known in the strong sense, that is, proved, then it is reasonable to hold that the rest, the mysteries, are also true. . . .