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JEFFERSON REPORT: PROBING EDUCATION

Thomas Aquinas and the University of Paris

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Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article features philosopher-theologian Thomas Aquinas and the University of Paris.

Sixth in a Series

Born 1224 or 1225 in Roccasecca, Italy — died March 7, 1274 in Papal States; canonized July 18, 1323.

Thomas Aquinas was one of the great minds of theology and his teachings are still much in use today in sacred and secular education. Harvard University, for example, had a seminar on his thoughts on philosophy, not its theology department. He developed his conclusions from Aristotelian premises, notably in the metaphysics of personality, creation, and Providence. As a theologian, he was responsible in his two masterpieces, the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa contra gentiles*, for the classical systematization of Latin theology, and, as a poet, he wrote some of the most gravely beautiful eucharistic hymns in the church's liturgy.

For his education, he was sent to the University of Naples, recently founded by the emperor, where he first encountered the scientific and philosophical works that were being translated from Greek and Arabic. In this setting Thomas

decided to join the Friars Preachers, or Dominicans, a new religious order founded 30 years earlier. It departed from the traditional paternalistic form of government for monks to the more democratic form of the mendicant friars (i.e., religious orders whose corporate as well as personal poverty made it necessary for them to beg alms) and from the monastic life of prayer and manual labor to a more active life of preaching and teaching.

By this move he took a liberating step beyond the feudal world into which he was born and the monastic spirituality in which he was reared. A dramatic episode marked the full significance of his decision. His parents had him abducted on the road to Paris, where his shrewd superiors had immediately assigned him so that he would be out of the reach of his family but also so that he could pursue his studies in the most prestigious and turbulent university of the time. At one point, two of his brothers resorted to the measure of hiring a prostitute to seduce him. It did not work.

Thomas held out stubbornly against his family despite a year of captivity. He was finally liberated, and in the autumn of 1245, went to Paris to the convent of Saint-Jacques, the great university center of the Dominicans. There he studied under St. Albertus Magnus, a major philosopher who had a wide range of intellectual interests.

Escape from the feudal world, rapid commitment to the University of Paris, and religious vocation to one of the new mendicant orders all meant a great deal in a world in which faith in the traditional institutional and conceptual structure was being attacked. The encounter between the gospel and the culture of his time formed the nerve center of Thomas' position and directed its development.

Normally, his work is presented as the integration into Christian thought of the recently discovered Aristotelian philosophy, in competition with the integration of Platonic thought effected by the fathers of the Church during the first 12 centuries of the Christian era. This view is essentially correct; more radically, however, it should also be asserted that Aquinas' work accomplished an evangelical awakening to the need for a cultural and spiritual renewal not only in the lives of individual people but also throughout the church. Aquinas must be understood in his context as a mendicant religious, influenced both by the evangelism of St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan order, and by the devotion to scholarship of St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican order.

When Aquinas arrived at the University of Paris, the influx of Arabian-Aristotelian science was arousing a sharp reaction among believers, and several times the church authorities tried to block the naturalism and rationalism that were emanating from this philosophy and, according to many ecclesiastics, seducing the younger generations. Thomas did not fear these new ideas, but, like

his master Albertus Magnus (and Roger Bacon, also lecturing at Paris), he studied the works of Aristotle and eventually lectured publicly on them.

For the first time in history, Christian believers and theologians were confronted with the rigorous demands of scientific rationalism. At the same time, technical progress was requiring men to move from the rudimentary economy of an agrarian society to an urban society with production organized in trade guilds, with a market economy, and with a profound feeling of community. New generations of men and women, including clerics, were reacting against the traditional notion of contempt for the world and were striving for mastery over the forces of nature through the use of their reason. The structure of Aristotle's philosophy emphasized the primacy of the intelligence. Technology itself became a means of access to truth; mechanical arts were powers for humanizing the cosmos.

During the summer of 1248, Aquinas left Paris with Albertus, who was to assume direction of the new faculty established by the Dominicans at the convent in Cologne. He remained there until 1252, when he returned to Paris to prepare for the degree of Master of Theology. After taking his bachelor's degree, he received the licentia docendi ("license to teach") at the beginning of 1256 and shortly afterward finished the training necessary for the title and privileges of master. Thus, in the year 1256 he began teaching theology in one of the two Dominican schools incorporated in the University of Paris.

In 1259, Thomas was appointed theological adviser and lecturer to the papal Curia, then the center of Western humanism. He returned to Italy, where he spent two years at Anagni at the end of the reign of Pope Alexander IV and four years at Orvieto with Pope Urban IV. From 1265 to 1267 he taught at the convent of Santa Sabina in Rome, and he then, at the request of Pope Clement IV, went to the papal Curia in Viterbo. Suddenly, in November 1268, he was sent to Paris, where he became involved in a sharp doctrinal polemic that had just been triggered off.

The inclusion of Aristotle's *Physics* in university programs was not just a matter of academic curiosity. Naturalism, however, as opposed to a sacral vision of the world, was penetrating all realms: spirituality, social customs, and political conduct. About 1270, Jean de Meun, a French poet of the new cities and Aquinas' neighbor in the Rue Saint-Jacques in Paris, gave expression in his *Roman de la Rose* to the coarsest realism, not only in examining the physical universe but also in describing and judging the laws of procreation. Innumerable manuscripts of the Roman poet Ovid's *Ars amatoria* (Art of Love) were in circulation; André le Chapelain, in his *De Deo amoris* (On the God of Love) adapted a more refined version for the public. Courtly love in its more seductive forms became a more prevalent element in the culture of the 13th century. This didn't seem to wash off on Thomas.

His thinking on “just war” has been fundamental to Western thought and action. Aquinas, centuries after Augustine of Hippo, used the authority of Augustine's arguments to define the conditions under which a war could be just. He laid these out in his historic work, *Summa Theologica*:

- First, war must occur for a good and just purpose rather than the pursuit of wealth or power.
- Second, just war must be waged by a properly instituted authority such as the state.
- Third, peace must be a central motive even amid violence.

For Jews, Aquinas argues for toleration of both their persons and their religious rites.

From the many aspects of Thomas’ writings and thought, natural law is of great interest these days in America and should be around the world. The question is – is there a solid foundation for law that is not just the meandering of a Supreme Court trying to figure out what the Constitution means?

What Aquinas offers instead is a deep and systematic explanation of where morality comes from, yielding a moral code that is impressively responsive to the changing circumstances of human life.

Whereas human law is the contingent result of social and political organization, the natural law is innate within us. Since Aquinas thinks that God orders everything to its proper end, there is a sense in which all things follow a natural law by which they participate in the eternal law. But when Aquinas refers to natural law in a moral context, he means the distinctive way in which rational agents have been ordered to achieve their proper end; hence he has in mind a law that governs the mind. Thus, “the law of nature is nothing other than the light of intellect, placed within us by God, through which we grasp what is to be done and what is to be avoided.”

Aquinas’ conception of natural law is much thicker than Aristotle’s, both in the sense that he articulates a rich and substantive notion of the happiness that is our ultimate end, and in the sense that he thinks we have been given various further innate inclinations, intended to provide us with specific guidance toward that ultimate end. Among these are inclinations to preserve our own lives, toward sexual activity, toward educating the young, toward knowing the truth about God, and toward living in society. These innate inclinations, combined with the first practical principle and Aquinas’s substantive conception of happiness, are the foundations from which arises a comprehensive account of the moral law, relying on conscience as the rational activity of working out what ought to be done from a moral point of view.

The confidence in appeals to natural law displayed by Aquinas and most medieval theologians and 17th- and 18th-century writers such as Locke, the authors of the *American Declaration of Independence*, and the authors of France's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* evaporated in the early 19th century. The philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), as well as the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), served to weaken the belief that "nature" could be the source of moral or legal norms. In the mid-20th century, however, there was a revival of interest in natural law, sparked by the widespread belief that the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler had been essentially lawless, even though originally democratic and the source of a significant amount of positive law. As in previous centuries, the need to challenge the unjust laws of particular states inspired the desire to invoke rules of right and justice held to be natural rather than merely conventional. However, the 19th century's skepticism about invoking nature as a source of moral and legal norms remained powerful, and contemporary writers almost invariably talked of human rights rather than natural rights.[1]

Aquinas identified the goal of human rights as union and eternal fellowship with God. This goal is achieved through the beatific vision, in which a person experiences perfect, unending happiness by seeing the essence of God. The vision occurs after death as a gift from God to those who in life experienced salvation and redemption through Christ.

The goal of union with God has implications for the individual's life on Earth. Aquinas stated that an individual's will must be ordered toward right things, such as charity, peace, and holiness. He saw this orientation as also the way to happiness. Indeed, Aquinas ordered his treatment of the moral life around the idea of happiness. The relationship between will and goal is antecedent in nature "because rectitude of the will consists in being duly ordered to the last end [that is, the beatific vision]." Those who truly seek to understand and see God will necessarily love what God loves. Such love requires morality and bears fruit in everyday human choices. And we might add that governments should be aware of this as well, and program their efforts toward this end.

Toward the end of his life, he was favored with mystical experiences. On 6 December 1273, while he was celebrating Mass, he experienced an unusually long ecstasy. Because of what he saw, he abandoned his routine and refused to dictate to his helper Reginald of Piperno. When Reginald begged him to get back to work, Aquinas replied: "I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me." As a result, the Summa Theologica would remain uncompleted.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri sees the glorified soul of Aquinas in the Heaven of the Sun with the other great exemplars of religious wisdom. Dante asserts that Aquinas died by poisoning, on the order of Charles

of Anjou; Villani cites this belief, and the Anonimo Fiorentino describes the crime and its motive.

So where are we now in our journey through the ancient universities? My original encounter with Thomas Aquinas was a first-year class at Harvard in a philosophy of religion course in which we dipped into Aquinas, Pascal, Hume, and Heidegger. It was a totally confusing mess for me, not having any background in religious studies whatever. I learned about my ignorance.

Unfortunately, we didn't bother with context. That would have made a difference. They were ideas from the ether without grounding on Earth. We studied the ideas in themselves without reference to the times they were written or about contemporary America. My impression of Aquinas was that he was full of conservative straw and not in my world at all.

Sixty years later, I have a different idea. Now I see what battles he was up against. He helped introduce both Greek and Muslim philosophy to faculties and students who did not want to see much value in other cultures except their own. That caused Aquinas much trouble, as it would today when new ideas are introduced to audiences that don't want to hear them.

Like previous authors in these articles, Aquinas had the insight to integrate academic disciplines and was fluent and creative not only in theology but also law, war, social ethics, economics, Islam, and many of his original and derived ideas are in use today.

I also gathered over time that most of our great Western thinkers and our best institutions have been willing to take on outside ideas from other cultures than their own. I think that has caused great progress, and it only came through our universities. Other examples are the English listening to the Scots (e.g., Adam Smith, and not a popular idea in England among the Labour Party to this day), the Renaissance learning from ancient Greece and Rome, the Americans processing ideas of Locke and other English political thinkers to form the breakaway United States, Western scientists learning from Asian traditions and vice-versa, and Pakistan learning from India, those historic rival enemies, and vice versa.

Today most of us have accepted that the Greeks were our founding fathers in philosophy and Rome was our legal foundation. Roman law was taught in Oxford for first year students to give them the basis of English law. But there is a lot of reluctance to learn from the Muslim world. The excuse is that they had their day in the Middle Ages and haven't progressed since then. That is baloney. I think there is a prejudice that started long before the 9/11 terrorist attacks that

has relegated them to the intellectual and social and religious background – people to be converted, not listened to.

Writing as a theologian, I have to say that the churches haven't helped. I cannot remember a sermon or even much discussion on Muhammad and his times, let alone the tremendous advances in legal, mathematics, scientific, and moral knowledge that Islam has offered the world. A quick example: the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was rightly celebrated, though mostly after his death. Rev. Malcolm X on the other hand has virtually disappeared into the textbooks with not many cashed in leftovers. Why? Martin was Christian – Malcolm was Muslim?

The same can be said about much of current politics. There are many who are against allowing new social or political thought. The debate over Critical Race Theory is a good example. Though there are countless definitions of the phrase, it mainly means looking at American history to see how slavery and Jim Crow have affected our national lives. But some states and college boards have banned the word "systemic" (definition: some individual phenomenon – an illness, a social problem – that affects every part of an entire system) which helps us understand who we have been and who we are.

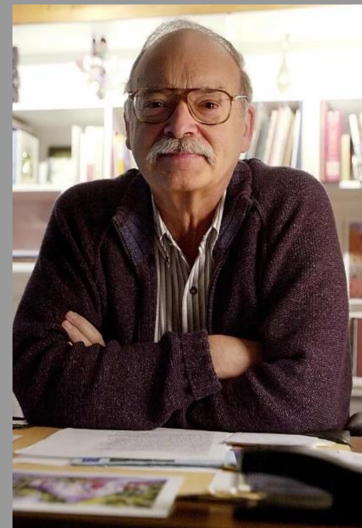
They hate the word "woke." Nobody can agree on that definition either, but it is along the lines of being alert to racial prejudice and discrimination. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis wants to prohibit racial analysis from local schools. He does not want to see any social and historical analysis by teachers on gays or gender change either. That is living in the mud of Confederacy and older restrictive religious attitudes and not moving forward with contextual and philosophical analysis as Aquinas did in his time.

Aquinas saw life differently from his more conservative colleagues and helped to set the stage for a historic and inclusive view of knowledge. We need him today for his method if not his results, though they can be interesting too, especially natural law.

But it is doubtful that we would have had him around then or now had it not been for the University of Paris and its intellectual integrative superstars. We would have still been wallowing in the mud of the early Middle Ages.
Sources*: A pastiche of current online articles from Encyclopedia Britannia; Stanford History of Philosophy; Wikipedia*

[1] *Natural Law*, The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. This article was most recently revised and updated by Adam Augustyn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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