

## THE ARISTOTELIAN INVASION

We have seen how with the fall of the Roman Empire the torch of learning in the West flickered and nearly died out. Intellectual life-of the most rudimentary kind indeed-was practically confined to the monasteries during the seventh and eighth centuries. Then Charlemagne made a magnificent effort to revive learning. His capitularies decreed that every bishop should set up a school at his cathedral. He gathered scholars around his own palace, and a small number of learned monks-Alcuin the most illustrious-shed some light amid the surrounding darkness. But the breakdown of the Carolingian Empire once more disrupted the orderly life necessary for education, and schooling again became the virtual monopoly of the monasteries in the ninth and tenth centuries, the most famous being Fulda in Germany. Only a few luminaries stand out in this general eclipse of culture: Walafriad Strabo, Hrabanus Maurus, Einhard, Alfred the Great none of them, with the exception of Irishman John Scotus Erigena (d. c. 875), really original thinkers.

But in the eleventh century an intellectual awakening began that transformed the cultural life of Europe. It was associated at first mainly with the monasteries but soon also manifested itself in the cathedral schools of northern Europe and the urban schools of Italy. It found its most characteristic expression, however, in the newly founded universities, which around 1170 began to replace the cathedral schools as the most vital centers of learning. It was

mainly at the universities that theologians of genius worked to harmonize the data of human experience with the data of faith. The most successful in this enterprise was Thomas Aquinas whose synthesis of Aristotle and the Gospel in his *summa* represents the summit of Christendom's intellectual achievement.

The rise of the universities was only one of the most noteworthy features of the great upsurge of town life that began in western Europe in the eleventh century. While in Italy a skeletal form of town life had survived the barbarian invasions, in northern Europe town life and commerce virtually ceased. But in the eleventh century, improvements in methods of agriculture brought a higher yield of crops, population increased, commerce revived, and wagons loaded with cargoes of grain, lumber, spices, fine cloth, wines, and salt began to move again across the old trade routes. Ancient towns came back to life, and new ones sprang up as centers of trading activity. The surplus population gravitated from the countryside to the towns-providing manual labor for the industries and a market for the commerce. Only a few of these towns numbered populations in the tens of thousands, and they never comprised more than 10 per cent of the total population, but they furnished the vital centers of medieval life. The prosperous burghers who inhabited them provided the economic resources for the intellectual and artistic achievements of that age-notably the universities and the cathedrals.

The founding of the universities cannot be precisely dated, since they evolved almost imperceptibly out of the cathedral or urban schools. Several of them-Paris and Bologna in particular-began to overshadow the others and drew great crowds of students from all over Europe. As their numbers grew, the members began to feel the need to organize to protect their mutual interests. They found a model close at hand in the existing guilds of merchants and craftsmen, which regulated the relations of those working in a particular business or craft and protected the rights of the members. And so the university-organizationally speaking-was nothing more in its origin than another guild, in this case a union of scholars, which like other guilds regulated the conditions for reception of the various degrees. At first both students and masters were almost all members of the clergy (the term "layman" being synonymous with illiterate) and as such enjoyed special privileges-often including subsidies from the Church. Sometimes this took the form of board and room provided in well-endowed colleges. They could also count usually on help from the Pope in their frequent conflicts with the town, for the universities provided one of the great instruments used by the papacy in dominating the Church. Pope Gregory IX issued a bull in 1231-the Magna Carta of the University of Paris-that clearly defined its essential rights, including the right to boycott. In appreciation for this help, the University of Paris became the favorite of the papacy.

Favored by the Popes and even by secular rulers, universities multiplied, adopting as models the organization of Paris or Bologna. They included Salemo (c. 1200), Oxford (c. 1200), Cambridge (1209), Naples (1224), Padua (1222), Pisa (1303), Salamanca (1220), Toulouse (1230), Prague (1348), Heidelberg (1385), and Louvain (142;). Paris, however, remained pre-eminent and served a student population reckoned at around five thousand.

Only three branches of knowledge were regarded as worthy of advanced study: medicine, law, and theology. These, together with the preparatory liberal arts, formed the four faculties. Law meant both Canon Law and civil law. The monk Gratian made Bologna the Canon Law capital of Europe. In his immortal Decretum (c. 1140) he assembled a vast number of canons or sacred laws decreed at innumerable Church councils, put them in order, and clarified their meaning with a brilliant commentary. The study of civil law began with the rediscovery of the Emperor Justinian's Code in the eleventh century. Bologna also led the way here, and produced the finest civil lawyers in Europe.

Medicine for a long time was hardly more than a science of folklore practiced by herbalists, witches, and bonesetters. Leeching was a favorite remedy, and most monasteries deputed someone for this task. The scientific study of medicine began with the introduction of Greek and Arabic texts, such as Galen and Avicenna, during the eleventh century. The first faculty of medicine was established at

Salemo, and it seems to have been remarkably progressive. Others followed at Bologna and elsewhere. They were handicapped by a servile attitude toward their Greek and Arabic sources, but still they made some real advances-especially in surgery, hospitalization, and the use of quarantine. A public health board flourished at Venice as early as 1377.

The scientific study of nature was retarded by the low level of mathematical knowledge, but there was still some progress in the experimental and physical sciences-notably at Paris and Oxford. Robert Grosseteste (d. 1238), bishop of Lincoln, wrote on astronomy, mathematics, physics, and optics, and proposed the theory that light energy is the basis of physical phenomena. Franciscan Roger Bacon (d. 1292) was an irascible genius who delighted in challenging the conventional ideas of his age. He was deeply committed to experimentation, invented a rudimentary telescope and thermometer, and anticipated other developments by his prophecies of mechanical transport on land, water, and in the air. But modern scholars tend to rate his actual achievements as less significant than Grosseteste's.

But the real queen of the medieval sciences was theology. The best minds of the Middle Ages devoted themselves to its study, and it was in this field that medieval scholars made their most significant contributions.

The traditional method used in its pursuit was the so-called *lectio* or reading, which was merely a critical reading or exegesis of sacred Scripture. In addition, the writings of the

holy fathers of the Church were utilized to elucidate individual scriptural passages. Their opinions were catalogued and compared with one another. In the best example of this method-the famous Sentences of Peter Lombard (d.1160)-there was some attempt to organize the material and arrange it according to topics such as the Trinity, Creation, Incarnation, and Sacraments to face new problems and offer new opinions. But still the whole emphasis was on the acceptance of tradition and authority, rational speculation being kept to a minimum.

A new approach began in the twelfth century under the influence of the renewed study of Aristotle, the great master of rational speculation. Until then only his Categories and Interpretation had been known in the West and studied in Latin translation. They contained the essential techniques of ancient reasoning, and as interest in things intellectual revived, their study became the focus of the revival.

It was the fascinating, stormy, and tragic Abelard (d.1142) who did the most to popularize these logical studies at Paris; he pioneered in using Aristotelian categories of thought in order to reach a deeper understanding of the Christian dogmas. He took a carefully reasoned approach to theological questions, not denying the role of authority but making every allowance for rational objections and natural human feelings. In other words, he was the first theologian to view theology as a whole and attempt a grand synthesis of the data of reason with the data of faith. In so doing he provided us with a new understanding of what theology was all about.

But he was limited by the small number of Aristotle's works that were available, and he died on the threshold of the momentous revolution in medieval thought that was caused by the rediscovery of Aristotle's complete works. Over a period of roughly a hundred years (1150-1250), all of Aristotle's writings were translated and introduced into the West, accompanied by a formidable number of Arabic commentaries as well as by other scientific and philosophical works, Jewish and Arabic. This amounted to a vast new library. The work of assimilating and mastering it occupied the best minds of Christendom and profoundly altered the spiritual and intellectual life of the West.

Its effects on theology were earthshaking. The translation and dissemination of the complete works of Aristotle confronted Christian thinkers for the first time with a completely rationalistic interpretation of human experience and indeed of the whole of knowable reality. Aristotle was an encyclopedic writer whose thought covered the whole spectrum of Greek science and philosophy: botany, zoology, astronomy, physics, logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and political science, not to mention various minor inquiries. He classified, organized, and systematized all the available knowledge of his day and always from an utterly rationalistic point of view. He saw the world as one vast, self-contained, self-explanatory organism.

This invasion of Aristotle, accompanied by the work of such masterful Arabic commentators as Avicenna (d. 1037) and Avenoes (d. 1198)-who emphasized the unspiritual and nonreligious character of the philosopher's

thought-precipitated a grave crisis for the intellectual leaders of the West. It offered a totally rationalistic and this-world solution to all the major problems facing humanity.

Assimilating and harmonizing all of it with the Christian faith constituted a tremendous task. The effort to do so profoundly altered the spiritual and intellectual climate of Christendom. It inaugurated a period of unparalleled intellectual activity and ferment that reached its climax in the thirteenth century, especially at Paris and Oxford, and in the schools of the newly founded mendicant friars.

Ecclesiastical authority reacted at first with predictable caution and prudence. Bishops gathered at a council at Paris in 1210 forbade the Parisian masters to lecture on the natural philosophy of Aristotle—a ban reiterated by the papal legate, Robert de Curzon, at Paris in 1215. However, this interdiction was gradually lifted when it proved impossible to enforce the curiosity of the hungry minds at Paris being too powerful to control. Moreover, the ban was never applied at Oxford, and so the schoolmen at Paris resented the discrimination. So by the middle of the thirteenth century the study of Aristotle was in full swing. It is at this point that we see emerging several great systematic works of Christian thought that endeavored to incorporate into one harmonious Christian theology everything deemed true in Greek and Arabic scientific thought. Three men stand out head and shoulders above the rest: a Franciscan, Bonaventure (d. 1274), and two Dominicans, Albert the Great (d. 1280) and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).



Bonaventure was the first to construct a cohesive theological system with all of its parts interrelated and based on a clearly defined conception of the relative role of reason and faith. His native bent, however, was mystical, and he tended unduly to subordinate the natural human urge toward reason to the authority of tradition and faith.

Albert the Great, on the other hand, was determined to uphold the value of natural rational knowledge and to defend its autonomy within its own sphere. And since he saw Aristotle as the supreme exemplar of this attitude the principal guide and repository of human reason-he made it his principal mission in life to make the whole corpus of Aristotle known in the West, supplemented by whatever human science had discovered since. Albert's intrepid faith convinced him that nothing uncovered by research could prove detrimental to the Christian revelation, and he felt that the cause of the faith would ultimately be served better by honest recognition of difficulties than by fearful condemnations. His project was encyclopedic in scope. Thirty-eight huge tomes remain as a monument to his intellectual audacity.

Albert's universal genius embraced the whole scientific realm of his day, and his works served as the starting point for most of the intellectual currents of his time. However, he never succeeded in his main objective: a total reinterpretation of Aristotle in harmony with the Christian faith. Fortunately, however, he inspired his brilliant student, Thomas Aquinas, with the same vision. Like Albert, Thomas was confident that

faith and reason were ultimately compatible, and like him he recognized the complete autonomy of secular knowledge as a domain of human experience subject to its own proper laws. He mastered all the thought of his time, and his massive collection of works include every type of theological and philosophical work. His ambition was to do for Christian civilization what Aristotle had accomplished for the pagan.

He completely assimilated Aristotle and expropriated his fundamental intuitions-but did not uncritically accept the whole Aristotelian doctrine. Drawing on the entire Western philosophical tradition-Platonists and Neo-Platonists, Arabs as well as Christians-he was able to construct a new, original philosophy: Thomism, the first original metaphysics since Aristotle. By an ingenious synthesis of Aristotelian, Platonic, and Christian insights he developed as his central idea a rational understanding of God as the creator and source of all being, goodness, and truth, present in all beings by his power and essence, the uncaused cause, in whom alone essence and existence are one.

With this philosophy as his basis and making use of all available sources of knowledge, he then wrote his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologiae* (1266-74)-the summit of his life's work and one of the finest hours of human genius. Every important question of theology is treated from every angle conceivable in his day. The solutions he gives reveal his astonishing versatility, and while they are often unsatisfactory in the light of the present explosion of knowledge, they are still worthy of consideration because of

Thomas's incredible learning, philosophical profundity, and unrivaled clarity of thought and expression.

Because of Thomas's unique ascendancy, until recently, over modern Catholic thought, one sometimes imagines that he reigned serenely over his own times as well. But historians pursuing their research into the multifaceted Aristotelian revolution sketch a much different picture. They have uncovered a most controversial Thomas, the target of furious hostility from important Churchmen of his day, a liberal caught in the eye of an ecclesiastical hurricane during his last years of teaching at Paris—a situation that curiously enough left no echoes in the placid, limpid syllogisms of the *Summa* he was writing at the time.

We now know that already by the year 1267 several bitterly opposed factions had formed in the Church over the issue of Aristotelianism and its relation to the faith. There were the radical Aristotelians (we might call them the modernists) led by Siger of Brabant, whose overzealous devotion to the pagan philosopher led them into heresy. Opposed were the conservatives—many of them Franciscans, like their leader, John Pecham (d. 1292), a renowned professor at Paris and later archbishop of Canterbury. They were no doubt supported by Bonaventure himself, whom they claimed together with Augustine as their masters. They lumped Thomas and the radical Aristotelian Siger together, considering Thomism equally dangerous to the faith. Unable or unwilling to grasp the profundity of its masterful synthesis, they saw in Thomism only a pernicious rationalism whose heretical tendency appeared in

Thomas's numerous innovations, mainly in his views on the unity of intelligence in all men, the eternity of the world, the freedom of the will, and the knowledge and providence of God.

But the most dangerous of Thomas's newfangled ideas in their eyes was his assertion of the unity of "form" in man. To understand Thomas here we must keep in mind that this basic concept of form and matter was Aristotelian; it involved his idea of reality as explainable in terms of two principles: matter, meaning the potential of something to become real or actual; and form, that which actualizes this potential and hence makes a thing what it is.

Now, for Aquinas the soul as a spiritual substance (and therefore completely simple, unmixed with matter) was related to the body as its "form" and superseded all other forms, such as the form of vegetativeness or the form of bodiliness. This opinion corresponded with Aristotle's teaching that the soul was the first "entelechy" or perfection of the body.

The rival Augustinian conception held that the soul was a complete entity acting upon the body—an idea incompatible with the Aristotelian conception of a single substantial form for every being. The Augustinians also failed to posit a clear distinction between substantial and accidental forms and between an objective and factual plurality of forms and a merely mental and logical Plurality, and so the way was left open for them to assert an actual plurality of forms of equal metaphysical significance.

Thus the conservatives regarded the human being as a composite of many separate entities, each having its own matter and form: the human soul, the body, the vegetative principle, the sensitive principle. As to how all of these were united to form a unity in one person, there were various theories. Some held that they were united under the one life form of the intellectual soul; others, that they possessed an autonomous existence of their own and were only joined extrinsically to the soul; still others saw them as forming a hierarchy over which the soul exercised a directive function. "In opposition to all these theories," historian Dom David Knowles has written, "Thomas set his thesis, which developed and clarified that of Aristotle, that the soul, as pure form, actualizes the body as its matter and that the intellectual soul contains in itself in an eminent degree all the perfections of the sensitive and vegetative souls, which it supplants in the embryo of the human being at the moment of its creation,"! Pecham erroneously contended that Aquinas had invented this doctrine. The truth of the matter is that Thomas's true originality consisted in the way he considered the question from a metaphysical angle, while previous thought focused on the psychological aspects. This was in accordance with his insistence on substantial unity as a metaphysical reality. "Nothing is purely and simply a unity," he said, "unless it has a single form that determines its essence for a thing derives its being and its unity from a single source."

The question, as Dom Knowles remarks, was not merely academic. The old idea of the soul as an entity or

substance in its own right entailed a view of the soul as having a vital power possessing a rich life of faculties, virtues, and superior potentialities-the concrete, immortal, personal core of a human being. But the soul in Aristotle's theory is hardly more than a metaphysical abstraction, a logical necessity; he was not interested in the question of its immortality and left the matter unresolved. So in subscribing to Aristotle's theory, Aquinas left himself open to some difficult objections from the conservatives.

In 1277 the archbishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, upheld the conservatives in a decree that condemned 219 errors; it was primarily aimed at the radical Aristotelians, but it also stigmatized some of the basic Thomist ideas as heretical. It was the most solemn condemnation of the Middle Ages and was repeated in England by the archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Kilwardby, and again by the man who succeeded him shortly thereafter, John Pecham.

The consequences of this confusion of Thomas's orthodox thought with heretical Aristotelianism were grave and far-reaching. Theologians henceforth divided into sharply opposed schools, and their bitter and sterile polemics cast discredit on their common enterprise, retarding for many centuries recognition by the Church of the unique value of the Thomist synthesis.

The Neo-Augustinianism of Pecham and his conservative coterie was unable to hold its own for more than twenty years or so. A much more powerful alternative to Thomism, however, was worked out by John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), perennially celebrated for the extreme subtlety of

his thought, a theologian who seems to have deliberately chosen an adversary relationship to Thomism. He denied Thomas's distinction between essence and existence, arguing in favor of a plurality of substantial forms in man. He held against Thomas that the will rather than the intellect was the determining factor in human decisions and denied the Thomistic thesis that we can reach natural certainty about immortality. As the mainstay of the Franciscan school he commanded a larger following than Thomas in the late medieval period.

In spite of their many differences, Thomists and Scotists at least agreed on one crucial point: the knowability and intelligibility of things. They both held that we can know the essences of things through the intellect's power of abstracting what is universal from the singular and concrete data of our experience. It was on this point that the last great medieval Scholastic, William of Ockham (d. 1349/50) broke decisively with both schools and shattered the already shaky structure of Christian Aristotelianism. He denied the very existence of a mental process of abstraction and excluded all knowledge of the extramental world except the intuitive knowledge of individual things. Universals or essences, for Ockham, were purely intramental phenomena, mental artifacts.

The effects were devastating indeed: metaphysics was rendered practically impossible, while theology, deprived of its metaphysical foundations, became increasingly a mere arid controversy over words. Ockham taught that God was purely unknowable on the natural rational level of

thought; his moral decrees, for instance, were not in evident correspondence with the nature of things (which he held we also could not know) and therefore could only be understood as arbitrary. God might just as well have commanded us to do the opposite; he could have commanded us to hate him above all things.

Ockham's star rose quickly, for his nominalism suited the temper of his age; it henceforth dominated the universities and philosophical and theological speculation of the last medieval centuries. It reflected the breakdown of unity in all departments of the life and thought of Christendom during the later centuries of the Middle Ages—a phenomenon already perceptible by the year 1300.