

Chapter 15

The Aristotelian Invasion

The Rise of the Universities

At the beginning of the 9th century, Charlemagne inaugurated the Carolingian Renaissance and helped establish the political/religious phenomenon known as Christendom. A hallmark of the Carolingian Renaissance was a revival in learning.

In the prior two centuries formal higher education had been primarily located in the monasteries. When Charlemagne began his grand effort to revive learning, he ordered schools to be established at all cathedrals. However, after the collapse of the Carolingian Empire schooling again reverted to the monasteries and remained there throughout the 9th and 10th centuries.

The 11th century saw another intellectual awakening which began in the monasteries and spread to include a revival of cathedral schools, especially in northern Europe and the beginning of so-called urban schools in Italy. The crowning achievement of the institutions involved in this intellectual awakening was the gradual formation of the universities, which began to form sometime in the second half of the 12th century.

The rise of the universities took place within a cultural change that saw the revival of commerce and urban life. This revival was due to an increase in agricultural production and a rise in population that stimulated economic activity. Rural people now gravitated to the towns and cities, thus providing manual labor for new industries and a consumer base for agricultural commodities and new industrial products. This concentration of population and wealth provided the necessary social conditions for the rise and success of the universities.

The name university, *universitas* in Latin, was at first a term used to describe the legal status of the “whole” or the “totality” of the scholars who would come to make up the university. Late in the 12th century in the north at Paris, scholars from various schools banded together into a guild, modeled after the various guilds of medieval merchants and craftsmen. Like other guilds, its initial function was to regulate admissions to the ranks of “scholars”. Once established, this guild of scholars proceeded to set up a series of fees, courses, examinations and graduation requirements for students. They then presented this “system” for approval to the chancellor of the local bishop who acted as the nominal head of all schools in his area of governance.

However, in southern Europe, it was the students who banded together to make certain claims on their scholars in the areas of fees and curriculum. These students tended to be older and were interested mainly in the subjects of law and medicine. While Paris was to become the great university center of the north, it was Bologna that was its counterpart in the south.

The Organization of the Universities

While the name “university” became the universal label for these great schools, the general medieval name first given to these institutions was “*studium generale*”, that is, a place where all studies could be pursued. In practice, however, the normal pattern that developed for university curriculum typically included four faculties or departments: the arts, theology, law and medicine:

1) The arts, what we would term the liberal arts, were seen generally as preparatory for the other three faculties. However, in the most famous school of Paris, the arts were used to prepare students to become teachers and to take positions in the Church. In fact, the majority of all university students were clergy as were their teachers.

2) Theology was considered the “queen of the sciences” and thus considered the highest faculty, the highest area of study. This faculty attracted the best minds of the Middle Ages and these scholars made the most significant contributions to medieval thought. Paris was the most famous center for the study of theology along with Cologne and Oxford.

3) The study of law included both civil (Roman) law and canon (church) law. The word “canon” is from the Greek word for “rule” and refers to a specific church law or ruling. The most famous university for the study of canon law was at Bologna. It was here that the Italian jurist, Gratian, published his “Concordance of Discordant Canons” also known as the *Decretum*. Gratian gathered, compiled and organized some 4,000 church laws and rulings into a single collection. This continued as the standard canon law textbook until the reform of canon law in 1917.

4) Medicine was taught in many places, but most importantly at Montpellier in the south of France and Salerno and Bologna in Italy. The common method for teaching medicine was based on a close study of ancient Greek and Arabic medical writers rather than on experimental science or clinical practice. However, this was a major improvement over traditional folklore medicine that relied on such things as herbs, witches and leeches.

University students often had a difficult life. Technically they were foreigners in a city and were often preyed upon by unscrupulous landlords, innkeepers, prostitutes and sometimes, even their teachers. The period of study was often very long, depending on their prior preparation. Degrees were awarded by public examination, rather than by the modern accumulation of credits.

University Teaching Methods

The original method of study was called the *lectio* or reading. This was a critical interpretation of some passage of Scripture. The writings of the Church Fathers, like St. Augustine and St. Ambrose, were also used to shed light on the meaning of the passage.

The materials used and produced in this original method were first organized by Peter

Lombard (1100-60) in his famous four volume collection known as the *Four Books of Sentences*. A “sentence” (*sententia*) is a conclusion reached at the end of a process of reasoning that proceeds as follows: One first poses a problem (*quaestio*); then argues through the problem, making cases for and against various propositions (*disputatio*); and finally one reaches a conclusion (*sententia*). This conclusion can then serve as a new *quaestio* and the process goes on.

The four volumes treated: 1) the Trinity, 2) creation, grace and sin, 3) the incarnation, redemption and virtue and 4) the sacraments and the “*Last Things*” (eschatology). This was the first systematic and comprehensive overview of Christian doctrine. From the 13th century through the 17th century theology students were required to comment on all or part of the *Sentences*. While reasoning was used, the primary emphasis was on Christian tradition and Church authority

A second method of doing theology also developed in 12th century and used a process know as “dialectic”, which was the use of Greek logic taken from Aristotle to understand Christian dogma. It was the first grand attempt to synthesize faith and reason. This second method took over as the method of theology, due in large part to the adoption of Aristotelian philosophy.

The Introduction of Aristotle to the Christian West

Between 750 and 900, Christians in Persia translated much of Aristotle and commentaries on his works into Arabic. This led brilliant Islamic thinkers like Avicenna (980-1037) and Averroes (1126-1198) to explore the philosophical questions of the relationship of the mind and reality and attempt to understand the kinds of truths that could be acquired by human reason and those that depended on divine revelation. Many of these writings were translated into Latin and thus were able to be introduced to the intellectual world of the West. Likewise, Jewish scholars like Avicbron (1021-1070) and Maimonides (1135-1204) tried to reconcile the rational philosophy of Aristotle with the Jewish faith and to explore the competing claims of faith and reason.

The full impact of Aristotelian philosophy on the West was facilitated by the translation of the complete works of Aristotle into Latin over a period of nearly 100 years, from 1150-1250. These texts, plus the works of the above mentioned Arabic and Jewish scholars, had a profound and lasting effect on Christian theology.

Aristotle presented the Christian world with a completely rationalistic interpretation of the whole of reality - the material world and the world of human experience. Aristotle made a logical case for an explanation of the world as self-contained and self-explanatory. This presented a fundamental challenge to Christian thinkers - how to harmonize faith and reason. Both faith and reason were seen as gifts from God and in principle they could not contradict each other. It is was daunting task, a task that continues today, to determine just how the two relate.

The “Baptism” of Aristotle by the Christian West

The official Church's first reaction to the introduction of Aristotle's thought into the universities was predictably reactionary. A council was called at Paris in 1210 and forbade the teaching of Aristotle at the university of Paris. This ban was gradually lifted and the serious work of relating philosophy and theology was taken on by Catholic theologians. The three most gifted of these 13th century theologians were Bonaventure, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas.

Bonaventure (1217-74) - Bonaventure was a Franciscan monk, theologian and later Doctor of the Church. Bonaventure was educated at the University of Paris and taught there briefly before becoming minister general of the Franciscan order, a position he held for seventeen years.

Bonaventure constructed a systematic theology which included the relationship between reason and faith. However, he reacted against radical Aristotelianism which tended to see all of reality as existing on its own and understood by pure reason. Bonaventure held that all things depend on God and that nothing really makes sense apart from God.

He based his theology on an understanding of the Trinity. The Father is the "womb of being". Out of a boundless desire to communicate self, the Father generates the Word who perfectly expresses the Father, the Spirit is the reflection of their perfect, personal mutual love. The incarnate Word is the "hidden center" of the universe and all creation is somehow contained in Him as an expression of God's creative love. This concept is found in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn. 1:1-3).

Bonaventure saw all being as symbolic and through an understanding of mankind and nature the philosopher was naturally led to God. He wrote: "Every creature, because it speaks of God, is a divine word". Thus our scientific and rational analysis of the world should lead to God and God is the ultimate cause and explanation of all reality. Bonaventure's approach can best be summed up by Anselm's (1033-1109) famous characterization of his theological work as "faith seeking understanding".

Albert the Great - "Magnus" (1200-80) - Albert was a German Dominican bishop, philosopher, theologian and later Doctor of the Church and patron saint of scientists. Albert's early university study was the liberal arts in Padua where he came in contact with the newly translated works of Aristotle. Later he studied in Paris where he came in contact with a greater variety of Aristotle's works.

He set himself to the lifelong task of making Aristotle's ideas known throughout the universities of the West. However, he also critiqued Aristotle's ideas, especially his scientific ideas, in the light of the new scientific knowledge of the times. He was convinced that nothing uncovered by scientific research could prove detrimental to Christian revelation and that the cause of faith would ultimately be served better by an

honest recognition of any apparent difficulties presented to the Christian faith by scientific knowledge. It was the task of the Christian theologians to address these apparent difficulties. Like Bonaventure before him, Albert believed that vestiges of the creator could be found in all creatures. His dedication to and acceptance of scientific discovery earned him his title of Patron of Science and he was the only philosopher to earn the title of “the Great”, a title afforded him even during his lifetime, contrary to medieval custom.

Thus, for Albert, reason and faith could not contradict each other or, stated another way, sound philosophy never contradicts revelation. And while he never completed his goal of the total reinterpretation of Aristotle in harmony with the Christian faith, his work would continue through his most famous student and heir, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) - Thomas was born in a small town south of Rome. In 1230, at the age of five, his nobleman father sent him to the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino with the expectation that eventually he would become the abbot. In 1239 he went to Naples to study arts. While there he also encountered Aristotle’s natural science and metaphysics. In 1244, over the opposition of his family, Thomas joined the Dominican Order of Preachers. He then traveled to Paris where he met Albert the Great and studied the newly translated texts of Aristotle. In 1248 he followed Albert to Cologne and studied there with him until 1252 when he was ordained a priest. Returning to Paris in 1252 for further theological studies, Thomas lectured on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* and in 1257 he was declared a regent master of theology. In 1259 he departed Paris and spent the next ten years teaching in Italy.

Teachings -- Between 1259 and 1264 Thomas wrote his first Summa (synthesis), the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (against the Pagans). This was a selective synthesis of Catholic theology possibly designed for Dominican missionaries among the Muslims, but more likely for Christians to help present their faith to infidels or to argue against “paganizing” philosophers.

The first three books of this Summa examined God, creation and the human return to God, using only reason with no recourse to the Scriptures or the Fathers. However, in the fourth book the Scriptures and the Fathers are used to explore the Trinity, the Incarnation, sacraments and eschatology (the Last Things). These he considered Christian mysteries inaccessible to unaided human reason.

Thomas’ crowing achievement was the *Summa Theologiae* (Synthesis of Theology) which has had a significant influence on Catholic theology to this day. It was composed during the years 1266-74, beginning at Rome and then in Paris where he returned from 1268 to 1272. He then returned to Italy to teach at the University of Naples where in 1273 he had a powerful mystical experience and declared that all he had written was “like straw”. After this experience he ceased to write and while enroute to the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 he fell ill and died prematurely on March 7, 1274.

This Summa has three parts. The first part examines God, the procession of creatures from God and some aspects of the creature's return to God. The second part deals with the return to God of human beings insofar as they are images of God. In the third part Christ and his sacraments are presented as the Way creatures return to God.

The Vision of Thomas -- Steeped in Scripture and the writings of the Fathers and confronted with the great rational synthesis of Aristotle, Thomas set out to show that faith and reason do not and cannot contradict each other. For Thomas human reason had its own valid field of the study of human experience and of creation.

While Thomas depended largely on Aristotle for his philosophical approach he was also critical of Aristotle and supplemented Aristotle's thought with that of Plato and Neo-Platonists. With this blend of philosophy and Christian theology he created a new, original philosophy known as Thomism. He presented 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.

Thomas' work also received severe criticism even in his own time. Many were skeptical of his "baptism" of Aristotle and preferred to relate Christianity more to Plato. For example, Aristotle explained the material world in terms of two principles: matter and form. Matter was the potential for something to become real and form was that principle which actualized this potential and made a thing what it is. So for Thomas the soul was the form of the body, superseding all other forms.

Platonic thought, within the long tradition of St. Augustine, saw the soul as a complete entity acting on the body - a dualism of body and soul. Thomas saw human beings as a unity, Augustinians saw human beings as a composite of many separate entities, each having its own matter and form: the human soul, the body, the vegetative principle, and the sensitive principle. For Thomas the soul was the single actualizing principle of the body and contained all the other principles mentioned by the Platonic school. Conservative critics said that this position put into question the immortality of the soul.

In 1277 the archbishop of Paris issued a decree that condemned 219 errors that included those of radical Aristotelians and also some of Thomas' position. The two schools of thought - Thomism and Neo-Augustinianism fought it out throughout the rest of the 13th century. Later Thomism became the standard approach for Catholic theologians. In 1323 Thomas was canonized a saint and in 1567 was declared a Doctor of the Church. In 1897, Pope Leo XIII made Thomas' works standard for all theological students. In 1898 Thomas was made the patron of all Catholic universities.

Reactions to Thomism

John Duns Scotus (1266-1308) - The first major alternative to Thomism came from the Franciscan school of theology in the person of John Duns Scotus, who held the Franciscan chair of theology at the University of Paris from 1305-07. Like Thomas,

Scotus was a realist and held that we can know the essence of things through the intellect's ability to abstract essences from our sense experiences of them. However, he held for a plurality of forms in man, held for the primacy of the will and of love over reason and knowledge, and denied that we can come to the notion of the immortality of the soul by reason alone.

William of Ockham (1285 - 1347) - Ockham was a Franciscan philosopher and theologian. He was of English birth and studied at Oxford where he also lectured on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. His works became questionable and Pope John XXII summoned him to Avignon to defend his position on the Eucharist. While there, Ockham studied the papal pronouncements on poverty and then declared that the pope himself was heretical. In 1328 he fled to the protection of Emperor Louis of Bavaria, a rival of the pope and lived out the rest of his life in Munich.

Ockham challenged the realism of Aristotle as adopted by Thomas and Scotus and denied the possibility of the intellectual process of the abstraction of essences from things. He held that these "universals" or "essences" were a purely intramental phenomena, mere mental artifacts. For example, there is no essence of "tree" which is abstracted in the process of knowledge, thus giving knowledge of trees. This is only a mental construct to organize the experience of things that resemble one another, there is no such thing as "treesness". Rather all knowledge of the extramental world is through an intuitive knowledge of individuals.

This set the realistic theory of knowledge (epistemology) on its ear, for if Ockham was right philosophy and theology were simply human constructs of words with no real anchor in reality. Thus God could not be known or approached through rational thought and since there was no essential nature of things, a knowledge of their being was quite arbitrary depending solely on the human mind and its ability to organize experience.

Ockham's approach came to be called the theory of Nominalism. This theory had a profound effect on moral theology, because it attacked the theory of natural law which held that there are some universal moral principles based on human nature and to violate them, diminishes the fulfillment of human life as created by God. According to natural law, some human acts are wrong because they go against the proper nature of mankind. Thus stealing is not wrong because it is in the ten commandments, but it is in the ten commandments because it is wrong. The ten commandments reveal what God has designed for the fulfillment of human.

Ockham, however, held that all individual laws and rules are created by the absolutely free (and perhaps arbitrary) will of God. Thus, stealing is wrong simply because it is in the ten commandments. If God had willed it so, stealing could have been declared a virtue.

Thus, morality is simply conforming to the will of God, it has no basis in the nature of things.

Ockham, however, is best known for his “razor”. Ockham’s razor is a call for an economy in argumentation. When philosophical or scientific theories are presented, the simplest is to be preferred.

Scholasticism

The advent of Aristotelian thought into the intellectual life of the medieval world of the university, brought about a method of intellectual inquiry known as “scholasticism”. The definition of scholasticism has long been a subject for controversy.

Some scholars define it as an attitude or state of belief which takes Christian revelation for its subject; to others it is the method of disputation; while for others it is the rational aspect of belief, a philosophy in its own right.

While none of these is necessarily self-exclusive, most historians view scholasticism as essentially the application of reason to revelation. Thus, with the introduction and assimilation of Aristotelian philosophy into Christian thought, theology became a rational inquiry governed by the assumptions of faith, and faith was supported by the powers of reason (the dialectic or logic of Aristotle). Faith and reason as gifts from God must be compatible. Scholasticism was a method that attempted to show that this was true and possible to prove.

Thus reason elucidated, explained and supported the fundamental Christian tenets as found in Scripture. It was then the function of faith to direct reason and to provide it with the terms of reference for its explanation. Scholasticism, therefore, went beyond either mere dogma or natural philosophy. It was knowledge within a dogmatic framework and, ultimately, faith and reason had to harmonize. When they no longer did so, scholasticism disintegrated.