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978-0-521-87963-7 - The Cambridge Companion to: The Summa Theologiae

Edited by Philip McCosker and Denys Turner

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## Introduction

PHILIP MCCOSKER and DENYS TURNER

What need is there for yet another collection of essays on Thomas Aquinas? The obvious, and non-defensive, answer to that question is that we need any and as many as are worthwhile, as many as contribute to his reception within the theological and philosophical communities – those communities being as many and various as they are, they need as many and various Thomases. And Thomas being the kind of generative thinker that he is, his writings invite and reward endlessly, even occasionally cacophonously, plural engagements.

This volume, moreover, is less than a comprehensive account of the theology of Thomas Aquinas, being confined as it is to the Thomas whose theological mind can be discerned in a particular text, his *Summa Theologiae*. Though our collection no doubt will contribute to the dominance of that text within the contemporary reception of Thomas' thought, it is worthwhile noting now that it would be possible to give an account of Thomas' theology, in its different way as comprehensive, and in its different way as limited, as that to be found in the *Summa*, but based entirely on his biblical commentaries, especially those on the gospels of Matthew and John.

There is therefore something distinctive about a collection of papers on the text of the *Summa Theologiae* alone. Our focus on Thomas' mature 'systematic' work of theology, so central to the theological canon, yields different dividends. In addition to exploring Thomas' own views on many theological topics and methodological questions, our contributors show how one can still do theology with this seminal text. Our volume has quite a bit to say (and show) on how that might be done. It thus necessarily differs in focus from its stable-mate edited by Norman Kretzmann and Eleanore Stump, *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), for this latter volume attends principally to the thought of the philosopher whom, Thomas believes, he has to be if he is to have any sort of credibility as a

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theologian. These two Thomases should ideally be read side by side. Both are needed and they fit together, indeed frequently they are identical. At any rate this volume is intended to complement that earlier volume. In its multi-perspectival dimension it is also doing something significantly different from the recent single-author guides to the *Summa Theologiae* by Bauerschmidt, Davies, Loughlin, McGinn, and Torrell.<sup>1</sup> It is closest to Andreas Speer's edited collection but differs from it in its theological focus.<sup>2</sup> Some of the dividends by which we have been struck in our collection include: the thoroughgoing importance of *convenientia*, or fittingness, in the *Summa*; the ubiquity of the Holy Spirit in Thomas' teaching; the aporetic nature of Thomas' christology and anthropology; the forgotten centrality of the life of Christ in his thought; the way in which Thomas complicates facile East/West theological cleavages; and the overall importance of the practical, especially in the form of moral theology, for the whole: it is all geared to action.

One recent development in the reception of Thomas' *Summa* is a plurality and diversity of interpretations, whether of its overall structure and purpose, or of the relative significance of the two main sources known to him of classical Greek philosophies in Aristotle and Plato, or of the influence on his theology of Muslim thought, especially that of Avicenna (as Ibn Sina was known in the Latin West), or the Jewish theologian Maimonides, or indeed of the relative roles of scripture and philosophy. In this collection of papers we have tried to represent no one school of interpretation alone, but rather as many as possible. The heterogeneity of readings, of styles of presentation, of views about the nature, purpose and context of the text means that no reader should expect an easily identified consistency in the matter of the interpretation of the *Summa*. One should, rather, expect to find represented a broad, though by no means entirely comprehensive, representation of the main approaches to the reading of Thomas' *Summa* in contemporary scholarship. This should encourage readers to come up with their own interpretations of Thomas' text in dialogue with others.

<sup>1</sup> See Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005); Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Stephen J. Loughlin, *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Reader's Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2010); Bernard McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jean-Pierre Torrell OP, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, and Reception* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Speer (ed.), *Thomas von Aquin: Die Summa Theologiae. Werkinterpretationen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005).

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Because, unusually, this Cambridge Companion is focussed upon a text rather than a complete oeuvre or single theme, we have introduced a whole initial section devoted to the question of what kind of text it is, and how it should be read. We thought it important to attend to the preliminary questions of what Thomas' purpose was in writing it; of how, for Thomas, the description of the author at work in composing the *Summa* is incomplete without reference to the sources of his theology in a life of prayer; of how the structure of the text reveals its primary purpose to be the construction of a coherent moral theology appropriate for the training of Dominican preachers. We thought it important to give an account of the relative places and roles of scripture and philosophy in Thomas' text and likewise to give some account of the distinctively medieval conception of theological (and philosophical) teaching method and argument structure.

Thereafter, in the central Part II of our collection, the essays address broad themes in the *Summa*. This is not to say that in all cases they address 'sections' of the text, for, though others, including some of our contributors, disagree, in general it is not our view as editors that the structure of the *Summa* is determined by discrete sections or, as some call them, 'treatises,' on discrete and detachable subject matters. Were one to suppose this to be so, it would come as a shock to most readers to discover that Thomas' set-piece discussion of grace is confined to but seven 'questions' of the *Prima Secundae*. In fact it would be more to the point to stress that the doctrine of grace is so pervasively present throughout the whole *Summa* that, like the air we breathe, you would notice how present it is in the work only when, exceptionally, it seems to be missing. Though, understandably, the *Summa* is rarely read from cover to cover, it is important at least to acknowledge that the ordering of its agenda is determined, as Thomas emphatically insists in the work's general prologue, by pedagogical considerations bearing on the training of his fellow Dominican preachers and confessors. The structure of the *Summa* betrays Thomas' sense of a learning curve for theological neophytes. You will not get your christology right in the *Tertia Pars*, he implies, unless you have got in place first your doctrine of God, one and three, in the *Prima Pars*; and the over-arching pastoral purpose of the *Summa* – considerably more than half of the work's total volume is devoted to what we today would call moral and pastoral theology – demands that it be enclosed within that framework, of God one and three at the outset, and of the incarnation of that triune God in Christ in the final part. The *Summa*, in short, is an intricately connected whole. It cannot be read without distortion as a series of separable 'treatises'.

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Inevitably, however, we editors had to allocate topics to our fellow contributors on some principle of division of labour, and though we vary much in how exactly we approach our task, on the whole we have seen our purpose to be that of inviting the reader in to particular aspects of Thomas' theological temperament: and there, once again, one discovers not a singleness, but a multiplicity of voices and perspectives fully reflective of the multi-valency of the text of the *Summa* itself. It is, for example, necessary to give due place to the importance that Thomas attached to a sort of pre-theological rational argument for the existence of God; equally, it is important to stress the ultimacy in Thomas' theology of the apophatic – for Thomas at the beginning, in the middle and threading through to the end of theology there is mystery: we do not, and cannot, know what God is. But take both approaches together, and the reader will find that they converge on the same Thomas Aquinas: there is but one God and that one God is, as Thomas himself says, both the 'formal object' of '*Sacra Doctrina*' and ultimately unknowable whether by reason or by faith (I.12.13ad3) – and yet it is precisely with this God that by means of that grace of the Spirit which is charity we are made 'one' through Christ and the Church.

We have also attempted, in Part III, to give weight to the work's historical and contemporary relevance within a broader range of Christian theological traditions, from its most natural environment in the Roman Catholic traditions, to those Christian traditions other than the Roman Catholic, whether variously Eastern Orthodox or Reformed and for whom, in Thomas' own times or in recent decades, the *Summa* has become a common source; and then finally it seemed worth adding some reflections on the work's reception, whether actual or possible, within some of the non-Abrahamic religious traditions. Thomas Aquinas – or rather a distinctly odd version of him as a, or even *the*, 'Christian philosopher' – used to be the private and closely guarded 'official' possession (and weapon) of a Roman Catholic church in search of a distinctive theological identity, one moreover marked by its hostility to much in the philosophies of the modern age. More ecumenical and inter-religious times, together with their considerably improved grasp of history and hermeneutics and their theologically more generous scholarship, have reconnected Thomas' theology with the common traditions of the mainstream Christian churches which results in an immeasurably enhanced theological payback to all. The Thomas whom we as editors have come to know in the course of assembling this collection of essays would certainly have approved of this revision of his place within the history of

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Christian theology as a '*doctor communis*', a common resource for all traditions.

Perhaps the over-riding impression of Thomas' theology as represented by the *Summa Theologiae* that we hope the reader of this volume will be left with is that in that vast work there converge an implacable commitment to rational coherence, obedience to the laws of logic, and pedagogical purpose, with a sense that the whole enterprise of theology is shot through with unresolvable mystery. For Thomas, logic and philosophy, indispensable to the theologian, have nonetheless missed the mark if that ultimacy of the mystery of God is not what they lead to, just as the task of the 'doctor' of the sacred, the task of the theologian, is betrayed if it leads the student to anything other than the even deeper mystery of faith.

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## Part I

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## Reading the *Summa Theologiae*

FREDERICK CHRISTIAN BAUERSCHMIDT

Those who have been reading the *ST* for a while might forget the difficulties that it poses to the novice reader. Perhaps harder to forget are the difficulties posed by the vast secondary literature and the various schools of approach that seem endlessly locked in fierce, if at times arcane, battles over how the *Summa*, and Aquinas' work in general, is best understood. Yet over the years I have found the *Summa* to be one of the most rewarding texts to teach precisely because many of its initial difficulties *can* be overcome as students master its idiom and begin to acquire a basic knowledge of some of the critical questions which it has engendered.

### READING THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE

While the secondary literature on Aquinas is helpful, in the end it is more important to read the *ST* than to read about it. Yet simply opening the text often leads readers to quickly close it, as they see arguments and counter-arguments, divisions and subdivisions, as well as a variety of unfamiliar technical terms and constant reference to debates between authorities ancient and medieval. We might wonder what we need to know, or perhaps who we ought to be, before we start reading the text. We certainly ought to have some basic familiarity with the vocabulary of Aristotle, the sort of familiarity that might be gained from reading Aquinas' own Aristotelian *Vade Mecum*, *De Principiis Naturae*, so as not to be baffled or misled by this terminology, which pervades the *Summa*. Likewise, the reader ought to have a basic familiarity with the contents of the Bible, both the principal figures and the overall arc of the biblical narrative, as well as some knowledge of the history of Christian doctrine, particularly the contributions of Augustine. While good English language translations of the *Summa* are available, a reader

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who is not afraid to use a Latin dictionary will often benefit by checking a translation against Aquinas' fairly simple Latin.<sup>1</sup>

### The articles

The smallest unit of the *Summa* is the 'article' – *articulus* in Latin meaning a small joint, member, or part (see II-II.1.6*corp*). Small though they are, the articles shall command the largest share of our attention here. The articles follow the pattern of the medieval 'disputation,' a classroom exercise in which philosophical and theological questions were debated. They begin with a statement of the point that is at issue; these are given by Thomas at the beginning of the collection of articles known as a 'question' (see later in this chapter), but are typically repeated by editors at the beginning of the corresponding article. These are followed by opening arguments known as 'objections,' typically two to four in number, that offer reasons for one way of answering the question posed in the title. Then follows what is almost always a single argument for the other way of answering the question posed, which is introduced by the words *sed contra* ('on the other hand'). After this comes what is known as the 'body' or *corpus* of the article, in which Thomas offers his answer to the question. The article concludes with responses to the opening objections and, on a few occasions, to the *sed contra*. This dialectical path to truth, also known as the *quaestio*, is discussed in detail by John Marenbon in his contribution to this volume, so I will simply offer some practical suggestions for how one might go about reading an article in the *Summa*.

The objections offer initial arguments and authoritative statements that will prove, in the course of the article, to be in some way inadequate to the task of answering the question. These should not, however, be viewed as straw men set up by Aquinas so that we can admire his skill in knocking them down. In the prologue to the *Summa* Thomas complains about the 'swarm of pointless ... arguments' found in many disputations, and we can presume that he is setting out to do something different. So the arguments found in the objections are never pointless; indeed, Aquinas generally thinks that they are rather good arguments and deserving of our attention. The more truth found in the objection, the better it serves Aquinas' purposes.

The objections are sometimes simple arguments from authority – that is, they cite a statement from scripture or the church fathers or a

<sup>1</sup> The sixty-volume 'Blackfriars' edition of the *Summa*, originally published in the 1960s and recently republished in paperback by Cambridge University Press, helpfully presents the Latin text and English translation on facing pages. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Aquinas in this volume are from this edition.