

Introduction

The dawn of the nineteenth century marked a decline in scholastic philosophy within the European academic landscape. The severe critiques issued by renowned thinkers like Georg Wilhelm F. Hegel (1770–1831) in Germany and Victor Cousin (1792–1867) in France dealt a significant blow to Scholasticism, which had thrived since the thirteenth century and had been a dominant intellectual movement in subsequent centuries. According to Hegel, Scholasticism is not philosophy, but essentially theology and should be regarded as such. He argued that the Middle Ages did not distinguish between the two disciplines, and their separation marked the transition to modernity when reason began to assert its independence from ecclesiastical theological doctrine.¹ Similarly, Cousin posited that philosophy and theology were intrinsically unified before their separation by René Descartes (1596–1650), often considered the father of modern philosophy.² Consequently, the Medieval era is often regarded as a transitional period between Greek and modern philosophy. During this period, philosophical thought was considered to be uniform and insignificant, largely overshadowed by theological understanding. The study of medieval philosophy did not experience a resurgence until the early twentieth century. This renewal was primarily driven by a renewed interest in Thomism, which served as the driving force behind this revival.

The origins of the Thomistic revival can be traced to the early nineteenth century within the Italian Catholic context. However, its rapid and widespread dissemination throughout the Catholic world owes much to the efforts of Pope Leo XIII, who granted Aquinas a privileged status in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (4 August 1879).³ This document effectively established Thomism as the dominant philosophical framework within the Catholic tradition. *Aeterni Patris* played a central role in the Thomistic renewal, to such an extent that the term neo-Thomism began to be used to refer to both philosophy and theology grounded in the doctrines of Aquinas, as interpreted according to the principles outlined in the encyclical. On the wave of *Aeterni Patris*, numerous Thomistic research centres were founded in the subsequent decades, leading to a proliferation of studies aimed at rediscovering Aquinas' philosophy.⁴ However, it is essential to recognise that from its inception, neo-Thomism was not merely a philosophical movement focused on the rediscovery of Aquinas' thought. It also had a pronounced ideological dimension, deeply rooted in the context of intransigent Catholicism. This movement explicitly

¹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 37–40. ² Victor Cousin cited in Gilson, *Le philosophe*, 79–81, 160.

³ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*. Henceforth, it will be abbreviated in *AP*.

⁴ Gilson, *Le Thomisme*; Gilson, *La philosophie*.

2 *History of Philosophy and Theology in the West*

sought to restore the ideal of a *societas Christiana* (Christian society) and to defend the political and social agenda associated with it.

The present work aims at examining the context of the Thomistic renewal originated by the Leonine encyclical and analysing its implications, with a twofold aim. Firstly, it aims at demonstrating that *Aeterni Patris* constituted a crucial turning point in the history of Catholic philosophical and theological thought. While, on the one hand, this encyclical validated and rejuvenated Thomism, on the other hand, it marked the end of the pluralism that had characterised both Catholic philosophy and theology until then. Secondly, this research aims at showing that the Thomistic revival, as desired by Leo XIII, was not a neutral scholarly pursuit which was dedicated to the in-depth study of Aquinas' philosophy. Rather it represented an ideological endeavour within the intransigent Catholicism, where the resurgence of Aquinas' philosophy was conceived as instrumental in forging a new Christian *Weltanschauung* (worldview).

It was not until the early twentieth century, particularly the 1910s, that Thomism began to shift away from its traditional ideological constraints. This transformation was largely driven by the influence of Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) and his groundbreaking contributions to Thomistic studies. While firmly grounded in Christian thought, Gilson's work introduced a critical historical and scientific approach to the philosophy of Aquinas, thereby laying the foundation for the modern study of medieval thought.

The present study is divided into three sections. Section 1 provides an overview of the multifaceted landscape of Italian philosophical and theological studies before the publication of *Aeterni Patris*. It aims at showing that, contrary to a common opinion, Thomism was not the predominant philosophical current within the Catholic world. In fact, it was a relatively marginal phenomenon, even within Catholic and ecclesiastical institutions. However, it was precisely within this context that the philosophical and social assumptions upon which the recovery of Thomism would be based first emerged.

Section 2 is devoted to an in-depth examination of *Aeterni Patris*. It offers a detailed analysis of the structure and pivotal themes of the encyclical in order to identify the conceptual underpinnings at its core. By contextualising the text within the context of the Leonine renewal agenda, it is possible to shed new light on the prevailing notion of Thomism that emerges from the document, and both the philosophical and social-political implications of *Aeterni Patris*.

Finally, Section 3 focuses on the initial reception and interpretation of the encyclical within the Catholic context. It examines two prominent contemporary commentaries on *Aeterni Patris*, which, through their contrasting perspectives, elucidate the implications of divergent interpretations of Thomism. The

commentaries in question are the works of Giovanni Maria Cornoldi (1822–1892)⁵ and Carlo Passaglia (1812–1887).⁶ Such a comparison is made possible not only by the contemporaneity of these two texts and their shared literary genre, namely that of the commentary, but primarily by the fact that Passaglia's commentary can be regarded as a direct response to Cornoldi's work, which, in turn, is to be considered as an official commentary on the *Aeterni Patris* due to its content and proximity to the pontiff's entourage.

Within this framework, it becomes possible to distinguish two interpretative currents that arrive at opposite interpretations of Thomism, and can be defined as *maximalist Thomism* and *relativist Thomism*. The maximalist current, which subsequently became the dominant interpretation, sought to establish Thomistic philosophy as the only foundation of Catholic philosophical and theological thought. In contrast, the relativist current regarded Thomism as one among many expressions of the diverse Catholic tradition, despite the notable and significant influence he exerted.

Although there is an extensive literature on *Aeterni Patris* and the revival of Thomism in the nineteenth century, research which focuses on the immediate reception of the Leonine encyclical lacks. Moreover, studies on Cornoldi's and Passaglia's commentaries are nearly non-existent. Some valuable information, albeit fragmentary, on Cornoldi's text is available in Luciano Malusa's work.⁷ Furthermore, while Passaglia's monograph is occasionally mentioned in some commentaries on *Aeterni Patris*, a comprehensive study that highlights its originality lacks. Additionally, there is no research that compares these two works in order to grasp the divergent conceptions of Thomism that underpin them.

Therefore, the present study aims at providing a preliminary examination of the various responses that Italian Catholic thought developed immediately after the publication of the Leonine encyclical: namely, in a period when Thomism re-emerged as a philosophical doctrine that had to assert the ideological primacy of the church of Rome, and before that Aquinas' thought was reinterpreted according to the historical and philological principles championed by Gilson.

1 Thomism and Theological Philosophical Pluralism in the Italian Context before *Aeterni Patris*

Before analysing Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which calls for the revival of Thomism in both philosophy and theology, it is crucial to understand the cultural landscape that preceded its publication. Only within this

⁵ Cornoldi, 'La regola filosofica'. ⁶ Passaglia, *Sulla dottrina*. ⁷ Malusa, *Neotomismo*.

4 *History of Philosophy and Theology in the West*

multifaceted context the novelty and far-reaching implications of the Leonine reform can be fully grasped.

This introductory section offers an overview of the multifaceted Italian philosophical and theological environment before *Aeterni Patris*. It highlights that the revival of Thomism in the early nineteenth century was a gradual and difficult process.⁸ Therefore, labelling the Catholic intellectual movements of this period as merely neo-Scholastic or neo-Thomistic is both premature and misleading. At that time, Thomism was not a dominant philosophical current but a marginal movement that had nearly faded from Catholic academic circles. It was through the efforts of a dedicated group within the area of the intransigent Catholicism that Aquinas' philosophy was seen as a vital antidote to the errors of modern philosophy and society. As a result, Thomism was promoted and defended as a cornerstone of Catholic thought.

1.1 The Revival of Thomism within the Italian Counter-Revolutionary Context

Paolo Dezza, a prominent scholar of the origins of neo-Thomism, emphasises that the resurgence of Aquinas' philosophy took place in Piacenza at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and was led by Canon Vincenzo Buzzetti (1777–1824), a professor at the city's seminary.⁹ It's crucial to note that Buzzetti's advocacy for the revival of Aquinas' philosophy, which he termed 'sound philosophy',¹⁰ occurred within the context of Italy's Catholic counter-revolutionary milieu during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹¹ Against this backdrop, Buzzetti perceived Aquinas' philosophy as a bulwark against the revolutionary ideology that threatened to upend the religious and social order, which was rooted in Christian principles. It is evident that Aquinas was used for ideological purposes. The objective of Thomistic philosophy and theology is not the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but rather the means to face and fight the enemy. Buzzetti's ideological stance also had practical implications, as it led him to advocate for a comprehensive overhaul of seminary *curricula*. He believed that only through a unified programme of study based on a sound Thomistic philosophy, namely a philosophy that radically opposed the influences of sensism and empiricism typical of that time, would it be possible to defend the social order against subversion.

⁸ For an overview of the Thomistic nineteenth-century revival see Marschler, 'Nineteenth-Century', 359–374.

⁹ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 13–27. Concerning the evidence of a revival of Thomism as early as the eighteenth century see Rossi, 'La neoscolastica italiana', 365–391.

¹⁰ Buzzetti, *Institutiones sanae philosophiae*.

¹¹ On the counter-revolutionary Catholic thought in Italy see Fontana, *La controrivoluzione*; see also Guerici, *Uno spettacolo*.

Notwithstanding the occasional anachronistic interpretations of Thomism evident in the work of Buzzetti, such as the defence of the Ptolemaic theory in astronomy on the basis of Aquinas' teaching,¹² it is important to stress that the revival of Thomism was undertaken with the specific purpose of defending the established social order ordained by God against the threats of modernity. Thus, against this apologetic backdrop, Thomistic philosophy emerged as an effective antidote to the dangers of modern thought.

Although Buzzetti's Thomism diverged from the philosophical and theological mainstream of his time, thus causing astonishment and controversy among his contemporaries,¹³ it had a significant and enduring impact on some of his disciples, notably the Sordi brothers, Domenico (1790–1880) and Serafino (1793–1865). Both brothers joined the recently re-established Society of Jesus,¹⁴ where they continued to promote Thomistic ideas, although they encountered resistance from within the Jesuit order.

Of the two brothers, Serafino exerted considerable influence in advancing and disseminating Thomistic principles,¹⁵ to such an extent that, according to Dezza, he can be considered the custodian of Buzzetti's intellectual legacy.¹⁶ Serafino's Thomism was characterised by a staunch and uncompromising stance: rather than merely reiterating the doctrines of Aquinas, he sought to reinterpret Thomistic principles in order to address the exigencies of contemporary society and to defend them against the dominant rationalist theories and philosophical systems of his time.¹⁷ As Dezza notes, Serafino Sordi's methodology entailed a comparison between the doctrine of Aquinas and various modern philosophical systems. After elucidating Aquinas's doctrine and substantiating his thesis, Sordi proceeded to compare it with the aforementioned systems, thereby demonstrating the superiority of the former over the latter.¹⁸

Following Buzzetti's perspectives, Sordi asserts that a sound philosophical system, that is Thomism, is essential to counter the spread of modern errors that challenge the divine socio-political order. This ideological Thomism exerted significant influence both within and beyond the Society of Jesus, largely due to Serafino's extended tenure in the teaching of scholastic philosophy in Jesuit institutions and his prominent roles within the Order.¹⁹

The person who derived the greatest benefit from Serafino's influence was the Jesuit Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio (1793–1862). Taparelli's correspondence with

¹² Fontana, 'Vincenzo Buzzetti'. ¹³ Masnovo, 'Il discorso commemorativo', 160.

¹⁴ Following the suppression of the Society in 1773 with the apostolic brief *Dominus ac Redemptor* by Clement XIV, the Jesuits were re-established on a global scale in 1814 by Pius VII with the bull *Sollicitudo omnium*.

¹⁵ On Serafino Sordi see Dezza, *Alle origini*, 29–64. ¹⁶ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 29.

¹⁷ See Dezza, *Alle origini*, 46. ¹⁸ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 42–43.

¹⁹ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 48–49.

6 *History of Philosophy and Theology in the West*

Serafino provides evidence of his significant intellectual evolution towards Thomism.²⁰ Despite having received an education that included the study of empiricism and eclecticism, which were taught in Jesuit colleges, Taparelli's engagement with Serafino's writings prompted a reorientation towards scholastic philosophy, particularly the teachings of Aquinas. Before this intellectual shift, Taparelli confessed that he had despised Thomism, and thus he began to redo his philosophical training according to the peripatetic method.²¹ Taparelli acknowledged Serafino as his mentor and professed to be his loyal disciple.²² He considered Serafino's works to be fundamental to his study and propagation of Thomism. It is noteworthy that under the guidance of Sordi, Taparelli produced a manuscript, that can be described as a comprehensive compendium of Thomistic philosophy, in which he provided a summary of the fundamental tenets of this theological and philosophical tradition. Taparelli distributed this enigmatic and, in certain respects, initiatory writing in a strictly confidential manner only among those students he deemed most likely to accept this doctrine, pending a time when it would be feasible to reveal it publicly to all.²³ It can thus be observed that, particularly within the context of the Jesuit order and colleges, Thomism still remains a marginal and minority movement that is not held in high esteem. This scarce consideration of Thomism can be attributed to the perception that it was the product of an obsolete philosophical tradition that was no longer capable of adequately explaining the complexities of the modern world.

Taparelli's conversion to Thomism was completed in 1825, during his tenure as Rector of the Roman College (1824–1829).²⁴ This event marked a crucial moment in the evolution of philosophical studies within this Jesuit institution, although it encountered resistance from some of the faculty members.

1.1.1 Thomism, Traditionalism and the Restoration of Societas Christiana

In the light of the analysis of the pioneering thinkers who rediscovered Scholastic philosophy and Thomism in the early nineteenth century, several observations emerge. As Sandro Fontana observes, for these thinkers

the pragmatic concerns of socio-political restoration are deemed to outweigh those of a speculative order. Buzzetti, Sordi and Taparelli, who are rightly regarded as the pioneers of the Thomistic renaissance, consider themselves above all to be champions of a *just cause*, activists of a counter-revolutionary ideology and, in those years, convinced supporters of the ideas of Lamennais.

²⁰ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 49. ²¹ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 49. ²² Dezza, *Alle origini*, 50.

²³ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 50–52.

²⁴ Dezza, *Alle origini*, 50. See also Pirri, 'Il p. Taparelli', 59–76.

It is therefore not an exaggeration to state that Thomism, in that time, represented the *Italian version* of traditionalist philosophy.²⁵

Fontana's observation regarding the close interconnection between Thomism and Traditionalism may initially appear paradoxical. In contrast to rationalist systems, traditionalism posits that human reason is unable to identify truths, including those pertaining to nature, in the absence of faith. Consequently, this stance may be regarded as an example of fideism. This aspect appears to be in conflict with the principles of Scholasticism and Thomism, which uphold a balanced interplay between faith and reason and assert that human beings can grasp natural truths through reason. It is important to note, however, that traditionalism does not merely seek to create an abstract philosophical system based on the idea of *common sense*, which would seek to combat rationalist systems derived from Cartesianism through speculative means. Rather, such a philosophical approach has significant practical and social implications. Traditionalist philosophers aim at 'demolishing at the root any possibility of conceptual elaboration that does not identify itself with religious belief',²⁶ in order to restore a socio-political system based on religion. In other words, they aim at re-establishing the model of the *societas christiana* that was undermined by the French Revolution. Against this backdrop, it is illuminating to juxtapose the Italian Thomistic renewal with contemporary French traditionalism. As both tendencies are not merely speculative and intellectual, but also practical in nature, it is evident that, in opposition to the social ills caused by the Revolution and Rationalism, it is necessary to propose the re-establishment of a theoretical system that affirms a total identification and unity between the social order and religion, namely between social principles and religious truths.

In France, given the country's longstanding philosophical and scientific advancements since the sixteenth century, the revival of Scholasticism and Thomism appeared to be an unfeasible answer to the challenges posed by Rationalism and its social implications.²⁷ Conversely, in Italy, which has historically demonstrated a greater resistance to novel cultural influences, the resurgence of Thomism emerged as a compelling model for social and religious

²⁵ 'Le preoccupazioni d'ordine pragmatico di restaurazione politico-sociale [sono] di gran lunga preponderanti nei confronti di quelle d'ordine speculativo: i vari Buzzetti, Sordi, Taparelli, giustamente considerati tra i pionieri della rinascita tomistica, si sentivano soprattutto dei paladini della *giusta causa*, dei propagandisti dell'ideologia contro-rivoluzionaria e, in quegli anni, convinti assertori del verbo lamennese. Per cui, senza timore di compiere eccessive forzature, possiamo dire fin d'ora che il tomismo rappresenta, in quel periodo, la *versione italiana* della filosofia tradizionalista'. Fontana, *La controrivoluzione*, 160–161.

²⁶ 'Demolire alla radice qualsiasi possibilità di elaborazione concettuale che non si identifichi con il credo religiosa'. Fontana, *La controrivoluzione*, 166.

²⁷ Fontana, *La controrivoluzione*, 161, 163–167.